

St. Petersburg Times

Even long distance couldn't stop this union

Half a world apart, a couple exchanges wedding vows with the help of a Montana judge and some special technology.

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Published December 23, 2005

WIMAUMA - From a military duty station in Africa, Jason Druding, 26, smiled at his bride.

"Hey, Francie," he said.

Francie Mercado, 25, grinned at her fiance on a projector screen set up at the University of Florida's Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Wimauma.

"Do I look pregnant?" she asked the fiancee she hadn't seen in six months as she rubbed the slight bulge under her embroidered wedding gown.

"You look beautiful, baby," Druding said.

Though half a world apart, Francie and Jason were celebrating their wedding day.

The couple had planned on marrying when Druding, a Marine reservist stationed in Djibouti, completed his tour of duty in March. But thanks to Freedom Calls, a nonprofit organization that helps military families stay in touch during wartime, they didn't have to wait. They could wed before Francie delivers their first child, a boy to be named Julian Christopher Druding.

This wasn't the first long distance marriage orchestrated by Freedom Calls, based in New York. Through the wonders of technology, the organization had helped another military couple wed via video conference. In September, Francie, who lives in Clearwater, read about a wedding online and contacted Freedom Calls for help. She didn't want to wait until March to marry Jason.

John Harlow, director of Freedom Calls, had only one roadblock to conquer: Florida requires both members of the wedding party to be present when exchanging their "I do's."

In Montana, however, marriages are allowed to take place by double-proxy. Neither the bride nor groom has to be in attendance at their own wedding.

Freedom Calls contacted the University of Florida's research center. Through the same technology that enables UF students to watch class on their personal computers in their pajamas at home, Harlow was able to connect Africa, Montana and Wimauma.

Judge Gordon Smith, a Gallatin County, Mont., justice of the peace, addressed the couple from the projector screen. He spoke into the camera located in the Montana State University's Burns Technology Center.

"Unfortunately we're waiting on someone to drive your marriage license over," he said.

The couple waited 45 minutes as someone in Montana drove the piece of paper that recognized their union to the judge.

It was already approaching midnight in Africa. Some of Druding's Marine companions went to bed. They had to be at work in six hours.

"We got the license!" Smith said, holding the long piece of paper up to the camera.

With a slight delay as the words traveled across the globe, Mercado and Druding exchanged their vows.

"Now normally we'd have a kiss to seal these wedding vows," Smith said. "But I am sure you will take care of that when Jason gets home."

At 4:18 p.m. EST and 12:18 a.m. in Djibouti, Francie and Jason were pronounced husband and wife. The couple was applauded by audiences on two continents.

"You do understand that we're getting married on two different dates," Mercado said to her new husband, who was already smoking a celebratory cigar. "I'll be expecting two anniversary presents."

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