

Happy Dad's Day to fathers in Iraq

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[BY STEPHANIE SANCHEZ, SUN STAFF WRITER](#)

During the six months since her husband was deployed to Iraq, Jessi Coggins and her daughters communicated with him only through telephone calls, e-mails and regular mail.

This Father's Day, they were selected to be one of the five families to participate in Freedom Calls hosted by Arizona Western College and Northern Arizona University-Yuma branch campus.

AWC/NAU-Yuma used their interactive network technology to connect local families to their loved ones who are stationed in Al Asad Airbase in Iraq.

During that afternoon, Coggins, Loni, 4, and Riliee, 2, were ushered into an empty classroom, where they sat quietly in front of a large screen.

Suddenly, her husband's face flashes before her on the large screen. They smile and don't say anything for about a minute but just observe each other's face.

Then they begin their conversation.

Paul Neuman, AWC's vice president for information technology services, said there is no charge for the unique experience the local Marine families receive when they get connected through live videoconferencing.

"Our local Marines are halfway around the world and it allows the families and deployed Marines the opportunity to see each other," Neuman said. "It's Father's Day and it's important that they get the opportunity to meet and greet. It's exciting to see that they feel as if they were in the same room."

Neuman said there also is no limit on the number of people when using the video conference room. "You can't put a price tag on people getting connected with their families," Neuman said.

All personnel who help make the Freedom Call experience happen are volunteers, Neuman said.

The time slot usually given to the families is about 45 minutes to an hour.

He also said that as soon as the families are connected live they turn off the audio in the control room to ensure the family's privacy.

As Coggins left the room when the session was over, she wiped tears of joy away. Her two daughters were jumping around excited that they got the chance to see their father live.

"It was good seeing him," Coggins said. "It was a little crazy with the girls being loud because they haven't seen him."



Loni Coggins shows her dad that she can recite her Bible memory verse during her family's half-hour visit with him.

PHOTO BY JARED DORT/THE SUN

Stephanie Sanchez can be reached at ssanchez@yumasun.com or 539-6847.