

KOCT links Marine families with loved ones in Iraq

By: ALEXANDRA DeLUCA - For the North County Times

OCEANSIDE ---- On a recent Wednesday morning, Julie Mendez sat in the green room inside of KOCT-TV's Oceanside headquarters, anxiously waiting to be called into the studio.

"I'm really nervous," said Mendez. "I'm almost as nervous as if he was coming home."

The "he" Mendez was referring to was her husband, a Marine deployed in Iraq with the 1st Combat Engineer Battalion. Through the magic of modern technology, Mendez was about to be virtually reunited with her husband via videoconference.

Working in conjunction with the national nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation, KOCT provides 30-minute videoconference sessions to families of deployed Camp Pendleton Marines twice a month at no charge.

Mendez, her 12-year-old daughter Breanna and 6-year-old son Brandon were one of 13 families scheduled to have a half-hour session with their deployed Marine on Wednesday.

"I'm very excited," said Breanna Mendez, who along with her brother took the day off from school and drove up from San Diego with her mother to come "see" her father. "We haven't talked to him in three days. The last time we talked, the phone got disconnected."

"I just want to see what he looks like," said Julie Mendez. "When I talk to him on the phone, he sounds so tired."

Just then, Dick Bartlett, a Freedom Calls Foundation volunteer, came into the green room: it was time. Julie Mendez grabbed a handful of tissues before following Bartlett into the studio, where her husband was waiting on the big-screen television, live from Camp Fallujah.

"This is so cool," Breanna Mendez said before Bartlett closed the door behind her.

The videoconferencing sessions began at KOCT about five months ago after Bartlett approached the nonprofit television station about being a videoconferencing location. Bartlett, a retired business executive who serves on the Freedom Calls Foundation's board of advisors, has spent the past year finding, developing and coordinating videoconferencing locations throughout the country.

"Living in Oceanside, you see the families every day," said Bartlett. "You see the difficulties, the tragedy, the hardships. How do you not step up and do something?"

Over the past year, Bartlett has helped set up seven videoconferencing locations throughout San Diego County, including KOCT, and is currently developing several more. Each of the sites hosts weekly or bimonthly videoconference sessions for families of Marines deployed to one of three locations in Iraq: Al Asad Airbase, Camp Fallujah and Camp Taji.

KOCT Executive Director Tom Reeser said when Bartlett first approached KOCT about serving as a Freedom Calls Foundation location about a year ago, the entire KOCT staff and board of directors were immediately on board.

"Everyone was enthusiastic," said Reeser. "This is a community television station and we thought this is definitely something we should be doing."

KOCT provides the Freedom Calls with the use of its studio and equipment at no cost. They also set up a waiting area for families in the green room, which is stocked with coffee, water and pizza and toys, games and activities for the children.

Twice a month, Bartlett and either a Family Readiness Officer or a key volunteer ---- a specially trained Marine spouse from the 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, come to KOCT to help coordinate the all-day videoconferencing sessions.

"I personally think it's a great thing," said Tanya Campbell, a key volunteer who helped Bartlett run Wednesday's session. "Phone calls and e-mails are great, but (it's better) when you can actually see them."

"It's a great morale booster for our Marines and soldiers," said RP1 Jennifer Sporl-Palmer, a chaplain's assistant who coordinates the videoconferences at the Camp Fallujah chapel.

At the conclusion of their videoconference, Julie Mendez and her children emerged from the studio, tears streaming down their cheeks.

"He basically looks the same ---- just the thing growing on his upper lip," said Julie Mendez, laughing as she wiped her eyes with a tissue. "He grew a mustache," Breanna Mendez explained.

Breanna said although her father didn't cry, she could tell he was holding back tears.

"It looked like when we first came on, he wasn't that happy, but as we started talking, he got happier," she said.

"I kind of wanted to reach up and just pull him out of the TV," said Julie Mendez.

For information about Freedom Calls Foundation, visit www.freedomcalls.org or e-mail Dick Bartlett at bartvtc@cox.net.