

**Making a Difference**

# The Saint of Staten Island

Coping with her own loss, Elissa Montanti found a cause worth her passion: helping war-wounded kids

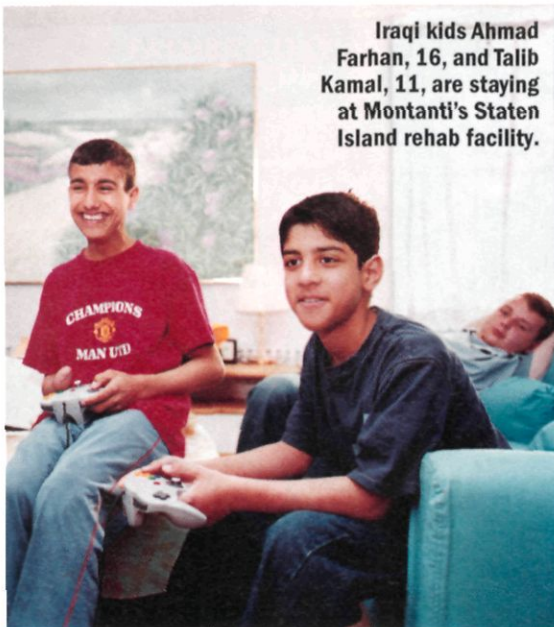
**F**or Ahmad Sharif, the journey from Sadr City, in Iraq, to Philadelphia took him from tragedy to hope. Caught in a firefight between U.S. forces and insurgents last October, the 7-year-old was hit by a bomb blast that blinded him and tore off much of his right arm. Now, eight months later, he is in Shriners Hospitals awaiting a new prosthetic limb, thanks to the woman next to him: Elissa Montanti, a former lab assistant who helps heal kids disabled by war. As Jeff Eichhorn, the hospital's director of prosthetics and orthotics, slips an epoxy-resin limb over the stump below Ahmad's shoulder, the boy's scarred face brightens into a smile. He touches his cheek with his new hand, then hugs Montanti. Burying his face in her shoulder, Ahmad whispers some of the little English he knows: "Thank you."



**"We're overwhelmed with children in need," says Montanti (above with Ahmad Sharif and Roosel Malallah in Staten Island in May). Left: Prosthetics specialist Jeff Eichhorn fits Ahmad with his new prosthetic resin arm.**

STYLIST: LAURA CORTESE; HAIR & MAKEUP: SYLVESTER CASTELLANO/BERNSTEIN & ANDRILLI; BOTTOM LEFT: SCOTT HOUSTON

Iraqi kids Ahmad Farhan, 16, and Talib Kamal, 11, are staying at Montanti's Staten Island rehab facility.



## TOUCHING LIVES

**45** Number of kids Montanti's group has brought to the U.S. for prosthetics or other medical procedures

**1-3 MONTHS** Length of time children typically stay at Montanti's facility while visiting the U.S.

**\$150,000** Global Medical Relief Fund's annual budget

### HOW YOU CAN HELP:

GMRF accepts donations at its toll-free number 866-734-4673

## Making a Difference

to bring Malkic to the U.S. to be fitted with prostheses. "Something happened," she says of her activism. "It's like a white light and a voice."

Soon she was traveling to Bosnia, where Sarajevo hotel manager Asko Glusak, now 27, helped her bypass red tape to find needy kids. "We connected because she cared about my people," he says. The pair wed in 2000, and Montanti's efforts have spread to Iraq and other countries. "There are not a lot of people like her," says Malkic, 22, who now attends the College of Staten Island and lives with Montanti and Glusak. "She made feel me whole."

Montanti works tirelessly to give that feeling to other kids, treating them to shopping trips and sightseeing as well as overseeing their care. "She helps us forget what we come from," says Roosel. The point, says Montanti, is to remind children with shattered bodies that their lives are precious. "Some people say, 'Why don't you help your own?'" she says. "They are our own. We're all in this world together."

By Thomas Fields-Meyer. Nina Biddle in Staten Island and Philadelphia

Since 1996 Montanti, 49, has helped 45 children, most of whom have lost limbs in war zones, by personally arranging visas and shepherding them to the U.S., where she hosts them in a three-bedroom Staten Island facility provided by New York City's Catholic archdiocese. With help from one part-time volunteer, she arranges for free surgery, treatment and prostheses (paid for by the Shriners). Montanti's non-profit group, Global Medical Relief Fund (GMRF), subsists on donations from the Richmond County Savings Foundation and others who know her work. Her reputation for saving kids eclipses a shoestring annual budget of \$150,000. "Elissa has helped every child I've asked her to help," says Maj. Glenn Rubalcava of the U.S. Military's Humanitarian Operations Center, which deals with Iraq's civilian casualties. "She always has a game plan."

She also has a human touch. "I want to keep it as personal as I can—one kid at a time," says Montanti, who never looks after more than four kids at once. That's made all the difference for Roosel Malallah, 7, an Iraqi girl born unable to stand or walk—a birth defect linked to Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons program. After learning of her through the U.S. military, Montanti flew Roosel and her mother, Samira, 52, to Staten Island and arranged for her care. Says Samira: "I didn't believe this could hap-

pen. She has a deep love for children."

It's a role that Montanti fell into by accident. The New York City native was in her 20s when the deaths of her mother and grandmother within a short span left her stricken with grief. To deal with her loss she became involved in efforts to aid victims of Bosnia's civil war. She read a letter from Kenan Malkic, a then 15-year-old boy who had lost all of his limbs to a landmine. Moved, Montanti raised funds

“I want to keep it as personal as I can—one kid at a time”



"He's happy and expressing it so much," Montanti says of Ahmad (with her and his brother Saad).

Do you know someone working to make a difference in the world? Send suggestions to [heroesamongus@peplemag.com](mailto:heroesamongus@peplemag.com) Please include your name, phone number and return e-mail address.