

The Oregonian

Soldiers in Baghdad, families will reunite via satellite

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BEAVERTON -- Priscilla Martin saw her son John, 26, last month when he was on leave from Iraq.

But the Clackamas mother knows it's going to be at least spring before she sees the Oregon National Guard member again. So she's excited about a chance to spend 30 minutes Sunday chatting with him face to face over a satellite link.

It's all part of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York charity that pairs soldiers with their families back home. Sunday in Beaverton, families of more than 20 Oregon National Guard soldiers at Camp Cooke in Iraq will be reunited using video conferencing.

"That kind of interaction is priceless," said John Harlow, executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation. "When these families talk to the soldiers by telephone, they hear how everything is fine. But they see all the terrible news on television.

"Seeing the soldier in person reassures the family in a totally different way and helps relieve anxiety."

Debi Key-Young hopes so. She's the Beaverton woman who contacted the group about coming to Oregon for Operation Freedom Calls.

She doesn't have a son in the military but said she's "a mother who has a daily choice of talking to her 31-year-old son."

"These people don't have a choice," she said. "They can't just pick up the phone and say, 'Hi, Mom.' "

Martin said she often e-mails and talks with her son, Spec. John Martin, but has never seen pictures of him in Iraq and has never seen the environment where he lives as a member of a machine gun crew.

"It will be nice to see his face, to know that he's all right," said Priscilla Martin, who plans to take family members to the videoconference.

"We'll have to think about what questions to ask so we make sure we have enough to say," she said. "It would be horrible to sit there for 30 minutes staring at each other."

The public is invited to attend. A large-screen television will show each satellite reunion between soldier and family, while private screens elsewhere will allow for private conversations, Key-Young said.

Families will have 20 to 30 minutes to talk.

Beyond reuniting family members, the event, which includes food and children's activities, is a fund-raiser for the Freedom Calls Foundation. The nonprofit agency plans to create satellite connections at other military bases, eight in Iraq, two in Afghanistan, Harlow said.

Camp Cooke north of Baghdad has the charity's only satellite connection. Since April, the camp's soldiers have connected with families throughout the United States, he said.

Harlow gives poignant examples, such as the father who saw his daughter's first birthday and heard the girl's first "dada." Or the father who witnessed his child's birth, beginning to end.

"The Army wants additional camps outfitted for videoconferencing, and they're helping with the cost," Harlow said. "But each camp costs about \$350,000 to establish and \$30,000 a month to run."

Key-Young, who works for Sunset Group Realtors, said she is trying to raise \$100,000 through sponsorships and private donations.

"I've been on the phone contacting everybody I know," she said. "I've gotten a lot of support. But, of course, we could always use more.

"These soldiers are out there doing their duty for us," she said. "I feel like this is the least we can do, to keep them connected to their real lives."

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