

Danville Register & Bee

From a world away, a link back home

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DANVILLE - It seemed like a first date when the married couple of two years, Marine Sgt. Ben Harrelson and Sherri Harrelson, talked during a live satellite video call from Iraq on Friday.



Sgt. Harrelson, who is currently an AAV mechanic in Fallujah, got a chance to visit with his wife and daughter, Savannah, for the first time in months during a program offered by the Freedom Calls Foundation at the Institute for Advanced Learning & Research.

With tears in her eyes, Sherri told her husband that she missed him and they discussed how the experience was like a first date. Ben said that the experience made him feel like a teenager again and said he had to make sure he looked good for his wife.

Ben said that he has known his wife for eight years and never thought that he would be nervous to see her.

"It's amazing, awesome, and indescribable," Ben said of the opportunity.

The program was started in 2003 after organizers heard about a soldier who had a \$7,000 cell phone bill from talking to people back home, according to John Harlow, executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The cell phone company would not forgive any of the calls, and the foundation wanted to do something to help the soldiers be able to get in touch with friends and family from home, Harlow said.

The program is not funded by the military and is free to the families or friends of soldiers in Iraq. Because of the expenses, the opportunities for people to connect with their loved ones could be lost.

Harlow said that the funding is an issue and that the foundation is dependent on donations. He said that the foundation is in danger of being shut down and that it needs help from people and corporations.

"If the program couldn't continue, tens of thousands of families would be blacked out from their loved ones," Harlow said.

Sherri expressed concern that the foundation is low on funding and said this is not a matter of how people feel about the war.

"This is about showing people you love them regardless of their job," Sherri said.

Sherri also believes that the program is important for the morale of the soldiers as well as the families and the children of soldiers.

Through it all, the video call was bittersweet for the couple. They were both happy to see each other, but as Sherri said, "They still aren't home and still not safe."

"I would give up everything I had to get him back," she said.

To set up a videoconference with a soldier in Iraq, call Fatima Tedeyeva at (434) 766-6745. Donations to the Freedom Calls Foundation can be made at www.freedomcalls.org.

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