

THE BLADE

Local firm to help families reach out to GIs

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Families of soldiers stationed in Iraq wanting to look upon the faces of their loved ones will get a chance just before the new year with the help of a local company.

BPNC of Toledo, which markets the alcohol-laden gelatin shots called Zippers, is sponsoring a New Year's Eve event at the Toledo Radisson, offering families of soldiers stationed in Camp Cooke and Camp Fallujah in Iraq a chance to talk and - more importantly - see their relatives via a live satellite video uplink for a good half-hour. For free.

Nick Costanzo, co-owner of BPNC, which owns Zippers, said so far about two dozen families have signed up. "There's people coming from Indiana, Cleveland, Columbus," he said. "We'll keep it going till two in the morning if we have to."

Last year, he and his partner, ex-Marine Brian Pearson, noticed the company's New Year's bashes were getting quite a crowd - not to mention a chunk of change from their raffle.

"But that's not what we do that event for," he said. So the two thought of ways to give the money away.

Freedom Calls Foundation - a not-for-profit in Brooklyn Heights, N.Y., that has been providing free satellite uplinks to overseas soldiers since Mother's Day - seemed perfect.

In October, they provided services for another such event at Toys "R" Us in West Toledo.

"Usually these soldiers get two, three minutes to talk on the phone at the base," said John Harlow, executive director and co-founder of Freedom Calls. "What are they going to say for those minutes over the phone? 'I'm fine, don't worry.' That doesn't tell their family anything at all."

Freedom Calls started after Mr. Harlow and his partner, who worked for a satellite services company, heard that soldiers in Iraq were getting scammed by people selling three-foot satellite dishes "out of the back of a truck" to set up on top of their barracks' and call home.

"People would call up and say what can we do with this stuff? There's nothing you can do with that stuff," he said.

So they approached the Pentagon offering free satellite services for servicemen who "shouldn't have to worry about that stuff."

The Pentagon gave the OK in April, and Freedom Calls set up permanent sites at both bases, using donations from individuals and corporations like Raytheon, a defense contractor, TAMSCO, an information technology company, and FedEx, which ships supplies to Iraq for free.

Back in the states, the company recruits local companies like Zippers to donate time and resources to sponsor link-up events.

Families with computer and Web cameras are also using the free service to link up from home, Mr. Harlow said.

"The troops are just so extremely grateful for this. The feedback, it's been absolutely wonderful," said Pentagon spokesman Lynette Ebberts.

At Camp Cooke, located at in the Sunni Triangle, Freedom Calls provides calling services for 1,500 soldiers a day.

In one instance, a soldier talked his wife through a 12-hour labor and delivery. There have been several parent-teacher conferences via video feed from Iraq, as well.

"For the first time in history, servicemen can keep commitment to family as well as commitment to country," he said. "A war fighter can come off the battlefield and tuck his kids into bed."

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