



P R E S S R E L E A S E

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CONTACT: Jean Henshaw

Public Relations Specialist

Berks County Intermediate Unit

610-987-8423; jeahen@berksiu.org

Families Reunite via Satellite Videoconference with Loved Ones Serving in Iraq

Emotional virtual reunions on the day before Mother's Day

READING, PA – Lynn Smith's reaction pretty much summed it up.

"It was as if I could have touched him; he was right there," she said of seeing her son, National Guard Spc. Elliott H. Smith. "This was the best Mother's Day present anybody could have given me in my whole life!"

Smith was one of several Berks County residents who came to the Berks County Intermediate Unit on Saturday, May 9 – the day before Mother's Day – to see and speak with loved ones who are on active duty in Iraq. They were connected via satellite-linked videoconference provided to them at no cost by the BCIU and the non-profit Freedom Calls Foundation (www.freedomcalls.org).

"Many National Guard families live here in Berks County," said Dr. John George, BCIU executive director. "The Guard's recent deployment has had an impact on children who attend county schools. In some families, both the mother and father deployed. We thought offering this videoconference opportunity was something we could do to help make the separation between children and their parents a little less sad. We also wanted to do something to show our support to military families for the sacrifices they are making on behalf of our country."

"We stay in touch with him via e-mail and instant messaging, but it's not the same as seeing him," said Tom Wails, applications programming, database, and systems specialist with the BCIU.

Wails and his family came to the BCIU to see Wails' son, Evan, a National Guardsman who deployed to Iraq in January. "Just to see him, to see that he's doing well. It's good to know he's OK," Wails said.

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Families had 30 minutes each to visit privately with their servicemember. Event coordinator Sue Calvin, supervisor, Distance Learning, said interest in the videoconferences was so great that the BCIU may hold individual sessions in the coming weeks.

“We put out a flyer and sent it to county schools,” Sue said. “In just a few days I started hearing from chaplains and others in Iraq about [the event]. It really made its way there fast!”

If you have a family member on active duty in Iraq or Kuwait and would like to take advantage of the BCIU’s/Freedom Calls’ satellite-linked videoconference capabilities (or you know of a military family who may be interested), contact Calvin at 610-987-8639 or at suecal@berksiu.org.

Because arrangements must be made with the servicemember’s supervisors thousands of miles away, please allow a week or two for the videoconference to be set up.

Not all active duty personnel serving in the Middle East are eligible to participate. Servicemembers must be stationed at or near military camps that are supported by the Freedom Calls satellite links. The camps are:

Iraq: Camp Taji, Camp Baharia, Camp Taqaddum, Al Asad Airbase, and Camp Victory
Kuwait: Camp Arifjan and Ali Al Saleem Airbase

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