



'All I wanted was to see his face'

Families get to see, talk to loved ones through video conferencing

By Shaylyn Cochran
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COLUMBUS -- For the first time in her eight months of pregnancy, Lanisha Clapper was able to show off her very round stomach to her husband, Chris.

Despite Lanisha desperately wanting her husband to be present during the pregnancy, the reality is he can't; Chris is one of thousands of servicemen and servicewomen serving in Iraq.

"I talk to him about every other day, but we haven't seen him since he left in December," Lanisha said.

Courtesy of the Freedom Calls Foundation, the Columbus Blue Jackets and USA Hockey, Lanisha was able to see her other half via an Internet Video Conferencing at the Nationwide Arena. More than 75 people gathered at the arena to chat with about 25 members of the 706th Transportation Company, which is based in Mansfield. The relatives, clad in shirts bearing the phrase "Support our troops," also were able to watch Team USA take on Team Canada in an exhibition of the 2004 World Cup of Hockey.

"I don't think I can put into words how I feel right now," said Tammy Clapper, Chris's mom. "This experience has been ... it's been real good."

Holding back tears, Tammy explained Chris will have a leave at the end of September, just in time for the birth of his son Oct. 3.



Daniel Melograna/News Journal

Dee Freidhof holds a speaker up to 4-year-old Ryan's ear so he can hear his father, Paul, a member of the 706th Transportation Company in Iraq, as they talk through video conferencing at the Nationwide Arena in Columbus.



Daniel Melograna/News Journal photos

Kathie Burkepile begins to cry Monday as she talks with her son, Earick, a specialist with the 706th, through video conferencing.

"He hasn't even seen the baby's room or anything yet," she said. "We can't wait for him to come home."

The evening brought the best anniversary gift ever for Lori Hager. She was able to look at her husband, Richard, on the day that marked their eight years of marriage.

"It was a lot of 'I miss you' and 'I love you,' " she said. "All I wanted was to see his face, to look in his eyes. I just can't wait for him to come home."

Likewise, Sean Freidhof can't wait for the return of his dad, Paul. The six-year-old gets to talk to his dad about once a week, but he, too, hasn't seen him since December.

"I saw him on the computer and he looked the same," Sean said.

Sean's mother, Dee, agreed.

"We get to talk on the phone a lot, but it's the face-to-face that matters," she said. "I want to see that he's alive and that at this second, this day, he's okay."

Dee was able to see just that during her 20 minute conversation with her husband, who's been in the reserves for 14 years. Before the virtual meeting, Dee had a myriad of things she wanted to say to Paul, but when her turn came around, she reverted back to what her and her husband know best -- their two children.

"I basically gave him an update of what was going with the kids and how they've grown ... who's lost a tooth or who's stomach hurts," Dee said. "I want him to be involved in their daily lives as much as possible."

While Dee put her role as a wife into action, Karen Harris quickly recaptured her maternal instincts when she spoke with her son, Josh.

"Are you taking care of yourself over there?" she asked. "We all miss you so much."

Karen was joined by 11 relatives in her Internet video conference with Josh. Although Josh returned to Mansfield a few months ago for the funeral of his father, his family jumped on the opportunity to see their favorite soldier.

"This event allows (Freedom Calls) the chance to hook up the brave members of the armed services who leave their families to protect ours," said Rick Jubeck, director of development for the charity.

The organization specializes in connecting troops on duty with their family members. Funding comes from donations through corporations and private citizens.

"Families are depending on Freedom Calls to unite them with their servicemen and we are in turn depending on the American people to help us finance this endeavor," Jubeck said. "It's our goal to improve the equipment and make it possible so that every person serving overseas can communicate more effectively with their family."

The ultimate goal of all the families of loved ones in the 706th company is the see their relatives home safe and sound.

"I'm looking forward to seeing him in October for his leave and I can't wait to see him (when he comes home) permanently in January," Lori Hager said.

How to Help

To help the Freedom Calls Foundation, visit the Web site at www.freedomcalls.org and find out how to give a donation and support the troops.

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