

LEE'S SUMMIT JOURNAL

Reach out and touch someone

Family gets to talk with overseas soldier with help of local AT&T

By Miranda Wycoff
The Journal Staff
Thursday, July 26, 2007

Although, it has been two weeks since the Vicuna children saw their father, for them it has seemed like months.

But with the help of AT&T, 201 N.E. Mulberry St. in Lee's Summit, Lauren, 5, Jaren, 4, and Tristen, 1, not only got to talk to their dad, Vic Vicuna, who is half way across the world in Iraq, but they got to see him, too, via Operation Freedom Call.

AT&T donated their Video-Link Teleconferencing equipment and their Lee's Summit facility so the Vicuna family could be reunited even though they were half a world apart.

Vic Vicuna is a soldier at Taji Air Force Base in Iraq. He has served 15 years in the Air Force but his current tour of duty is his first deployment.

The Vicuna children, along with their mother Lorelei and her cousin Karen Festejo and her two daughters, Sophia and Annie, traveled from Warrensburg, Mo. for the opportunity to talk to Vic via the video-teleconference.

"Usually when my husband is home, I don't drive," Lorelei said. "But I sure didn't mind driving 45 minutes for this. I wanted to see my husband, and my kids wanted to see him, too."

When the family arrived at the AT&T facility just before 11:30 a.m. Wednesday, volunteers with the AT&T Pioneers, a community service organization made up of active and retired AT&T employees escorted the group to the conference room. The entire office showed support for the Vicuna family and



Jeff Kirchhoff The Journal

The family of Vic Vicuna, a member of the U.S. Air Force stationed at Taji Air Force Base in Iraq, lights up as they see him on a videoscreen during a teleconference at AT & T in Lee's Summi. Vic's relatives on hand for the teleconference included (front, from left) his son Jaren, wife Lorelei, daughters Tristen and Lauren; and (back, from left) cousins Karen,, Sophia and Annie Festejo.

others who are serving in the military by wearing red, white and blue and decorating with flags, stars and stripes.

The Vicuna family sat down at the conference table and saw their dad and husband for the first time in a couple of weeks. Their eyes instantly lit up and smiles spread across their faces.

"It's only been like two weeks, but it's felt like we haven't seen each other for months," Lorelei said, "It's really good to see him and talk to him at the same time."

Vic, originally stationed at Whiteman Air Force Base, is stationed at Taji to help train and instruct Iraqi forces. However, Lorelei said the building he is supposed to teach in isn't even finished yet, so Vic has volunteered to drive a bus for now.

He is scheduled to serve in Iraq for a total of six months.

Lorelei said her kids were very excited to see their father, and 4-year-old Jaren even woke up early to put on his new Red Sox outfit, complete with backpack, to show his dad, who also is a Red Sox fan.

"The kids were excited and shy at the same time," Lorelei said. "I just think they didn't know how to react or what to say."

Karee Craig, coordinator of the event, said they get a lot of requests from the families of soldiers to do these video-calls, but unfortunately this is only available at a select few bases.

But this time, Craig said, the soldier requested the call from the Freedom Call Foundation.

"I didn't even think about it," Lorelei said when she heard she and her children were going to get this opportunity. "I said, 'Sure,' right away."

Craig said they encourage the kids to bring their artwork or anything else they want to show their dad.

"It's exciting, but it can get pretty emotional, too," Craig said.

But Lorelei said it was just good to see her husband.

"Having three kids you would think I would become more emotional, but I'm just concerned about him," she said. "I think that if he were anywhere but Iraq, it might be a different story."

One volunteer, a life member of the Pioneers, said this opportunity for the Vicuna family and others is amazing. She said that at the time her husband served in the Vietnam War, this type of communication was unheard of.

"There are so many differences between communication now and back then," said Doranna Manary. "Back then I never even got to talk to my husband. I was sure that every time the phone or doorbell rang that it would be bad news. We only corresponded through letters, and those were few and far between. This is a wonderful project and a great opportunity for this family."

Craig said AT&T provides this service through the Freedom Foundation. The Foundation sets up the call between the family and the soldier and AT&T provides the call free of charge.

"We never know when (requests for calls) are coming," Craig said. "We just rely on the Freedom Call Foundation to let us know."

To learn more about the Freedom Calls Foundation visit its Web site at www.freedomcalls.org.