

Soldier sees daughter's big day

From Iraq to Meadows Elementary

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Photos by Ron Soliman/The Olympian

Emily Martinez waves to the Web cam Wednesday with school Principal Joe Belmonte after she found out that her father, Luis Martinez, who is a chief warrant officer with the 593rd Corp Support Group in Iraq, was watching Emily's graduation at Meadows Elementary School in Lacey.

Among the proud parents lining the walls of the Meadows Elementary School gymnasium Wednesday for its sixth-grade graduation were those recording the ceremony with video cameras.

Technology also enabled Chief Warrant Officer Luis Martinez, sitting nearly 8,000 miles away near Baghdad, to watch live as his 11-year-old daughter, Emily, mounted the stage, accepted a hug and certificate from her teacher and returned to her seat.

His virtual visit was made possible by a laptop and Web cam donated by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that has built a private network and distributes donated digital technology so deployed soldiers can watch important family milestones, including weddings and births.

Martinez, a supply technician with the 593rd Corp Support Group's headquarters company, said the experience provided by the video and audio feed was almost like being there. He and his unit left Fort Lewis in January for a yearlong deployment.

"As you know, kids grow up fast, and I've missed too many events in her life as it is," he said.

But even digital technology has its limits.

"I wish I was there giving her a hug right now," he said.

The presence of her father was supposed to be a surprise to Emily until her principal, Joe Belmonte, announced it at the end of the ceremony. But Emily grew suspicious when she saw the laptop and noticed a familiar image, the big headphones her dad had worn during three previous Web cam conversations from her home east of Lacey.

"It meant a lot," she said as her mother, Chantal, stood nearby. "It made this day really special."

After the ceremony, Emily chatted briefly with her father, who told her how proud he was and took her picture with the Web cam.

Sgt. 1st Class Jaime Fregozo, the company's rear detachment commander, linked to Martinez on the Freedom Calls Network using the school's computer network. During the ceremony, he messaged Martinez to ensure the picture and sound were good.

He provided similar technical expertise when a spouse introduced her deployed husband to their newborn child and when a couple digitally reunited after a long separation caused by back-to-back deployments.

"Everybody expresses it differently, but you can tell they're very happy," he said.

Work is under way on a secure network connection so deployed soldiers can chat with their families at a permanent Web cam station provided the the Freedom Calls Foundation at Fort Lewis, he said.

The 593rd was instrumental in setting up the foundation's network at the Army base camp that features six videoconferencing stations, 10 video e-mail stations and 50 computers with e-mail and Internet access to serve more than 10,000 soldiers.

The foundation soon will expand its network at military hospitals so deployed soldiers can welcome newborns or talk with sick loved ones.

It plans to expand to as many as 200 locations in Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas where U.S. soldiers can't regularly contact families back home. It hopes to deploy to one to two camps a month, according to its Web site at www.freedomcalls.org.

Back at Meadows, Martinez's face broke into a beaming smile when Emily's teacher, Mary Holmberg, listed her numerous achievements as she walked up to accept her certificate.

Emily might not have noticed, but a proud soldier became a prouder father.

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Chief Warrant Officer Luis Martinez is seen on a computer screen watching daughter Emily's graduation.