

Agency helps pick up pieces of little boy's life

Air Force reservist reaches out to Global Medical Relief Fund for help after 5-year-old Iraqi is wounded in car bombing

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STATEN ISLAND, NY -- ALL SHORES -- Seven months ago, Sajjad Lafta was an average 5-year-old.

Growing up in a small town north of Baghdad, the Iraqi youngster played with his two older brothers and went to the local candy store with them.

A car bomb changed all of that.

But thanks to "an angel" from Staten Island and a good Samaritan from California, the smile has returned to Sajjad's face as he continues to piece his life back together.

Sajjad was critically injured in the explosion, but he lived. His siblings did not. Sajjad did, however, lose most of his left leg and sustained internal damage.

After life-saving surgeries at the Balad Air Force Base hospital, the combined efforts of Arrochar resident Elissa Montanti, the founder of the Global Medical Relief Fund (GMRF), and Kevin Berger, a reservist from Glen Allen, Calif., brought Sajjad to the United States.

While staying at Mount Manresa in Fort Wadsworth, the boy has received treatment at the Shriners Hospital for Children and been fitted for a prosthetic leg that will allow him an opportunity for a more normal childhood.

"He can't wait to ride a bike," said Ms. Montanti of Sajjad's big plans for his newfound mobility. "He just wants to run around without the wheelchair and the crutches."

REBUILDING LIVES

The GMRF is a small, non-partisan organization that provides access to health care for children from around the world who are victims of war, natural disasters and other misfortunes.

The Island-based group works as an emissary to foreign nations, presenting a softer side of America than some have seen.

To date, Ms. Montanti's organization has aided almost 90 children from a variety of countries. A half-dozen are currently undergoing treatment here in the U.S.

"It's all about healing and giving these children back their youth," she said.

Ms. Montanti will be the first to say that without the efforts of Berger, however, news of Sajjad's plight may never have reached her.

An emergency medical technician and volunteer fireman, Berger volunteered for hospital detail to brush up on his life-saving skills during his six-month tour.

In mid-September, he was given a chance to truly save a life, albeit with his heart instead of his medical knowledge.

"When Sajjad was flown in with other injured Iraqis, I was at the hospital assisting with the arrival," said Berger. "I built up this relationship with his dad, and I would visit Sajjad periodically. He slept quite a bit while he was recovering."

A father himself, Berger's heart broke for the man and his suffering son.

"I have a 5-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son," he said. "That's where the connection started."

A LIFELINE

Connections are what Berger's life is all about.

A civil engineer for Sonoma County, it's his job to examine structures like bridges to make sure they are safe and code compliant.

This time, however, he set out to build a bridge.

After getting the OK from his superiors to seek out Stateside assistance for Sajjad, Berger stumbled across the GMRF.

"(Truth be told), I 'googled' it to try to find an organization that would help," he admitted. "Elissa's Web site was the first thing that came up."

What started with a simple e-mail to Ms. Montanti became a full-fledged undertaking.

Berger served as an intermediary between Sajjad's family and the GMRF, passing information and instructions between the two.

"It was a process," he said. "I went through all the necessary steps to make sure I wasn't violating any privacy rules or military protocol by doing this."

Together, Berger and Ms. Montanti were able to leap the bureaucratic hurdles.

"I don't know how she does it," Berger said of Ms. Montanti. "She's incredible. She's an angel."

Before Berger's return home in December, Sajjad's family was speaking directly with the GMRF and the necessary government agencies. His work was done.

"I wasn't quite sure if all this was going to pan out," Berger said. "But my parting comment to Sajjad's father was, 'Hey, if you guys end up going to New York, I'll be there.' "

TOGETHER AGAIN

In late February, they were reunited.

"When Elissa called me and told me they were coming, I was thrilled," said Berger. "It was kind of like the pinnacle of all the efforts. It was the pinnacle of my Air Force reserve career. I think it was probably the greatest accomplishment that I have ever had."



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/JAMIE LEE

Sajjad Lafta, 5, lost most of his left leg and had internal injuries following a car bombing in his Iraqi hometown.

And when Berger arrived on the Island to see the 5-year-old boy that his heart had broken for months earlier, the emotion bubbled over.

"He recognized me right away," Berger said, recalling how Sajjad's face lit up when he walked in. "It was very emotional."

Ms. Montanti, too, was touched.

"It never gets old," she said. "(Kevin) cried. Sajjad's mother cried. They called Sajjad's father, who was back in Iraq, and he cried. We were able to give a little boy back his dignity and put pieces of a family back together."

And soon, Sajjad will return to his hometown, his smile helping his father and mother to rebuild.

He'll run through the streets and play with the other children.

He'll probably even go back to the candy store.

And maybe, he'll even get to ride his bike.

Additional information on the GMRF can be found on the organization's Web site, www.gmrfchildren.org.