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SLO SEVENTH-GRADERS CHAT LIVE WITH MARINES

Military life in Iraq gets real for local youths

The six Marines say they miss home cooking and McDonald's, and watch a lot of movies

By Nick Wilson - nwilson@thetribunenews.com



Old Mission School seventh-grader Evan Doria, 13, speaks to Marines in Iraq during a video conference Monday at the San Luis Obispo school. He coordinated the question-and-answer session as part of a service project.

In a video conference that brought San Luis Obispo students face to face with the war in Iraq, six U.S. Marines chatted with seventh-graders at Old Mission School on Monday about missing their families, leisure activities on their base, and how the Iraqi people view the American presence in their country.

Seated in a half-circle, the Marines talked about longing for home-cooked meals and foods like jambalaya — and Wendy's and McDonald's.

They told students that they worked alongside coalition troops from England, Turkey, France and Australia and other countries. One student asked if the Iraqis appreciated the efforts of American sol-

diers. The response was "Yes, most of them."

Answering a question about what they'd be doing if they weren't in the military, one Marine said he might be an FBI agent. Another said he'd probably be employed at a restaurant. A third surmised he'd have a job at Wendy's —evoking boisterous laughter from his young audience.

"I thought it was surprising that they could have a good time and be enjoying themselves in the conditions they're in," said student Annie Meyers, 13.

The event was the result of a school project coordinated by 13-year-old Evan Doria to help U.S. troops in Iraq communicate with their families.

Evan raised \$690 and donated it to the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation, which sponsors telephone calls, video conferencing and Internet service for soldiers.



After Evan sent his check, the New Jersey-based organization wrote back asking him if his school would like to speak to troops stationed in Iraq through video conferencing.

Last week, about 40 seventh graders formulated queries with their religion teacher, Margaret Arroyo. Questions weren't politically driven, Arroyo said. They were meant to evoke answers about what life is like overseas.

The Marines interviewed are stationed at Camp Fallujah Al Asad Air Base northwest of Baghdad. The mood of the conversation stayed light. For example, the troops weren't allowed to answer questions about whether they'd taken prisoners of war or directed fire on an enemy — both of which students asked.

The Marines said they watch movies in their free time, as well as sleep, surf the Internet, lift weights, run and read. Each time students introduced themselves, the Marines called out their names to greet them in response and waved — soliciting more laughter from the students.

As for being so far from home, the Marines mentioned missing their children's birthdays and graduations. They said they yearn to be with family on holidays in particular; one noted, "It's hard on me."

Evan's community service is just one of many projects that Old Mission students performed this year. All seventh and eighth-graders are required to do at least 10 hours of service annually toward a cause of their choice.

The idea behind Evan's original project was to help the soldiers, he said.

"I saw on the news about all the people dying in Iraq and about how the soldiers were homesick," he said. "I just thought if I raised money, they'd be able to call home."

Other projects focused on community outreach to benefit the homeless and animal shelters, incurable diseases, the environment and the elderly, said Principal Teri Stegman.

Arroyo said that the service projects teach children a sense of community involvement and giving back.

Students are assigned to draft a proposal of their projects, log work hours and write essays about their service.

But Evan's project turned into a unique opportunity to step into another world for a few moments.

"I learned that these soldiers are just like us," said student Sophia Smidth, 12. "They love their families. They're just trying to help us out."