

Marine kin's desert roses

Loved ones get TV link to Iraq

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Two-year-old Akili Gantt clutched the red string of her white balloon in her tiny hands, giggling as her father teased her.

"Can I hold the balloon?" Marine Cpl. Anthony Gantt asked his daughter, reaching toward her with both hands. "Akili, Happy Valentine's Day!"

The exchange may seem a familiar Valentine's scene, but when little Akili blew kisses at her father, she was directing them at a TV showing her dad's image from thousands of miles away in Fallujah, Iraq, where he's stationed.

The Gantts were one of dozens of family throughout the country reunited yesterday via video conferencing by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a Brooklyn Heights-based nonprofit group devoted to linking soldiers serving overseas with their loved ones at home.

Seven families in the New York area received a free hookup to Fallujah-based Marines at the midtown office of Tandberg, the company that provided Freedom Calls with the technical equipment. Gantt, 25, left his Uniondale, L.I., home six months ago and was shocked to see how much his 9-month-old daughter Nalani had changed.

"Look how big you are," he said.

Beverly Chase, 55, couldn't believe she was seeing her son, 1st Lt. Benjamin Chase, 25, in real time.

"It's like heaven," Chase said. "I just want to reach right through the screen and touch him and hug him."

Cpl. Reinaldo Rivera, 22, and Katie Remullah, 23, both of Forest Hills, Queens, started dating a week before he left for active duty in Iraq and haven't seen each other since January last year.

"I've got my Valentine right in front of me," Rivera said.

"It's an awesome relief, but I get to see her pretty much every night and every morning when I wake up," he added, holding up a photo of Remullah. "It's my motivation here."

Though Freedom Calls offers its communications services at no charge for soldiers and their family members every day, seeing her boyfriend yesterday was especially meaningful for Remullah.

"I see couples together, and they're doing [things] because it's Valentine's Day," she said. "Everyone's together with gifts in their hands, and for me, just to see him, it's more than all of those put together."