

Technology brings moms, troops closer

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By [Erica Pippins](#)
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Two Montgomery mothers received the ultimate gift on Mother's Day.

They got to "see" that their children were safe.

Knology and The Freedom Calls Foundation teamed up on Sunday to connect Edna Gardner and Gwenita Ponder with their children in Iraq. A video conference link through the Internet made it possible for the Gardner and Ponder families to talk face-to-face for nearly an hour.

While the mothers speak to their children on the phone and through e-mails almost once a week, "nothing takes the place of seeing that he is OK," said Edna Gardner. Her son, Army Sgt. Jim Gardner, left for his second deployment in November.

"He was over there (Iraq) on Mother's Day last year. Even though I got to talk to him, it was really hard," she said. "This is really the best Mother's Day present I could ever have. Getting to see him like this was so special."

Gwenita Ponder can relate to Edna Gardner's feelings as a mother.

"This is the best gift a person could have ... knowing she is not in harm's way," Ponder said of her daughter, Army Spc. Shenita Bryson. Bryson has been in Iraq for about seven months.

"It's a blessing to know that she's OK," Ponder said.

"I thank the Lord and Knology for providing us with this opportunity."

Art Loescher, general manager for Knology in Montgomery, said the company was happy to do it. Knology and The Freedom Calls Foundation also joined forces to connect families in Charleston, S.C., and Columbus, Ga., Loescher said, noting that all three locations were chosen because they have military bases.

"This is one of the best uses of technology," Loescher said. "It was wonderful to bring these mothers and families face-to-face with their loved ones in Iraq. Even when they were not talking to each other, you could see the joy in their faces."



Army Sgt. Jim Gardner, who is in Iraq, communicates with his family via video conferencing Sunday at the Knology office in Montgomery.

-- Photos by [Karen S. Doerr](#) Advertiser



Edna Gardner, center, waves Sunday along with her daughters, Rekesha Gardner, left, and Suerina Gardner, right, to her son, Sgt. Jim Gardner, who is serving in Iraq.

Huddled in the Knology office at 1637 East Blvd., the families laughed as they caught up on neighborhood gossip, church happenings and memories of the last time they were together.

Sgt. Jim Gardner, who spoke to nearly 20 relatives including his mother and siblings, teased his sisters about "being nosy as usual," when they tried to get details about his duties in Iraq. They ribbed him about singing a solo in his unit's choir and "thankfully" losing weight.

But then, the tears came.

"We're all doing well over here. I think we are all ready to come back home to our loved ones and everything, but we're doing fine," Jim Gardner said wiping tears from his eyes. "I love all of y'all."

"I love you too darling," replied Edna Gardner, before reminding her son to remember the Lord's Prayer. "I wish I could walk through the television and bring you back here right now."

Bryson's family shared a similar camaraderie. She wowed her mother and younger siblings with tales of eating Burger King, Pizza Hut and Subway in Iraq and working in 100-plus degree weather.

Bryson's mother asked how she was doing on her studies for the Soldier of the Month board exam. Youngest daughter Charnita, 7, told her big sister that the next time she came home, she would have to take her to get her nails done.

"Well, you'll have to pay since you are getting an allowance," Bryson said.

"OK, I can. I already have \$5 in my pocket," Charnita said.

"You all are going to make me cry," Bryson said.



Valeria Smith, left, and Brenda Anderson, center, watch as their sister Angela Williams waves to their brother, Sgt. Jim Gardner, who is in Iraq. The Mother's Day video conference was provided by Knology and the Freedom Calls Foundation.

Mother's Day was especially hard for Bryson because her son, Jeremiah, turns 1 on May 24, and she likely will not be home to celebrate his birthday. "I miss you all so very much."

But Ponder told her to hang in there. She was in the Army for 13 years and served in Desert Storm. Ponder knows what it is like to be away from your children on special holidays.

"You'll be OK, soldier girl. Know that we love you and are praying for you," Ponder said. "I'm just so glad we had the chance to spend time together today."