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## **Soldiers' video visits**

**Teleconferencing allows families to see, talk with loved ones stationed in Iraq**

By Beth Musgrave

HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

Denise Lewis beamed as she walked out of a conference room at Heritage Hall yesterday.

"That's all I wanted for Christmas," Lewis said as she tried to stop tears.

Thanks to a state-of-the-art video conferencing network, Denise and her husband, Mark Lewis, were able to talk to their son Adam stationed near Fallujah, Iraq, from a conference room in Heritage Hall in Lexington.

Yesterday was the first time the Louisville couple had seen their 21-year-old son since June.

"I thought I was going to cry through the entire 20 minutes," Denise Lewis said, laughing.

It was an emotional day for more than 50 families who participated in "Freedom Calls" before, during and after the University of Kentucky-University of Louisville game.

Freedom Calls was the brainchild of Rob Sprang, director of UK's HealthCare Kentucky TeleCare Network -- which connects health care professionals across the state.

Sprang suggested using the state's teleconferencing network to connect families with soldiers in Iraq after hearing about a similar program in Virginia. Sprang knew the state had enough video-conferencing equipment for families to use in Kentucky; the problem was finding similar video-conferencing equipment in Iraq. Sprang connected with a group called the Freedom Calls Foundation. The non-profit has installed three video-conferencing systems at three military bases in Iraq -- Camp Fallujah, Camp Taji and Al Asad Air base.

More families of Kentucky soldiers wanted to talk to their loved ones -- but those soldiers weren't near Freedom Calls Foundation's three sites, Sprang said.

"They're trying to raise money so they can put more (videoconferencing equipment) in all the bases in Iraq," Sprang said.

This is the second year for the Kentucky Freedom Calls. Last year, the event was at the University of Louisville, during the UK and U of L game. All of the equipment and food were donated for yesterday's program, Sprang said. The people who organized the event are all volunteers.

Many families have been able to talk on the phone or exchange e-mails with their soldiers. But being able to see and communicate in real time was almost as good as seeing someone in person, family members said yesterday.

Phillip Stith's wide grin and quick wit -- things difficult to convey in a telephone call -- came across the giant television screen in front of his wife, Amy, his parents and mother-in-law during yesterday's 20-minute teleconference.

But the 25-year-old Marine and Somerset native also conveyed a lot more just by looking at his wife, his mom said.

"You can see the way he looks at Amy," said Linda Stith, Phillip's mother. "You can't see that love look over the phone."

Lexington Councilwoman Linda Gorton and her husband, Charles, try to talk to their 24-year-old son once a week by telephone. But Clay Gorton has been especially busy -- his Army Reserve unit is training the Iraqi military in Fallujah -- and he hasn't had much time to talk.

Yesterday, as his parents gave Clay updates on family and friends and chatted about his plans when he returns, Linda Gorton suddenly stopped and looked at her youngest child on the television in front of her.

"It's so good to see you, honey," Gorton said.

Clay Gorton had told his parents weeks before that he had lost 15 pounds since arriving in Iraq in August. They were worried. But he looked good, Charles Gorton said.

"There's nothing like seeing him smile and laugh," Linda Gorton said.

Gorton said that, before Clay left for Iraq, she used to worry about little things.

Not any more.

"My first concern is making sure my child is safe," Linda Gorton said.