

Post-Tribune

Freedom Calls unites soldier, family

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By Mark Taylor Post-Tribune correspondent

EAST CHICAGO -- The Riveras shared a family reunion Friday morning.

Patricia and Johnny Rivera Sr. of Merrillville; two of their grandchildren, Johnnie Rivera III, 11, and Jasmine Rivera, 4, of Gary, and Johnny Rivera Sr.'s brother, Edwin Rivera of Gary, met at a steelworkers' training site in East Chicago.

The guest of honor made an appearance live, but not in the flesh.

U.S. Army Spc. 4 Johnnie Rivera Jr., 28, flashed the dimpled grin his mother loves and blew kisses at his children, parents and uncle.

While tears were shed, Rivera couldn't dab his son's eyes or hug his mother reassuringly. Hugs are hard to deliver from 8,000 miles away.

The Rivera family reunion was a technologically complex feat coordinated locally by Mittal Steel steelworker unions, in Iraq and in New Jersey, where the Freedom Calls Foundation, a not for profit organization, operates a satellite television link connecting soldiers in Iraq at five different bases with their loved ones stateside.

Spc. Rivera, located at the Taji Base in northern Iraq, and the Rivera family met in a TV classroom studio at the Leon Lynch Learning Center in East Chicago, an educational partnership between the United Steelworkers Union Local 1011 and Mittal Steel.

Spc. Rivera walked into a small, cement block cubicle on his base and beamed at the sight of his family.

Occasionally, like any reunion, family members stepped on each others' sentences and accidentally interrupted. After greetings were exchanged the questions flew furiously, heavily seasoned with "I love yous."

Patricia Rivera vowed to send more candy and nuts and wished her son a happy 29th birthday in advance.

"I know you must be eating well because you look healthy," Patricia Rivera said to the young soldier on his second tour of duty in Iraq. He isn't scheduled to return to the United States until January.

"I'm so glad to see you. I miss seeing those pretty dimples "Don't make me cry over here."

The elder Rivera, a retired LTV Steel worker and dialysis patient seeking a kidney transplant, dabbed his eyes and told his son, "We're praying for you to come home safe."

"Don't worry, I'll be back," Spc. Rivera reassured.

One could feel the yearning to reach out and actually touch each other, to plant kisses and press flesh. Unspoken, but understood, was the reason for that fear, the risk inherent in any war. Just two weeks ago a suicide bomber made it into Rivera's camp.

After teary farewells and good wishes, the 30 minutes elapsed and the connection ended.

"I miss him and love him and feel good that he's fighting for his country," the 11-year-old boy said of his dad. "It was a very touching feeling to see him. I miss him a lot and hope he comes back home safe."

Edwin Rivera, a steelworker from Mittal Steel Gary who worked with local steelworker unions and Freedom Calls to schedule the family reunion, said he was grateful for the opportunity to speak with his nephew face to face.

"There are a lot of good people who don't have to care, but really do," he said. "It's a whole different thing to see his face. I know our family will sleep better tonight."