

# THE SAINT OF STATEN ISLAND

## Elissa Montanti Helps Define a Deeper Meaning of Success

By Alicia Vitarelli, NY1 Anchor, "Your Staten Island News Now"

**N**ine-year-old Ahmed Sharif spends a sunny June day playing tag in the yard, talking about his favorite DVDs and declaring his abiding love for pizza. But, unlike other boys his age, Ahmed hasn't always been able to kick back and enjoy the best things about being a child.

It was three years ago that he and a friend were walking home from school in an Iraqi town just shy of Baghdad when they heard a big bang. The boys hid behind a wall until they thought it was safe and, as the shooting subsided, they started running home.

But the danger was far from over. Young Ahmed found himself diving in front of exploding shrapnel from a tank shell bomb to protect his friend. The heroic effort would save his young pal, but cost Ahmed his right arm and his eyesight.

Ahmed's older brother applied for aid at a local American military base, never expecting that the miracle worker would help the boy regain his dignity and his childhood.

Ahmed is one of 52 children Staten Island native Elissa Montanti has helped heal physically and spiritually.

"He feels hope that the world looks at him and accepts him," says Montanti, who was recently nicknamed the "The Saint of Staten Island" by *People* magazine.

The Arrochar resident and former lab assistant at Doctor's Hospital founded the Global Medical Relief fund back in 1997. The non-profit organization provides treatment and care for kids who have lost limbs to war, illness or natural disaster.

Thanks to the fund, Ahmed now has a prosthetic arm and eyes. And while his vision has never been restored, he's learning Braille at P.S. 55, making new friends and sleeping in a room that's not only comfortable, but quiet from the sounds of war that now seem so far away.

"One child at a time," Montanti says, as Ahmed snuggles up to her, smiling at the sound of her soft voice. "Every child deserves their dignity."

It was her own loss that led the now 49-year-old to her



calling. Losing her mother and grandmother in a short time, the then songwriter was asked to write a tune to headline a local benefit for victims in war-torn Bosnia. "I have to admit, at the time, I had no idea what was even going on there," she says.

But through loads of research, and even a personal visit with the United Nations Ambassador to the country, Montanti not only wrote the song "Let's Do a Miracle," she helped create one.

In the Ambassador's office, Montanti received a letter from then 12-year-old Kenan Malkic, a Bosnian boy who lost both of his arms and a leg in a landmine explosion.

"I am asking God and all merciful people to help me with getting prosthetics," his letter read. And with those words, Montanti made it her mission to bring Kenan here for a new life and new limbs. A month later, the boy and his mother landed in New York, where Montanti opened her heart and her own house to them.

Just as Kenan was finally ready to return home with his three new prosthetic limbs, Montanti was already booking her own flight back to Bosnia. Scouring hospitals and orphanages for children in need of medical care, she brought them back here one by one for treatment.

Since then, Montanti's mission to help and heal has touched the lives of children on almost every continent. She's recently credited with bringing the first child victims of the deadly Southeast Asian tsunami and massive Pakistani earthquake to the States for care. And from El Salvador to Sierra Leone, Montanti's small group is already making a big international impact.

In fact, she's even braved danger to personally enter war zones in order to exit with a child or two in tow. But on one particular trip back to Bosnia, she came home with something more than a few kids to care for. In 1999, on her fourth trip to Sarajevo, Montanti also met the man she would marry.

A kindred spirit, celebrated songwriter and published poet, Montanti once paid the bills working in radiology. And while she wouldn't call her new profession financially lucrative, Montanti says the real rewards are priceless. "Charity is so much bigger than one's self," she says. "Healing wounds and easing pain is the reward."

And if you're wondering who is taking notice, Elissa's story has been broadcast on CNN, MSNBC, *The Today Show*, *Good*

*Morning America*, Lifetime Television for Women and countless local TV stations.

The pages of *Redbook*, *Parade*, *Ladies Home Journal* and *People* magazines, *The New York Times* and other national newspapers have been filled with the small faces from across the globe now beaming from ear to ear with hope and a renewed sense of life.

And here at home, Montanti was recently honored as

the very first female Grand Marshall to grace the Staten Island Columbus Day parade route.

But it certainly takes more than a big heart and a bigger will to make a difference. Elissa says she has supporters spanning both the States and the globe to thank for making the dreams of war-wounded children come true.

The Philadelphia Shriners Hospital for Children provides the kids with the proper surgery, prostheses and rehabilitation free of charge. The Sisters of Charity and Columbian Presbyterian Hospital also donate their medical services. Each child is promised new prosthetic limbs until their 21st birthday, and return to the Island periodically for fittings. That means Montanti, who never had kids of her own, can watch each of the 52 little ones she's cared for so far grow to become self-sufficient adults.

"The requests are overwhelming," she says. "We are a small charity, but luckily we get tons of support nationwide."

On the local level, Montanti says she's grateful for generous donations from groups like the Richmond County Savings Foundation, the South Shore Rotary and elected officials. "If only people could see the suffering on the other side of the world, they'd know how good we have it here," she says.

When it comes to setting up a comfortable space for the kids to relax and heal, Mount Manresa recently came to



"Charity is so much bigger than one's self," according to Montanti, here with a few of the children she helps heal physically and spiritually. "Healing wounds and easing pain is the reward."

the rescue to provide a permanent home for the Global Medical Relief Fund.

After six years headquartered atop Mount Loretto, the group received what Montanti calls "shocking news." The Archdiocese announced it needed the space for a new center for autism, and said the kids would have to find another place to stay. With a long list of children scheduled to arrive for treatment, and suddenly without a home, Montanti quickly turned to the Jesuit Retreat House for help. "There was a clear need to do something soon," said Fr. Edward Quinnan, Mount Manresa's director. "So we're a charity helping another charity."

Quinnan adds Ahmed's "charm and compassion" made his decision an easy one. "He was a natural ambassador for the cause," says Quinnan. "Retreaters who come here for peace, quiet and prayer fall in love with him—it was an easy yes."

And for Montanti, the open invitation wasn't just a sigh of relief, but a sign that her work is far from finished. "God never closes a door without opening a window," she says.

In the meantime, she still had to pack up and move six rooms and six years of stuff to Manresa. That's when



The Medical Relief Fund's new operational space celebrates its grand opening this summer.



"If only people could see the suffering on the other side of the world, they'd know how good we have it here," offers Montanti.

Verrazano Moving and Storage in New Dorp saw the story on NY1 News and stepped in to help out. Thanks to the movers' manpower and some supplies from Home Depot and IKEA, Montanti says the fund's new space is celebrating its grand opening this summer.

As for the young man who inspired the global outreach, Kenan currently lives with Montanti and studies at the College of Staten Island. Montanti says his passion for life and his ability to overcome obstacles is evident in his everyday accomplishments. Case in point—he's currently driving her and the kids around town in an SUV—prosthetic arms and all.

But ask Kenan what drives his desire to stay onboard and help out, and the answer is simple. "I see myself in each of the kids," he says. "I am so happy to see them come out of war and be able to live a childhood without fear for a while."

And at that, Ahmed shrieks with excitement at an offer to ride around the scenic retreat grounds on a golf cart. His father Jabbar smiles, showing off the new deck he built so Manresa's visitors can take some sun and admire the scenery.

"I hope Staten Island is proud of how we are reaching out globally right here from our community," Montanti says. "I hope they embrace it." 🙏

For more information or to make a donation to the Global Medical Relief Fund, call 1.866.734.GMRF (4673) or log on to [www.globmed.org](http://www.globmed.org).