

Sentinel

East Brunswick • Helmetta • Jamesburg • Milltown • Monroe • South River • Spotswood

MAJOR IN IRAQ VIRTUALLY PRESENT FOR B-DAY PARTY

Celebrates with his children and classmates in Old Bridge

By MARY ANNE ROSS Correspondent - March 26, 2009



JEFF GRANIT staff Anna Orzol talks to her husband, Maj. John Orzol, on a live video call from Iraq during his birthday party last week at the Goddard School of South Old Bridge. At left are their children, Jillian and Robert, students at the school.

Birthdays can be lonely affairs for servicemen and -women far away from their families and friends.

Thanks to modern technology, Maj. John Orzol, who is serving with the U.S. Army National Guard in Iraq, had a birthday party he will never forget March 19. He celebrated through a video conference call with his wife Anna, son Robert, 4, daughter Jillian, 5, and all their classmates and teachers at The Goddard School® of South Old Bridge on Englishtown Road.

Although he was thousands of miles away, “Major John,” as the students know him, attended the party thanks to Skype technology. He watched and listened as his children’s classes of preschoolers and kindergartners, many wearing plastic camouflage helmets in his honor, sang “Happy Birthday.” Then, Jillian’s class presented

the song using sign language, and Robert’s class sang it in Spanish.

While Jillian and Robert are used to talking to their father on video, many of their classmates were thrilled to speak with Major John on the computer. They had plenty of questions: What’s the weather? Do you really wear an Army uniform? Do you wear a helmet? Where do you sleep? What do you do for fun? In response, Orzol was happy to show his uniform, helmet and backpack, his bed and “room,” which appeared more like temporary storage unit, and told the students he spends some of his free time playing soccer and cricket.

Orzol was able to watch it all, even the “pin the tail on the soldier” game.

“I may not have shown it,” he wrote later, in an email to school director Patrice Peschel Keesser, “but I was very touched and felt like crying a few times.”

Keesser was the driving force behind the party, the latest in her efforts to show how much she appreciates the major’s wartime service and the difficult time faced by his family.

“I always tell the kids that he is protecting our country,” Keesser said. “They are such nice people, and with him being away, it is so hard.”

In his email, Orzol expressed gratitude for the overall efforts of the school, whose students are mostly from Old Bridge

and Monroe. The school has emailed photos, and sent cards, care packages and a scrapbook, which Orzol said is his favorite. All the items, he said, "made me feel like I was still there, a part of everyone's life."

Orzol has been a member of the National Guard for 22 years. He and Anna were married in 2001 and live in Old Bridge. He had to leave last June for training in Texas before being deployed to Iraq. Anna and the kids were able to visit him at Fort Bliss in August before he left in September.

"Sometimes they ask to go visit him," Anna said of her children. "They talk about the place we stayed in Texas. They seem to think John is there."

The family communicates often over the computer.

"We usually talk to him two or three times a week," Anna said. She explained that it has made a big difference. "John has been able to watch the kids grow up. Their maturity levels and interests have changed over the past year."

That frequent communication has also been a help to Anna. Life without John by her side has been challenging.

"He was always a hands-on kind of husband, very involved with his family. It helps that I can talk to him and share some of the decision making," she said.

Anna also feels it's important for her children. "They can keep Daddy close and communicate their fears, concerns and interests," she said.

Orzol is scheduled to return home in June, and he and Anna have decided on a special way to celebrate.

"We are going to Disney World," she said with a smile.

In the meantime, Keesser was thrilled to be able to bring the family members and the classmates together for the birthday.

"There are so many military men and women and their families sacrificing so much, and we can't forget about them," she said. "Little things like this party can mean so much."