

The O&P Edge - April 2006

New Yorker Makes the World a Better Place, for One Child at a Time

By Tina Eichner

It is the lucky few who can point to a moment in time and mark the identification of their life's purpose.

For Elissa Montanti, the one-woman powerhouse behind the Global Medical Relief Fund, that moment occurred a decade ago in a United Nations office where she read a letter from a 15-year-old boy named Kenan Malkic who had stepped on a landmine in Bosnia, losing both arms and a leg in the accident.

"I am asking God and all merciful people to help me with getting prosthetics," wrote Kenan.

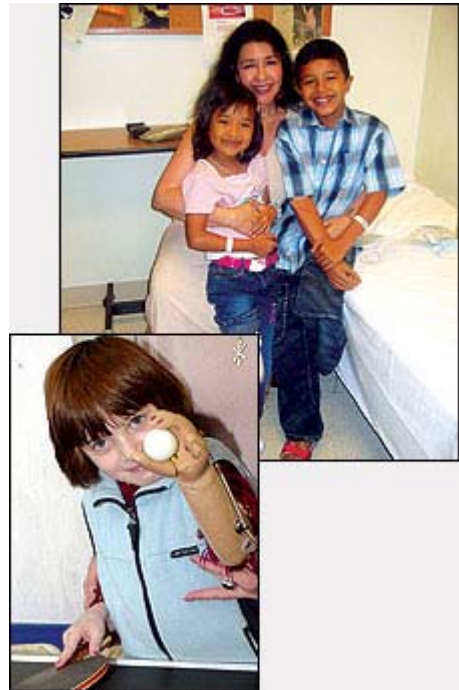
Montanti said from that point on, her life was changed forever as she was moved to help the children injured by the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At the time of her UN visit, the native Staten Islander was a medical technician and artist talking with the United Nations ambassador from Bosnia about sending school supplies and toys to the children there. She had even reached back to her past career and passion for music to write a song, "Let's Do a Miracle," for the UN in support of such efforts.

'I Knew I Had to Help Him'

But the effect of Kenan's letter on Montanti was profound. "I walked out of that office and my emotions were scattered all over First Avenue. I knew that I had to do all that I could to help him."

She contacted airlines, hospitals, and a prosthetic company for donations and was able to bring Kenan and his mother to New York City one month later. The visitors stayed at Montanti's home for three months, during which time Kenan received two new arms, a leg, and a new life.



Above: Elissa Montanti with Tara and Hamdani. Photos courtesy of Shriners Hospitals for Children, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Others Join to Aid Children

After Kenan returned to Bosnia, Montanti began to seek other children who were the victims of war and natural disasters. She raised money to travel to Bosnia and visited orphanages and hospitals there and brought back a second child. The first three children she assisted stayed with her in her home during their treatment. Soon after she founded the Global Medical Relief Fund (GMRF) with the mission of bringing hope and help to children who are missing or have lost use of their limbs, have been severely burned, or are otherwise damaged due to the atrocities of war, natural disaster, or illness.

In the past ten years, the 501 (3) nonprofit organization has helped restore the lives of 50 children around the world.

Although Montanti is the GMRF's sole employee, such great work does not occur without the help of many hands, and Montanti has assembled quite a team. The Mission at Mount Loretto in Staten Island, New York, gave GMRF housing for the children and their guardians during their stay in the United States and Ikea and Home Depot refurbished the facility. GMRF counts on numerous individual donors to get children and their families here for treatment and the Columbian Presbyterian Hospital donates medical assistance for children with eye injuries. Of course, it is the medical care that is critical to the mission, and the Shriners Children's Hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has been an unwavering supporter of GMRF, providing surgery, prosthetics, and rehabilitation to Montanti's kids free of charge.

Jeff Eichhorn, CPO, director of Orthotics and Prosthetics at the Shriners Hospital, is Montanti's partner there. "Elissa brings these people of little means over to America, brings them to the Shriners Hospital, and then I fit them with the types of prosthetics and orthotics that they need to go back to their country," said Eichhorn. "Her work is pretty unusual & for her to put all of her efforts into getting these kids over here. That is why we work so well together. She is able to get the kids here, and Shriners is able to provide care free of charge. It works exceptionally well for the kids, the families, and all involved. Her efforts

have been quite ambitious, and Shriners is able to meet those needs."

Since GMRF involves children, each year program alumni need to be brought back to the US to deal with growth issues and refitting. "Anywhere from one to two years, the kids need to come back in," said Eichhorn. "There are little things that can be done to keep them in their prostheses a little longer, but really, they need to come back every two years."

GMRF has aided children from Bosnia, El Salvador, Liberia, Mexico City, Niger, Sierra Leone, and Iraq. Help also has been provided to children from Indonesia, due to the tsunami disaster.

Kenan: Success and Inspiration

Kenan, Montanti's inspiration and adopted-like son, now attends college in the US and lives with her. "Kenan is a great guy," said Eichhorn. "He has finished a degree in computer programming; and his abilities to manipulate the prostheses are amazing, considering he is a bilateral amputee. His ability to function with his prostheses is high. He does extraordinarily well and gives the other kids coming here great hope, when they see what he has done and accomplished, that they will be able to achieve the same goals."

Montanti added, "Kenan is the pulse and the inspiration for my charity."

More Need Help

"The world is so fragile and complicated," she continued. "The children who need help are just lined up. I am getting ready to bring four Pakistani children. I have an Iraqi boy. I have children from the tsunami ... but as small as I am, I am really making a big difference," said Montanti proudly.

"She is an absolutely wonderful individual," said Eichhorn. "She has such a drive to get these kids over to the United States and get them help. She is an amazing woman."

For more information about GMRF, visit www.globmed.org



Photos courtesy of Shriners Hospitals for Children, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Article URL: http://www.oandp.com/edge/issues/articles/2006-04_10.asp