

New Yorker's Mission: Helping Children from Abroad

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A tiny organization based in New York City is making big changes in the lives of a few lucky children from around the world. The ten-year-old [Global Medical Relief Fund](#) has helped about 55 children from countries including Iraq, Pakistan, Nepal, Indonesia, Niger, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Bosnia, Mexico, and El Salvador. Fifteen children from the New York area have also received aid. The organization remains small so that every visiting child and family can be helped directly and personally, says founder and director Elissa Montanti. But even on a small scale, she says, raising the necessary funds is an uphill battle.

In 1996, New Yorker Elissa Montanti met a Bosnian diplomat at a fundraiser. She asked what she could do to help Bosnia. He showed her a letter from a boy, Kenan Malkic, who had stepped on a landmine when he was 10 years old. He had lost both arms and a leg, and at 14 was largely confined to his home. His letter asked for someone, anyone, to help him.

"I read the letter, and it was as if the world stood still," Elissa Montanti said in a recent interview. "I can't even explain it, but I knew I had to help this boy."

"And about two weeks later I got a call saying they had found a person who would be bringing me to the United States to get help with prosthetics," Kenan, now 24, said, sitting by her side. "And shortly after that, Elissa called."



**Global Medical Relief Fund
founder and director Elissa
Montanti**

Elissa Montanti, a former medical technician, began calling doctors and hospitals, asking for free care for Kenan. She brought him to live with her in New York to be fitted for prosthetic limbs at the Shriners Hospital for Children in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. That was only the beginning for both of them. "I helped Kenan, and Kenan went back, and I knew I wanted to do more," Montanti said. "It was almost very natural, that this is what I want to do, this is what I'm kind of meant to do. And I was finding my way as I was doing it."

After Kenan – now able to walk and use his artificial hands -- returned home to Bosnia, Montanti named her new charity the Global Medical Relief Fund, and began flying other children to the U.S. for help, children from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Europe, some born with defects, others hurt in war or accidents. She's traveled to other countries in her work, including Iraq. She says that although it makes her angry

to see children injured in war, she resists the temptation to speak out.

"Because I really need to focus on the children, and if I was to be more verbal, it would probably hurt the charity and any support that is coming in. And God knows, we exist on a prayer. So it's not easy, you do your best, and you keep your mouth shut, because the thing is, you need support, and these children need help."

Ermina and Jasmine, two recent visitors, are Bosnian. Jasmine lost a leg in an accident when he was five. Ermina was born with an undeveloped left arm. Like the other children helped by the charity, they and their mothers stayed in rooms donated by the Mount Manresa Jesuit Retreat House, in Staten Island, New York. They must return every year or two to be refitted at Shriners Children's Hospitals, where all the care and prosthetics are free.



Ermina and Jasmine, two Bosnian children recently helped by GMRF



Kenan Malkic

Montanti arranges it all, with the help of a few volunteers: seeing to the visiting children's comfort, medical visits, and entertainment. Now that the children and their parents are housed at Mount Manresa, where there's a dining room, she no longer has to grocery shop. Still, it's a busy life.

Montanti's most crucial support, she says, is her second-in-command, Kenan Malkic, the boy she first helped. He's now attending college and living with Montanti and her husband on Staten Island. Montanti's husband helps support her, so she draws a small salary from the Fund only when there is enough money. But she says the cost of airfare, food, and visas make it a constant struggle to keep the charity afloat.

"Right now I'm a little frightened, to tell you the truth," she said, "because oh, God, I've got so many children. And I just sit there and put my head in my hands, and say, God, just provide, just help. Just within the next couple of months I have eight children who need to return. That's not to mention another eight who are all new. And right now, if no additional funds come in, I'm not going to be able to do it."

The Global Medical Relief Fund is supported by private donations, and depends in large part on a grant from Staten Island's Richmond County Savings Foundation. But Montanti says major grant-givers are not usually interested in supporting such a modest organization.

"They want to see a big charity," she said. "They think if you are a big charity, and you have a paid staff, and you have a big salary, well, that warrants a grant. And that really is so unfair. Because here we are, really making an impact. Whether we're helping ten or 15 children a year, we're making an incredible impact. And in many ways, when you're dealing with the Middle



Montanti with a visitor from abroad

East, specifically Iraq, you're preventing – or should I say, I won't say preventing, but these children and people are going back, saying wow, the Americans really are helpful and wonderful. So there's a lot more here than just prosthetics."

Kenan Malkic says that Elissa Montanti has influenced him more than anything in his life, even more than his accident. He says she is like a second mother to him, and that he wants to stay in the U.S. to continue helping in her work.

"Living with her and seeing how she cares about other people and the wonderful things that she does kind of made me realize that, the help that I've gotten, that I can pass that on to other people, too," he said. "To make them realize that yeah, bad things have happened to you, but it's not the end of the world."

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