

Family connects across the miles -- to Iraq

By [VICKY TAYLOR](#) Staff writer

As hugs go, the one exchanged by James Buchanan Middle School teacher Donna Haugh and her son probably sets some kind of record. It did, after all, span a distance of some 7,000 miles.

The long-distance hug, which took place Tuesday in conference rooms at the Mercersburg school and Camp Victory in Baghdad, marked the beginning of a videoconference call between Capt. Jeremy Haugh, a Judge Advocate General lawyer serving with the U.S. Army in Iraq, and his parents in Mercersburg.



Donna Haugh is all smiles as she talks to her son, Capt. Jeremy Haugh, via the Freedom Calls Foundation Tuesday at James Buchanan Middle School, Mercersburg. (Public Opinion/Markell DeLoatch)

Sponsored by Freedom Calls Foundation using the Tuscarora School District videoconferencing equipment and an Internet hookup, the call marked the first time Haugh and her husband Tony had seen their son since Thanksgiving, when he was home on leave.

The Army officer has been in Iraq for a year.

Although the family keeps in touch by telephone and e-mail, just getting to see their son and spend an hour talking to him was a special treat for the Waynesboro couple.

The hug took place soon after Donna Haugh walked into the district's learning center at the middle school and saw her son's image on a large-screen television in one corner of the room.

Excited, she waved and said: "Hi, honey, you look wonderful."

She told him she wished she could hug him, then quickly suggested that they each wrap their arms around the televisions in their respective locations.

Jeremy Haugh could be seen walking toward the camera mounted on the television in the Camp Victory conference room as his mother walked toward a similar television set at the school.

They embraced, and Donna Haugh sighed.

Later she would say the hug was "almost as good as the real thing."

The call from Baghdad had come in 10 minutes earlier than expected, and Cindy Erickson, the school district's information services director, quickly put in a call to the middle school office asking someone to send the Haughs to the learning center immediately.

Tony Haugh arrived first, stopping abruptly when he saw his son's image on the television set. He swallowed hard as he fought back tears, then waved and asked "Can you see me, Jeremy?"

Jeremy Haugh could actually see almost the entire room, which was an asset later when his mother's co-workers and eighth-grade reading class trooped in to talk to him.

The Haughs talked about their son's upcoming birthday and the little girl he and his wife Maryanne are in the process of adopting. They reminisced about a similar videoconference call to Maryanne and the couple's 5-year-old adopted son Jeremiah, remembering how after the call ended the young boy walked over and looked behind the television set for his father.

When his father asked how safe it was in Baghdad, the soldier replied that he felt as safe walking in the Iraqi capital city as he did in Kuwait or downtown Baltimore.

Donna Haugh's co-workers and eighth-grade students wanted details of life in Iraq, and perhaps an assessment of how the war was going in that far-away country.

Stressing several times that he could not speak for the Army or the government, he said he personally felt things had changed for the better over the past year.

"I think the news is good," Jeremy Haugh said. "We hear some about suicide bombings on the news, but I think they (terrorists) are desperate and trying to make big splashes."

He said that when he arrived in Iraq, attacks on coalition forces were high, but those have dwindled and troops are now able to "get out in the communities and work with Iraqis to build schools, build their communities and build government structure."

The Iraqi military has also made strides in preparing to take control of their country, he said.

"Every day they are out there on missions," he said. "I think it is one of the positive stories. They are partners in what's happening over here, but it is going to take a little more time before they can do it on their own."

Asked by one student about an "average" day at Camp Victory, Jeremy Haugh asked if any of the students had ever seen the television show "JAG." Hands went up.

"Well, it's nothing like that," he said.

He said his life was in some ways similar to what it would be at home as a civilian, since he is a JAG officer whose job is to advise his commander on matters of law as outlined in the Geneva Convention -- "the law of war" as he called it -- and at times either defend or prosecute soldiers who break the rules of military law.

"I work in an office environment," he said. "I just wear a uniform and carry a gun all the time."

The Haughs would get about 10 minutes totally alone with their son, minus students, teachers, reporters and television cameras, before their hour was up.

Later they would call the entire experience "outstanding" and "very special."

"It has been wonderful," Donna Haugh said.

Jeremy Haugh is a native of Waynesboro, where he graduated from Waynesboro Area Senior High School in 1991. He attended law school in Baltimore before returning to Pennsylvania to practice law in Hamlin.

The turning point in his life was the terrorist attacks on the United States of Sept. 11, 2001.

He decided then to dissolve his private law practice and join the Army, choosing airborne training.

He currently serves with the 3rd Infantry Division.

The video call was organized by Freedom Calls Foundation, a public charity. The organization uses a satellite network supported by corporations and the American public. For information about the organization or to contribute, go to <http://www.freedomcalls.org>.

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