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Bring troops home, virtually

VIDEO CONFERENCING LETS THOSE IN IRAQ VISIT FAMILIES HERE

ASSOCIATED PRESS

FRANKFORT - April Fields was focused. Neither a bank of television cameras nor a chatting governor were going to distract her from staring at a jerky image of her son, Army Sgt. Joshua Fields, who was seated 5,000 miles away in Iraq.

Joshua Fields, a Lafayette High School graduate, sat in a conference room at Camp Taji, watching as his mother and father, David, helped publicize the second installment of Freedom Calls, a program that brings soldiers and their families together through video conferences.

This year's featured event will be in conjunction with the University of Kentucky basketball game against the University of Louisville on Dec. 17. Families of service members will gather at Rupp Arena, where they will be able to see and talk to their overseas relatives, and the game will be beamed to Iraq.

Yesterday, in a Capitol conference room, while Joshua Fields spoke of his allegiance to the Wildcats, and Gov. Ernie Fletcher talked about the cooperative effort to make the conversations possible, Mrs. Fields concentrated on her son.

"You want to capture every moment," Mrs. Fields said. "Silly little things that don't mean anything, but you can't catch on the phone."

It is that kind of closeness that family members cherish, said 1st Sgt. Roger Nickel, a member of the 101st Airborne Division who took advantage of the arrangement to talk with his wife earlier this year from a hookup in Madisonville.

"It was a great experience. We appreciate it," Nickel said from his seat alongside Fields in Iraq.

Joshua Fields is nearing the end of his yearlong tour in Iraq and his four-year hitch in the Army. Fields says he is coming back to Central Kentucky and enrolling at UK, where he wants to become an engineer.

Families of military personnel serving in Iraq can go to www.kthnschedule.com, a Web site co-sponsored by the Kentucky TeleHealth Network, or e-mail freedomcalls@kthnschedule.com to get on the list of people who want to take part.