

Neither Bride Nor Groom Will Be At This Wedding

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BALM - He's a Marine stationed in Africa.

She's a bride-to-be in Clearwater.

Surrounded by a small group of relatives and friends, she will recite her nuptials Thursday in a conference room at the Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Balm.

The groom will recite his from a military base half a world away.

And a judge in Montana will perform the ceremony.

"This will be a first," said John Harlow, who heads Freedom Calls, a New York City-based nonprofit organization that helps military families communicate during wartime.



Photo by: JASON BEHNKEN / Tribune

Francie Mercado talks with fiance Jason Druding on Tuesday in her apartment. A nonprofit organization, Freedom Calls, will help them marry despite the distance.

This time the group is helping orchestrate a long-distance, legal marriage using high-tech communication equipment and all the trappings of a traditional wedding - including the cake and flowers.

The couple, Francie Mercado, 25, and Jason Druding, a 26-year-old Marine reservist from Tampa stationed in Djibouti, Africa, near Somalia, are expecting a child. They planned to marry after Druding finished his tour of duty. But technology came knocking, affording the couple a more immediate union, Mercado said Tuesday.

It all started with a point and click on the Internet.

A self-described Web surfer, Mercado found freedomcalls.org in September and learned how the organization helped another military couple get married.

The bride and groom were both in the Army. She was in Iraq, and the groom was about to be deployed to Afghanistan. He flew to Colorado, where marriages are allowed even if only one member of the happy couple is present. A Colorado judge married them via video conference.

"I explained our situation to Freedom Calls and asked if they could help," Mercado said. "They said they'd be more than willing. It's very exciting."

Their situation is a little different. Since Florida doesn't allow a bride or groom to be absent when they take their vows, Freedom Calls had to do a little more maneuvering.

Montana is the only state that allows marriage by "double proxy," with both people absent, so the organization asked a judge there to officiate. He agreed.

To get the three together, Harlow used a nationwide network of communications specialists and reached a contact at Auburn University in Alabama, who pointed him to the University of Florida's new state-of-the-art research center in Balm.

The video conferencing setup they'll use, called the Polycom system, is regularly employed by professors teaching students on more than one campus. Professors can see the students, and vice versa.

Harlow contacted UF, and within days center Director Jack Rechcigl found himself taking on the duties of a wedding planner, even guiding Freedom Calls on where to find a cake and flowers to make the research center festive.

"They were looking in Wimauma," Rechcigl said with a laugh. "I suggested they might want to try Brandon."

The research center will provide the technology and serve as a venue where Mercado and her wedding party can gather for the ceremony.

"This is what we do," Harlow said. "We allow military people to do family stuff even though they are off fighting a war."

Freedom Calls, which relies on donations to cover operating expenses, also is working during the holidays to connect 100 families in four states free of charge with loved ones deployed overseas.

"Our vision is that war fighters ought to be able to come home from the battlefield and have a video conference with their family," Harlow said. His organization has helped thousands of people to do just that from several technology centers set up in Iraq.

"To see a 5-year-old look at his father for the first time in six months," he said, "or allow a father to see his baby walk for the first time, it's been an awesome personal experience for me."