

Global Medical Relief Fund Helps Children Receive Free Prosthetics

When Elissa Montanti first met 13-year-old Ali Ameer in May 2003, in the Al-Tahreer General Hospital in Basrah, Iraq, his open smile and solemn dark eyes were seared into her memory. Ali, who had lost a hand in a recent bombing, was one of hundreds of children crammed into the dank and dusty rooms of the children's ward, sweltering in the 130-degree heat. Despite the lack of medical supplies and shortage of doctors, the children just kept streaming in—and the bombs just kept exploding, day and night.

Montanti's first trip to Iraq marked the beginning of a long hard fight to bring one small Iraqi boy some hope, and build a bridge between two nations a world apart. "There were hundreds of children too unstable to be moved, so I decided to start with just one boy who was ready, willing and able," says 54-year-old Montanti, who brings children who have lost limbs in war zones or natural disasters to the U.S. for medical treatment through her organization, [Global Medical Relief Fund \(GMRF\)](#) . [Raise money](#) for this nonprofit and other nonprofits.

"Countries all over Europe were taking Iraqi children into their hospitals. I knew if I could bring one child to the U.S. for help, it would break through the barriers and allow for more children to be helped here."

Montanti launched GMRF in 1996, after learning of a 12-year-old Bosnian boy, Kenan, Malkic, who had lost his two arms and leg to a landmine. She helped him to get the prosthetic limbs he needed, and became very close with the child through the years. Kenan is now a 26-year-old web designer living in the US, and helps Montanti to run GMRF.

The Shriners Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, which provides free prosthetic limbs, surgery, and rehabilitation for needy children worldwide, is Montanti's partner in effort. GMRF pays for transportation, visas, housing, food and all fundamentals for children like Ali and their guardians. Montanti had arranged for 36 children worldwide to come to the U.S. for prosthetic medical procedures, but bringing Ali, an Iraqi child, here in 2003 was fraught with difficulties.

"There was no acting government in Iraq to grant the passport and visa needed to enter the U.S.," says Montanti, who spent hundreds of hours contacting international agencies, trying to piece together the proper procedure. "Plus, security was so tight in Iraq—nobody was being let in or out, except the military."

Six months after Montanti first met Ali, she was able to enlist the help of Congressman Frank Wolf, (R-VA) who had visited Iraq twice since the war began and was acting Co-Chairman of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. "The majority of Iraqis are moms, dads and innocent children just like our own kids, who are caught in the crossfire of their country's politics.," says Wolf, who pushed through a humanitarian parole application with Homeland Security on behalf of Ali and his aunt in just three weeks. "A boy who loses a limb is just tossed by the wayside in a poor society like Iraq, where your worth is determined by your ability to help support the family."

On June 03, 2004, Montanti found herself standing on the Kuwait/Iraq border, accompanied by

US and British military and representatives from the IOM and Ministry of Health, waiting anxiously for Ali to cross the border. He and his aunt arrived by ambulance, the only way they could safely travel through their war-torn country.

“It was 120 degrees, and I had to wait three hours while one border guard after the next examined my documents and asked questions,” Montanti recalls. “When Ali finally walked through the border gate, we both froze. Then he grinned ear to ear and gave me a huge hug. That made it all worthwhile.”

Finally, Montanti was able to keep the promise she made to Ali over a year ago: they were headed to New York for his new arm. During the 14-hour plane ride through London to New York, Ali asked dozens of questions through his interpreter. What it would be like in America? When he would get his new arm?

He couldn't believe his eyes when he arrived at his home-away-from-home, a room all to himself in the renovated orphanage on Staten Island, New York, that GMRF had refurbished with help from Ikea and Home Depot. Ali and Narges would stay here for six weeks while he commuted to Shriners Children's Hospital to be fitted with his prosthesis and go to weekly physical therapy to learn how to use his new hand.

Since 2004, Montanti has brought more than 50 other children from Iraq, the tsunami earthquake (Indonesia), the Pakistan earthquake, Nepal, China, Bosnia, Kosovo, Niger, Liberia and other war-torn countries to the U.S. GMRF is the only organization that not only brings children here for prosthetic limbs, but is committed to bringing them back for new limb fittings as they grow until age 21. To date, Montanti has helped nearly 90 children through her organization.

To help Montanti continue to give children from around the world the free medical attention they need, [make a donation to GMRF through Razoo.](#)

By Jennifer Haupt