

March 6, 2005

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: PLEASANT PLAINS; For a Boy Ravaged by War, A Haven on Staten Island

By MAUREEN SEABERG ERTURK

In a hospital in Kuwait City, a 12-year-old Iraqi boy named Ali Ismael Abbas spent months learning to thread a needle and play the piano with his feet. He also endured acute pain as doctors moved him from bed to bed to prevent sores that would worsen the third-degree burns covering his torso.

Ali lost both his arms, as well as his parents, his brother and 13 other relatives, in the American bombing of Baghdad in late March 2003. Pictures of him appeared in newspapers and on television stations around the world, powerful reminders of what war does to its youngest victims.

But soon, Ali, now 14, will begin a journey that his supporters hope will bring some degree of normalcy to his life. On April 5, he is scheduled to arrive at Mount Loretto, a residential care center for children and young adults in Pleasant Plains, on southern Staten Island. That will be his home between treatments at Shriners Hospital for Children in Philadelphia, which is donating its services and which will fit him with lightweight artificial arms. In London, where Ali has been for the past 18 months, he was fitted with prostheses he found too heavy.

Ali got the idea of coming to New York when a video about Kenan Malkic, another boy who was injured during wartime, was delivered to him. Kenan, now 22, lost his arms and one leg after stepping on a land mine in 1994 in Bosnia. For several years, he has been living in northeastern Staten Island with the family of Elissa Montanti, who founded the Global Medical Relief Fund to help children injured in wars. Kenan made the video after seeing pictures of Ali on television.

"I want him to understand that 'disabled' is only a word and a frame of mind," Kenan said in a recent e-mail message. "I always say I wish I had a tape like this after my accident."

In the video, Kenan is seen clasping a fork perfectly with his prosthetic arms. He deftly manipulates the controls of a PlayStation, he dresses himself and he uses the Internet.

Ali became entranced by the video, said Ms. Montanti, who delivered the video while she was in Kuwait and whose organization is paying Ali's nonmedical expenses. The boy turned to his physical therapist and asked, "Can he help me?"

Staten Island seems to be abuzz with talk of Ali's arrival. Bill D'Ambrosio, assistant executive director of Mount Loretto, said he looks forward to welcoming the boy, but added, "I look more forward to seeing him leave able to do things he hasn't been able to do."

Others are planning outings. Stephen J. Fiala, the Richmond County clerk, wants to take Ali to the Statue of Liberty and show him around Staten Island's growing Muslim community.

But perhaps most important for Ali will be the support of his role model, Kenan. "Kenan gave me a lot of inspiration and hope when I saw the video," Ali said through a translator last week. "I want Kenan to help me go on." MAUREEN SEABERG ERTURK