

And baby makes TV: Marine in Iraq able to watch birth at UMH

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Like any expecting father, U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Jovan Rodriguez coached his wife, Cara, through the delivery of the couple's first baby, a girl, Thursday.

But unlike most other expecting dads, the Marine was 6,000 miles away serving in Iraq. Jovan was unable to hold his wife's hand or serve her ice chips, but he was still involved.

"It was kind of like he was just there," said Cara, a Franklin Township resident. "I could hear his voice, so he felt like a part of it."

At 5:40 p.m. Eastern Standard Time 7-pound Lilliana Rae Rodriguez was the first baby born in New Jersey whose father was part of the delivery via a live Web cam, from Underwood-Memorial Hospital in Woodbury to Iraq.

For three days, Jovan was pulled from his regular duty so he could watch, at the Freedom Calls Center on the Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, every painful and emotional second of his wife's seven-hour labor.

From the maternity ward in Underwood, Cara, her mother, her best friend, and a fellow military wife Ava Scale whose husband is a Marine also serving in Iraq watched Jovan on their 20-inch screen as he sobbed at the first glimpse of his baby girl.

"It was my first child, so it was really emotional for me," Jovan said. "(Cara) was pretty much coaching me."

Just two days before Cara was induced and scheduled to deliver, Jovan walked into the Iraqi air base and asked how he could participate in Lilliana's birth. He was quickly referred to Freedom Calls Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that helps connect military families to their loved ones at no cost to the family.

"The way this event evolved was kind of interesting," said John Harlow, founder and executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation.

It's usually a two-week process of military and hospital clearance and technical obstacles, Harlow said, but Underwood pulled its staff together in hours to assist Freedom Calls in the transmission.

This is the first time we've ever done a project of this sort," said Thomas Robinson, an Information Systems technician at Underwood. "This one went off with no problems. The look on their faces told it all."

Friday, the family reunited again via Web cam to exchange I-love-yous before Jovan returns to his duties.

"Say, Hi, daddy," Cara said, and held the baby close to the Web cam so Jovan could get a good look. "She eats a lot and she sleeps a lot."

"Just like her daddy," he laughed, with tears welling in his eyes. "You've given me the greatest gift you can give a man."

Freedom Calls organizes 2,000 conferences a month between military families in the United States and their loved ones on the front lines, with 300 of those birth-related, Harlow said.

"It's like the Master Charge commercials," Harlow said. "If (Cara) was in New Jersey and (Jovan) was in California, this call between the two would have cost about \$5,000. But (Internet) is not even available in Iraq, so it's priceless."

Freedom Calls, headquartered in Morristown, N.J., pays thousands of dollars a month to maintain a satellite link that can transmit the signal to Freedom Calls Centers at military bases in Iraq and other countries, according to Harlow.

"It's a pretty amazing event," Harlow said. "Imagine being that far away, and having the nurse hold the baby up in front of the camera. It's a miracle in the life of a family, and now they are able to share it."

Cara, baby Lilliana, and the newborn's older sister Jazlyn will be able to conference call Jovan from their home three times a month until his return. Before the couple found the organization, it cost them about \$100 a week in phone bills through AT&T.

"I e-mail her every chance that I get," Jovan said.

Although Jovan does not know his official return date, he said he is excited to return to his family.

"I'll be enjoying my spoils, as they say. Every day that goes by is another day I get closer to her," he said. "You were right, babe. She does look like me."