

# Journal Star

## Soldiers, families connect from afar

Video conferencing helps troops feel closer to home

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**BY JOHN SHARP**

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**EAST PEORIA** - Erika Wieland was happy to hear her cousin is eating food from Taco Bell and Burger King and not sleeping with the scorpions.

Laken Hajnal, also a cousin, is glad to learn he is in air conditioning. Uncle Bob Sonney was telling him jokes.

All of Army National  
Guardsman Gregory

Widmer's family were simply elated to be able to see and speak with their hero, who is based at Army Camp Taji-Cooke in Iraq, thanks to an Internet video conference session offered Tuesday by the University of Illinois Extension Center in East Peoria.

The conference was one of three held Tuesday in conjunction with the National Center for Supercomputing Applications and Freedom Calls, a not-for-profit group.

"It was a wonderful experience to be able to see him and we appreciate it," said Widmer's grandmother, Joyce Haley of Peoria.



**DAVID ZALAZNIK/JOURNAL STAR**

Family members cheer Tuesday as the image of Greg Widmer, stationed in Iraq, appears on a screen as they participate in a conversation using videoconferencing technology at the University of Illinois Extension Center in East Peoria.

More than 20 family members - aunts, cousins and his grandparents - crowded into a room for the 8 a.m. video conference, which lasted for about a half hour. The conversation was upbeat and spirited, as evidenced by the American flags each family member held.

"He said he was on cloud nine about this," Haley said. "He said it was a morale booster."

Family members said Widmer, an Oshkosh, Wis., native who has been in Iraq with the Wisconsin-based 1157th Transportation Company since September, is pursuing a degree at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He wants to be involved with missionary work.

So it was only natural that Widmer led the family in prayer, stirring tears.

Right before the conference ended, Widmer came back to the video screen, holding a box of Kleenex.

"He's an amazing young man," Haley said.

It was also a time to talk sports. His aunt, Bonnie Swanson of Chillicothe, talked Green Bay Packers football with him.

Swanson, donning a Packers' sweatshirt and Cheesehead head gear, said she and Widmer regularly attend the football team's summer training camps.

"He agrees with me that if you're a Packers fan, you stick with them," Swanson said.

Widmer's Peoria roots come from his mom, Frances, who grew up in Peoria and graduated from Woodruff High School before meeting her husband in college. The two have lived in Wisconsin ever since but remain close with the Peoria family.

Widmer held a similar video conference with the Wisconsin relatives several weeks ago.

Haley said the East Peoria-based conference came about after the family learned of the opportunity through an advertisement in the Journal Star. In early November, the family asked to participate. They received a confirmation e-mail Nov. 22.

Judy Schumacher, an Extension educator, said the video conference was open to everyone and that nine families were interested. Only three soldiers, however, could do it because "it depended on where the soldier was at," she said.

Two camps - Taji-Cooke and Camp Al-Asad (Air Force) - could participate at no cost to the families.

Widmer happened to be at the base at the time of the video conference.

"You can have your own opinion of the war but these soldiers need our support," Haley said, adding that Widmer did not speak negatively about the war-torn region where he is stationed. "With Greg, it's always the ultimate positive. He told us that he had been looking forward to going and looking forward to new experiences."

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