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Link lets soldier say goodbye to dying sister

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Cancer patient Clara "Jenny" Wolf was comforted Friday by her sister Sherri Patterson as they left the University of Kansas Medical Center after earlier talking by videoconference with their brother Roger Bradley, a soldier in Iraq.
JOHN SLEEZER | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

The cancer that is killing Clara "Jenny" Wolf left her no strength to sing.

But there was her little brother, half a world away on an airfield in Iraq, smiling at her through a videoconference Friday, remembering the song she sang to him as a child.

Can you sing it again? he asked her.

Army National Guard Spc. Roger Bradley had wanted to come home to Kansas. He had tried, and his family had tried, to get him leave so he could see his dying sister.

If he could not be with her, the Freedom Calls Foundation would work with the University of Kansas Medical Center to bring them as close together as a wide-screen television.

"I'd been waiting to see him for so long to tell him I love him," Jenny would say afterward. "A lot of happy memories. ... He remembered the song."

Billy, don't be a hero, don't be a fool with your life...

Another sister, Sherri Patterson, who sat at Jenny's bedside, said she tried to sing the song from the mid-1970s. But her voice failed her, too.

Rog, as Sherri called him, was the youngest of five siblings who grew up in Anderson County, Kan. Jenny was the second oldest and Sherri had been the youngest of the first four, all born within four years of each other. Then Roger was born seven years later in 1972.

"You know, ticklebug and all of that, he got it all," Sherri said. "He was spoiled."

Roger followed the footsteps of his grandfather, father, mother and older brother, Michael, and joined the military, enlisting in the Marines when he was 17. After several years of active duty, he spent some time as a civilian, going back to school. Then the second war in Iraq began. Knee problems kept him from the Marines, Sherri said, but he made his way back with the Army National Guard.

"He's going to fight for our freedom," she said.

Little brother, 34, smiling and 30 pounds trimmer, sat in front of the video camera about 11 a.m. Kansas time. Freedom Calls had established a videoconference link at the Al Asad Air Base.

Freedom Calls, which began as a service to provide free telephone connections for service personnel, is now enabling about 1,000 videoconferences a month, said executive director John Harlow. Most of the occasions have been festive milestones. This was the first time he was aware of that a soldier said goodbye to a dying family member.

If Jenny would not be able to hold her little brother, they could talk about the songs that sang him to sleep, the pond where they fished, the autumn color of the leaves at home.

"We've always been the best family in the world," Roger told her. "We love you more than you can even know. God is going to wipe every tear from your eyes."

The doctors don't think Jenny has long to live, Sherri said. The sister is tending to her final wishes.

Jenny wanted to go home, and the hospital released her Friday, within hours after the videoconference, into an ambulance that took her to Sherri's Kansas home.

She wants to fish again in the pond by Sherri's house, and Sherri hopes to see to that.

And she wanted to see her little brother again.

"We're ready now," Sherri said. "This is what she was waiting for."
