

# Catholic Explorer

## Technology links families and troops at Christmas

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LISLE—The Michaels family of Naperville received a special Christmas gift Dec. 17 inside a computer classroom in Kindlon Hall on the main campus of Lisle's Benedictine University. Three members of the clan spent about an hour talking with their son and brother, 20-year-old Marine Lance Corporal Steven Michaels, who is serving in Iraq.

With the use of a satellite camera and high-speed Internet connection, the soldier's parents, Kathy and Dennis, and fraternal twin brother, Kevin, were able to see and speak with the Marine. Michaels, who arrived in Iraq in August, is currently stationed at Al Asad air base, the largest U.S. military complex in western Iraq.

This is the first year the family will be apart during the Christmas season, Kathy told the Catholic Explorer moments before the conference call was made to her son's location in the Middle East. "I thought that it would be really hard to get into the spirit," she admitted. But, after Thanksgiving her son called her and asked if she would send Christmas decorations and cookies to be shared with people stationed at the base. Since their talk, she said she has been busy wrapping and baking.

Speaking about getting through the season without her son at home, Kathy said it hasn't been too difficult "because he's been a part of it."

The mother and father have also been busy volunteering their time with Operation Support Our Troops, which dispatches care packages to servicemen and women from Illinois serving primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan. Kathy said she has been impressed by the number of people who are supporting the troops. Even those who don't agree with the war in Iraq have demonstrated their affection for the soldiers serving overseas, she said.

Meanwhile, Kathy shared that she has experienced many sleepless nights. The member of Grace United Methodist Church in Naperville leans on prayer to help her cope with the uncertainty of her son's mission. "I have my faith and a lot of support," she said.

The soldier gave his mom his silver cross to wear around her neck so she would feel close to him as she prayed for his safety, she said. And, before he left for Iraq, she handed him a St. Christopher medal. "Nobody is safe over there," stressed Kathy.

Dennis, who is employed in the public works division of the Village of Lisle, agreed with his wife. Taking a deep breath, the father of three adult children said, "I hope he stays safe."

The family's patriarch said he was happy to have the opportunity to see and visit with his son, especially near Christmas. Dennis said the family hasn't seen him in about five months. "We appreciate what Benedictine University is doing here." Speaking about the visit beforehand, he added, "I'm sure it will be emotional."

Rudy Dardy, audio visual coordinator at BU, said the school acquired the technology last summer to connect classrooms at the main campus with the school's satellites and other institutions. When administrators began plans to link with schools in China for interactive learning sessions, he told the Explorer he began thinking about using the new system to connect families with servicemen and women. "We have the capability. Why not do it?" he said.

Dardy began facilitating these free video conferences for families Dec. 16. The university was scheduled to continue offering the virtual Christmas visits until Dec. 19. "I couldn't image the void they have in their lives, especially this time of the year," he said, referring to the families. He intends to make the technology available to troops' families after the first of the year too. The initiative fits into the university's mission of service, he said. The plan, according to Dardy, is to schedule appointments around classes and university activities.

Benedictine offers its facilities for the families and links with the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides the connection for the soldiers stationed overseas. Funded by donations, the agency has thousands of public video conference sites in the United States, Japan and Germany. Five sites are located in Iraq, according to John Harlow, founder and executive director.

Established about three years ago, the New Jersey-based organization now has about 5,000 "local end points," including Benedictine University, said Harlow. "Providing state-of-the-art communication free of charge is the least that the American people can do to show their appreciation for the sacrifices being made by our soldiers and their families," he said.