

# THE TENNESSEAN

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## Dad serving in Iraq enjoys virtual reunion with daughter and wife

*Free service puts soldiers in touch with loved ones back home*

By RACHEL STULTS  
For The Tennessean

Hailey Keehan blew a kiss to her father. He caught it and blew one back, but the distance those kisses traveled was neither feet nor yards. It was thousands of miles.

A Hermitage resident stationed in Iraq, Army Chief Warrant Officer David Keehan used videoconference technology Tuesday and watched Hailey play the narrator in her second-grade class's annual story at Donelson Christian Academy. And Hailey could watch her father on television, dressed in uniform and smiling as she recited her lines.

Keehan made the call to Hailey's school through Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit group that connects military personnel with their loved ones at no charge. The organization, founded in 2003, makes more than 1,000 calls a month and allows those in the armed forces to be virtually present at events such as weddings, births and even parent-teacher conferences, said John Harlow, executive director and founder of Freedom Calls.

Tuesday was the organization's first hook-up in the Nashville area.



Donelson Christian Academy second-grader Hailey Keehan laughs along with with her father, Army Chief Warrant Officer David Keehan, who is serving in Iraq, and her mom, Gwen Keehan. Hailey participated Tuesday in a school play that her father was able to watch via a video uplink provided by New York-based Freedom Calls Foundation. (BILLY KINGSLEY / THE TENNESSEAN)



Army Chief Warrant Officer David Keehan

"Our ultimate vision is for our warfighters to come home from a day on the battlefield and spend time with their families and tuck their kids into bed every night," Harlow said.

After the show wrapped, Hailey continued to perform — for the audience that mattered most. Her second-grade friends lined up to talk to Keehan, but she planted herself in front of the camera, making faces and turning cartwheels. She giggled as her father laughed on the big screen and cheered her on.

She told her father she misses him. He told her he would be home before too long.

"I'm so proud of you, baby," he said. "I miss you, sweetie."

Keehan, a cargo pilot, hasn't been home since Thanksgiving. When Hailey found out she would have a lead role in the school play, she cried because her father wouldn't be there to see her, said her mother, Gwen Keehan.

That's when a fellow parent and a friend of the family contacted the Freedom Calls Foundation and set the wheels in motion. Keehan, stationed at Balad Airbase, 40 miles north of Baghdad, traveled 100 miles to get the Al Asad Airfield where he could be on hand for the call.

"I didn't know whether we'd laugh or cry," Gwen Keehan said. "It was an experience of a lifetime."

For Hailey, who turns 8 today, it was the perfect birthday present. For her father, it was an opportunity to be there for one of the many events in her life that he might have missed otherwise.

"It made my day — it made my week, just to see everybody," Keehan said to his family and friends. "And I'll see you all again before too long." •