

Celebrating from Afar

Mother serving in Iraq watches her daughter graduate via satellite.

By Susie Vang
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Sarah Andrada had two reasons to celebrate on Wednesday.

The Roosevelt High School senior received her diploma, and her mother -- who is serving in the 1072nd Army National Guard in Iraq -- was able to watch the ceremony via video conferencing.

"I feel good graduating," Andrada, 18, said, "but I just wished she was here."

The live broadcast was made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in New York that collects donations so that soldiers can communicate for free from their base camps with family members through video conferencing, wireless technology and other methods. "It's important for Sarah, who's had to go through her senior year without her mom," Principal Maria Escobar said. "This is something you can't replicate."



Sarah Andrada, with her son, Anthony Blajos Jr., and her aunt Phyllis Estrada Perez, talks to her mother during Wednesday's Roosevelt High School graduation ceremony at SaveMart Center in Fresno.

At the graduation ceremony, a handful of family members peered at a flat-screen computer and exclaimed at Michelle Soto's apparent weight loss. They spoke to her using a microphone and earphones.

The Webcam at the ceremony captured the grinning faces of family members, whom the teary-eyed Soto has not seen in six months.

Soto blew kisses with both hands to her family and dabbed her eyes when Andrada's name was announced.

Seated beside her was Steve Parrish, a member of Soto's unit and a veteran bus driver for Fresno Unified School District. He drove Roosevelt athletes to their competitions, including Andrada to her soccer games. Genero Andrada, Sarah's father, watched the family's exchange at the Save Mart Center. He was excited to see the glowing faces of his son and three daughters as they talked to their mother.

He said that even though Soto couldn't come home and join the festivities, he was grateful that his ex-wife was able to share the moment with the rest of the family.



A satellite connection shows Andrada talking to her mother, Spc. Michelle Soto, who is serving in the National Guard in Iraq. Fresno Unified School District bus driver Steve Parrish sits next to Soto.

"There was disappointment, but gratitude," he said.

About four to five junior and high school graduations have been broadcast live in the last week and several more are planned this week, foundation executive director John Harlow said. It costs about \$2,000 to coordinate such an event, he said. One facility north of Baghdad provides the free service to about 10,000 soldiers.

"This is a way that the American people can show their appreciation to the soldiers and their families," Harlow said. "Family is important, and it is even more important during war time."

For Sarah Andrada, having her mother see her walk across the stage with the other graduates was extra-meaningful because she achieved the thing her mother wanted above all else.

Andrada has a 16-month-old, Anthony Blajos Jr.

Not for a minute did Soto stop pushing her daughter to finish high school. And during commencement, not once did Soto stop beaming at her daughter and first grandchild.

Andrada plans to study nursing at Heald College in Fresno.

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