

## **Freedom Calls and San Juan College answers**

By Valerie Gritton/The Daily Times

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For the past two months San Juan College Director of Media Services Mike McDonald has been working with United States Army Maj. Rich Durost on the possibility of a teleconference call with a military soldier in Iraq and his family.

Durost is stationed in the Iraq with the 593rd Core Support Group from Fort Lewis, Wash., and is the coordinator of a Freedom Calls Internet Café in Iraq.

Durost holds several conference calls a day between some of the 12,000 soldiers stationed at the base in Baghdad and their families.

The base in Baghdad, because of its bandwidth, is the only base offering those services in the area.

"What we're doing here is leaps and bounds than anything we've done for deployed (troops)," said Durost via teleconference Saturday. "The impact that this has (on troops) ... it creates so much more of a personal connection (with their families)."

The program is funded by Freedom Calls, a non-profit organization whose mission is to develop a communications network enabling troops abroad to contact their families free of charge by Internet telephone, instant messaging and video conference.

Already, the foundation has plans to complete the installation of Freedom Calls facilities at Army camps in Iraq and Afghanistan. The facilities will serve an additional 40,000 troops, according to the organization's Web site, [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).

Saturday's teleconference between Aztec Sgt. Glen Mortensen and his family was the first teleconference between a deployed soldier and his family San Juan College has participated in since Freedom Calls was established.

Because the college conducts long-distance learning classes, the college had the equipment needed readily available, said Assistant Chief Information Officer Alex Struk.

"The set up was easy. The hard part was getting coordinated," Struk said of the first teleconference call.

Mortensen, whose wife is a teacher at San Juan College, was chosen as the "test" call because Durost noticed a New Mexico patch on the arm of his uniform.

Knowing McDonald was in Farmington, Durost asked Mortensen where he was from.

The rest, as they say, is history.

McDonald said he did not care how long family members spoke to Mortensen, but the military usually limits the conversation to 30 minutes to one hour.

McDonald and Durost each made a recording of the conference. A copy will be given to Mortensen in Baghdad and his family in Aztec.

Freedom Calls operates on donations. According to their Web site, a \$50 contribution to the organization by one million Americans will enable Freedom Calls to offer teleconference and other communication services to almost every soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Families wishing to speak via teleconference with soldiers stationed in Iraq need to contact [www.Freedomcalls.org](http://www.Freedomcalls.org) then click on "Contact."

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