

# OPELIKA-AUBURN NEWS

## To Iraq with love

Technology program reunites locals, loved ones

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Even though the newlyweds could see each others' faces, the couple was separated by more than 6,500 miles.

The last time Amanda Smither, a third-grade teacher at Morris Avenue Intermediate School, saw her husband, Matthew, was in August - that is, until Wednesday when she chatted with him via a videoconference.

They talked about everything from family to football.

Matthew Smither is serving his second tour in Iraq as a corporal in the U.S. Marines. The couple was married in May, just months before he had to head to officers' training and return to Iraq.

The videoconference was arranged through the Freedom Calls Network, now offered free of charge by Opelika City Schools to its employees, students and their immediate family members.

Freedom Calls Network, a satellite and Web-based service established in 2004 by the nonprofit organization Freedom Calls Foundation, serves more than 2,000 soldiers daily in Iraq at Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah, Camp Taqaddum, Al Asad Air Base and Camp Victory, according to [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).

During the videoconference, Amanda Smither sat behind a closed door in an empty office at the Opelika City Schools central office, and her husband sat at the Freedom Calls Center at Camp Fallujah.

Although the couple enjoyed seeing each other as they spoke Wednesday, one thing was missing.

"I miss hugging her," Smither said from his post in Iraq. "I'm really looking forward to the day when I get to hold my wife again."

The couple tried to connect through Freedom Calls in late December, but the war had other plans.

"Just to actually talk to him ... was great," Amanda Smither said, adding that they plan to visit by videoconference at least one more time before he returns to the U.S. in late April.

The Opelika school system is currently borrowing the equipment needed to access the Freedom Calls Network and has applied for a state grant to purchase its own equipment, which would also be used for other things such as virtual field trips.

Freedom Calls provides a valuable, personal service to the school system's employees, students and their families by connecting them to loved ones in Iraq, said Opelika City Schools Superintendent Dr. Mark Neighbors.

"It just makes you feel good. We're in the people business, and that's what we do," Neighbors said.

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