

Military dad surprises his Killian high school graduate

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On tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Army Staff Sgt. Jose Garcia missed his oldest daughter's high school graduation.

Stationed in Germany, an ocean away from his family in west Miami-Dade County, he watched his son accept his diploma through a live stream on the Internet.

This time, Garcia wanted it to be different. With his youngest set to graduate from Miami Killian Senior High on Monday, it was his last chance to watch one of his children graduate from high school.

He was determined to give his daughter, Samantha, "something to remember."

"She's the baby of the house," he said. "I know deep inside, she wants me to be here."

On Monday, Garcia watched his baby graduate. He surprised his 17-year-old daughter after being apart for four years — her entire high school career.

Military dad surprises his Killian high school graduate after four years apart

After four years away from his family, Army Staff Sgt. José Garcia surprises his daughter at her graduation from Killian Senior High School. Video by Jessica Bal and José A. Iglesias / Miami Herald staff

Hiding behind the stage at the BankUnited Center at the University of Miami, Garcia let out a deep breath as he waited for an announcer to call his daughter's name. Soon, Samantha would stroll across the stage toward her high school diploma, and then into her father's arms.

He shifted on his feet until an organizer hurried over.

"Mr. Garcia — we're almost there. Just listen for her name. She'll be here any second," the organizer said.

Since joining the Army in 2006, deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan kept the staff sergeant away through birthdays and holidays as he repaired Chinook helicopters and helped pilots in flight. Right as Samantha began her high school career, Garcia was sent to Germany.

With short leave times and expensive plane tickets, coming home was hard. When asked what he's missed in his daughter's life, Garcia, who also served in the Air Force in his native Colombia, responded simply.

"Everything," he said. "You have to live with that, because I'm doing this for my country and also my family."

Garcia waited in a press room and watched the graduation on a TV until the announcer began calling names. Then he slipped into a restroom to position his beret on his head. Garcia showed up in full uniform for the occasion.

He headed to a corner of the stage, hiding behind potted palm trees, and waited some more. And then, finally, Samantha's name was called over the loudspeakers.

Garcia bit his lips. He had suspected that he might cry.

As Samantha came off the stage in her white gown, Garcia's eyes welled. He took the last steps toward her and wrapped up the petite brunette in a hug. Neither said anything for a while.

Samantha's cap fell off as she buried her face in her father's neck. He picked it up and tried unsuccessfully to fashion it back on her head.

After a few moments, Samantha turned to her dad.

"Thank you," she said.

Samantha had suspected something was up — "I know my family," she said — but didn't quite expect her father to show up in person.

"It's nice to finally see him again," Samantha said. "I've grown up a lot."

Her dad admitted she looked "a little bit taller."

"It's a big moment right now, having her in this situation," he said. "I just can't believe it. I'm very proud of my family."

Samantha is headed to Miami Dade College and wants to study physical therapy.

The family planned to celebrate with a special dinner. And then Garcia is off again — this time to Hunter, Georgia, where he was recently stationed. After being an ocean away, the Garcias look forward to being only a car ride away.

"It's hard, always having an absent parent," Samantha said. "You just have to stay strong. I know he's there; he's just not physically there."

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