

# The Oregonian

## Soldiers in Iraq and families back home use laptops to visit face to face

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**TED SICKINGER**

BEAVERTON -- Spc. Kevin Scott's 100-watt grin and his relief to lay eyes on six family members came through loud and clear from Camp Cooke, near Baghdad.

Scott's family huddled around a laptop computer set up at the Murray Hill Marketplace in Beaverton on Sunday, taking turns to lean in and share some small piece of their daily lives.

His son, Austin, 9, let him know that football season was going pretty well. Kadin, 6, described the latest addition to the family, a "weird-looking" kitten named Oreo.

And Taylore, 12, just wanted Scott to know she loves him.

"I hope you're going to come home soon -- and safe," she said, starting to cry and burying her face in her mother's arms.

Scott was one of nine Oregon National Guard soldiers in Iraq who were able to spend some face-to-face family time Sunday courtesy of a program sponsored by the Freedom Calls Foundation. The organization has hosted similar events in 25 cities across the country, inviting family members to reunite with their loved ones in Iraq via videoconference.

American soldiers in Iraq may be the best-connected to home in history. Many have Internet access in their barracks and communicate daily with family members and friends via e-mail. Telephones are widely accessible and frequently used. But Sunday's visual link was a new and welcome wrinkle for most families.

"These people will be on a high for a week after making this visual connection," said Rick Jubeck, Freedom Call's director of development. "I've had more wet cheeks pressed on my face than you can imagine."

Sunday was no exception. Melissa Theurer was wiping away tears after pulling herself away from the jerky 5-by-5-inch image of her son, Spc. Marty Theurer, an emergency medical technician for the city of McMinnville who has been deployed in Iraq since March. Several days ago, a roadside bomb exploded outside Theurer's Humvee. He walked away with bumps and bruises.

"I know he tells me he's OK on the phone, but you never know because you can't see their eyes and their face," she said. "We had to drive two hours to get here, but we'd do it again in a minute."

Sunday's event also was a fund-raiser for Freedom Calls, and the shopping center's parking lot was full of an odd mix of Americana. The Hooters girls were serving chicken wings. Toys "R" Us mascot Geoffrey the giraffe and an Uncle Sam on stilts lumbered around the small crowd. And Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue Pipes and Drums entertained.

Lela Andrews of Scio came with 10 family members to talk with her brother, Spc. Lee Davidson.

"This is the first time since deployment that we were actually able to see him," Andrews said. "I know that when you don't hear from them, that's supposed to be a good thing. But when you do hear, it sure is nice."

Freedom Calls wants to raise \$6 million to establish nine videoconferencing sites in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the site at Camp Cooke. For information, visit [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).

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