

BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

Message from Iraq: Happy birthday to daughter

Father, school set up Web link

By Lorena Anderson - The Sun News

Jasmine McNeily will probably never forget her 11th birthday.

It's not unusual for her dad to call, but this year's call - via video conference from Iraq in front of her whole fifth-grade social studies class - was completely unexpected.

When she walked in and saw her dad's smiling face on the classroom videoscreen, Jasmine - normally "a ball of fire" - just stared.

She hasn't seen her father since May and thought she wouldn't see him again until August 2008.

"I was shocked," she said.

Her teachers and principal weren't.

They know Army Sgt. Henry McNeily, with the 504th corps support group at Al Asad air base, about 75 miles west of Baghdad, is an involved parent.

When he's not overseas, he sometimes has breakfast or lunch at school with Jasmine and meets with her teachers.



Jasmine McNeily listens on Wednesday as her father, Army Sgt. Henry McNeily, talks with her through a cyber video connection

RANDALL HILL/The Sun News



Fifth-grader Jasmine McNiely (center) blows a kiss to her father, Army Sgt. Henry McNiely, after her classmates and McNiely, through a cyber video connection, sang "Happy Birthday" to the 11-year-old North Myrtle Beach Intermediate student Wednesday during social studies class.

Even now, from Iraq, he e-mails her school each week to check on her, said North Myrtle Beach Intermediate School Principal Michelle Greene-Graham.

A few weeks ago, McNeily contacted The Freedom Calls Foundation, a New Jersey nonprofit that connects soldiers with their families through satellite calls.

Freedom Calls worked with the Horry County school district to make sure the school had a site where the call could happen and to coordinate technology.

The foundation's founder, John Harlow, said his organization

makes about 2,000 such calls a month, reuniting people for holidays, weddings, births, through illnesses and once even to let a soldier be present for his wife's in vitro fertilization.

The group doesn't charge soldiers for the calls and offers an educational program that lets students learn about life during wartime by speaking directly with those serving in the military.

Jasmine's class has been studying war's effects on families and society.

A couple of weeks ago Greene-Graham temporarily changed Jasmine's schedule so her teacher could talk about the plans for the call without Jasmine knowing.

On Wednesday, teachers took her classmates to a different classroom and brought Jasmine in a few minutes later.

Her dad was already on the video screen at the front of the room, smiling wide. He could see his daughter, thanks to a webcam.

She stood at the front of the class, looking at her dad, as her classmates came to stand next to her and ask him questions.

They wanted to know what it's like in Iraq - hot, he told them - and how he feels about his job.

"I don't enjoy fighting, but I do like standing up for our country," he said.

Before they signed off, the kids all sang "Happy Birthday" to Jasmine, with McNeily pretending to conduct them, and thanked him for his call.

Jasmine didn't have any questions for her father because she corresponds with him often.

But she did have something to say.

"I love you, Dad, and I miss you."

The look on his face said that made the call as special for him as it was for her.

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