

## A lengthy vigil, a likely bargain

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A little rain didn't dampen the spirits of a handful of die-hard shoppers who were lined up Thursday evening at the Maine Mall to get a very early start on the traditional "Black Friday" shopping spree.

More than 100 stores were scheduled to throw open their doors at 1 a.m. today, after a festival in the parking lot that included live music, giveaways and a video conference hookup between troops in Iraq and their loved ones in Maine.

At Best Buy, a line snaked around the building by 8 p.m. and shoppers were camped out in tents and wrapped up in sleeping bags.

"I got here at 1 p.m.," said Neil Ortiz, of South Paris, who was first in line. Ortiz was there to get a \$250 laptop that was marked down \$350. It's for his 15-year-old son, Juan.

"It beats all the other stores' deals," said Ortiz, with a blanket wrapped around his legs. He said it was his first time waiting in line on Thanksgiving for a store to open and that he had to be at work in Norway at 8 a.m.

Next to Ortiz was a seasoned Black Friday shopper.

Allison Picard waited in a camping chair, her legs wrapped in a sleeping bag and a pillow behind her head, as she leaned against the store door. Picard, of Rockland, said she's waited in lines for Black Friday deals for the past 24 years, ever since she was 13 years old and waiting to get a Cabbage Patch doll.

"We do this every year," Picard said. "We've always gotten what we want and we've always gotten great deals."

This year, she brought her son, Zack, 11, her daughter, Courey, 15, and her mother, Carol Parkins of Newark, Del.

Picard was writing people's names in a notebook so there wouldn't be any confusion about who got in line first. Picard, who also wanted one of the \$250 laptops, noted that there were only 18 of those deals available.

Some people just came to enjoy the activities at the mall.

"We just wanted to do something different," said Cheryl Oak of Sanford, who was with her two children, 14-year-old Chauna and 15-year-old Lucas. "We plan on shopping if we can stay awake."

The day after Thanksgiving, called Black Friday because it's when many stores finally turn a profit for the year, is the traditional kickoff to the holiday shopping season. Retailers offer deep discounts and special promotional giveaways for early-bird shoppers. Across the country, thousands of people will wait all night for a 6 a.m. opening.

But for the second year, the Maine Mall decided to get a jump on the sales - and perhaps spare shoppers a seriously cold night huddled at the doors - by opening at 1 a.m.

In the parking lot, bands and entertainers, including an Elvis tribute artist and a disc jockey, entertained the crowd of several hundred people.

As the rain grew stronger, people clustered around the coffee stations and warming huts set up by the National Guard.

Local businesses also were benefitting from the retail craze. Several nearby hotels and motels reported being sold out for today and through the weekend.

"This is pretty much the norm," said Anita Brooks, a front desk clerk at Days Inn on the Maine Mall Road, which cut room prices by \$10 to attract clients. "On Black Friday, we're always sold out."

It was the same story down the road at the Comfort Inn, which slashed room prices from \$99 to \$49.95 for a shopper's special. "We're already sold out Friday and Saturday, and there is a good chance we'll be sold out on Thursday, too," clerk Jeffrey Davidson said. "We've been sold out the last two or three weekends with all the shoppers."

The mall also sponsored major prizes, including a \$50,000 Maine Mall shopping spree, a 2007 GMC truck and a \$25,000 hot tub from Mainely Tubs.

For all the marketing and shopping hype, the big buzz Thursday evening was about the giant video screen set up in the parking lot to connect troops in Iraq with their families in Maine. The one-hour videoconference, scheduled for 10:30 p.m., was to be displayed on a 16-foot screen. Family members were gathered in a reserved section of the parking lot, and about 50 service members in Iraq - where it will be 6:30 a.m. - were expected to participate.

Tanya and Alan Dube of Limington were hoping to talk to their son Freeman, a member of the Maine Army National Guard's 133rd Engineer Battalion who left for Iraq in July.

"He's four hours from Baghdad, so we're not sure we'll get to talk to him," said his mother, who was wearing two photo pins of her son on her chest. They said they were there to support the troops and were looking forward to the videoconferencing. The hookup was arranged through the **Freedom Calls** Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that facilitates communication resources to troops in the field and their relatives and friends back home.

The foundation has communications facilities at four military bases in Iraq that provide videoconferencing, Internet telephone, traditional e-mail and telephone service for about 2,000 troops daily. Plans are in the works for several more facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as permanent public facilities in the United States. The foundation has facilitated all manner of videoconferences for the troops, from long-distance weddings and letting new mothers show their husbands their new babies, to allowing time with a dying relative.

Sgt. Rick Campbell of the Maine Army National Guard made arrangements for about 50 troops from Maine to join the videoconference from Camp Victory in Baghdad. Tim Frechette of Biddeford, who helped coordinate the videoconference, said he received a lot of e-mail about the broadcast, many with friends or relatives serving overseas, about how happy they were to have the opportunity to see the soldiers during the videoconference.

"It's really heartwarming," said Frechette, who was in the Coast Guard. "You read these e-mails and you know it's difficult for them, but you know you can actually do something for them. That feels really good."

Mall owner General Growth Properties, the **Freedom Calls** Foundation, various corporate sponsors and Frechette's company helped pay the undisclosed costs of the overall event.

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