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Miracle of birth, a world away

Lowell man serving in Iraq a laptop away from wife's side

By John Collins, jcollins@lowellsun.com
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LOWELL -- There were two miracles for new mom April Rudy on Saturday. The birth of her baby boy. And the miracle of modern technology that enabled her husband, Air Force Airman Korey Rudy, stationed in northern Iraq, to be at her bedside through eight hours of labor and the birth of the couple's first child.



April Rudy holds her newborn son, Kody, yesterday at Lowell General Hospital as her husband, Korey, on the laptop screen, watches via satellite hookup. Korey was able to take part in Kody's birth on Saturday, thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation. Sun PHOTOS/Bob Whitaker

"It's amazing that he could be so close and yet so far away," April said in her room at Lowell General Hospital yesterday, while cradling a sleeping 2-day-old (to the minute) Kody, who was born Saturday at 11:19 a.m.

Yesterday, the Rudys welcomed the hospital and Freedom Calls Foundation's request to help publicize the free laptop-computer video communication service, because the demonstration also provided Korey with a second opportunity to view his newborn son "live," all the way from Kirkuk.

After a number was dialed and several phone rings sounded, a visual of Korey Rudy, from the shoulders up and wearing headphones, blinked several times, then stabilized, filling the 17-inch screen on the laptop to the right of April's bed.



New father Korey Rudy of Lowell, stationed in Iraq, gets a look at his 2-day-old son, Kody, via satellite link and a laptop. Right: Mom April Rudy holds Kody for his father to see. SUN PHOTOS/BOB WHITAKER

"Oh, who's that?" April asked Kody, propping him up gently, to face the screen. "See? That's your daddy, over there."

It was not a high-definition connection, but joy and pride were clearly discernible on a misty-eyed Korey's face.

"He's out cold, huh?" Korey said.

Both mom and dad took a moment to wipe away tears.

Both Lowell residents, Korey, 24, met April, 27, while she was working her bartending job. They were married in August, while Kody was on the way to a Feb. 6 due date, and with Korey scheduled for deployment in Iraq in mid-November.

At first, the Rudys resigned themselves to having to endure the disappointment of Korey not being able to attend the birth of his first child. But then someone told April about the Freedom Calls program, a nonprofit organization that Executive Director John Harlow founded and continues to operate out of his New Jersey home.

"All I did was send one e-mail," April said. "I'm so thankful that the hospital and Freedom Calls got everything set up, and through the whole labor Korey was by my side, just like this. The laptop was set up there.

"It meant the world to us," April added. "He got to watch the whole birth and saw him being born. As soon as he was out, the doctor held Kody up to the camera, and his dad got to meet him."

From 8,000 miles away.

"It was awesome. Amazing," she said.

In addition to the doctors, nurses and husband-on-a-laptop, April's mother, Doreen Turcogorge, was also in the birthing room.

"I would've swapped places with you in a minute that night, Korey," she told her son-in-law during yesterday's video conference. "I wish you could've been here". Responded Korey, "It would've been nice. But you do what you have to do in the military."

He hopes to be home from Iraq "sometime this summer" to hold his son for the first time.

In New Jersey, Harlow, who appeared on the same laptop screen in April's room to address the media yesterday in advance of Korey's reappearance, said the Rudys' big moment was one of thousands of milestone family events that freedomcalls.org has beamed home live to the families of servicemen and women in the past four years, free of charge.

The events have included weddings, christenings, first Holy Communions, graduation ceremonies -- even "one military husband who got to witness the in-vitro fertilization of his first child," Harlow said.

"So you can get married, make a baby and have a baby, all on the Freedom Calls network," he added.

Freedom Calls relies on the generosity of defense contractors and other big corporations and contributors for funding, Harlow said. If the Rudy family had tried to hire a commercial provider of video-conference technology, Saturday's 10-hour laptop videocast "probably would've cost about \$8,000 to \$10,000," Harlow said.

Although to Airman Rudy, of course, it was priceless.

"Being here (In Iraq) for my birthday and New Year's and Christmas was tough, but being able to see my son being born made me completely forget about all that," he said.