

High-tech calls help close the distance

Alameda: Freedom Calls Foundation, AT&T team up to let relatives speak to soldiers in Iraq

By Eric Louie
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Marine Sgt. Jeffrey Cochran and his wife, Sabrina, have exchanged e-mails almost daily since he was sent to Iraq in January. Once a week, they talk on the phone.

But a recent donation has allowed them to go far beyond the calls -- which last 15 minutes at most -- and brief e-mails, which have become less frequent in the past month because of limited computer access.

The Cochrans, a family of five who moved to Alameda from Massachusetts last year after he went from the reserves to active duty, talked face-to-face for the first time in six months Saturday through a satellite connection provided by Brooklyn Heights, N.Y.-based Freedom Calls Foundation. The foundation will also be setting up a computer video camera connection that will let the couple make calls between Iraq and their home for an hour once a week, Sabrina Cochran said.

"Just to see his face, see his body and know he is all right. It was really, really special," she said. They talked for about two hours.

"Its been hard," she said of the separation. "We love each other so much."

Saturday's connection was done at AT&T's offices in San Ramon, allowing Sabrina Cochran to see her husband on a 4-foot screen. Sgt. Jeffrey Cochran had heard the service was offered by the foundation.

The connection let them celebrate the birthdays of their twins daughters, Brooke and Kyleen, who turned 2 a few days before. It also gave a chance for her husband to connect with 3-year-old Richard, who is having a hard time with his father being gone.

This is the first time Jeffrey Cochran, 28, a career retention specialist, has been deployed. The family is hoping he will return in mid-October.

John Harlow, who co-founded Freedom Calls, said the foundation handles more than 1,000 conferences a month, with half being repeats. The group runs entirely on donations and offers a variety of communication avenues to military members at no cost. Other conferences have allowed military members overseas to attend graduations, see their children born and get married.

For details on the Freedom Calls Foundation, go to www.freedomcalls.org.