



# Reader's Digest

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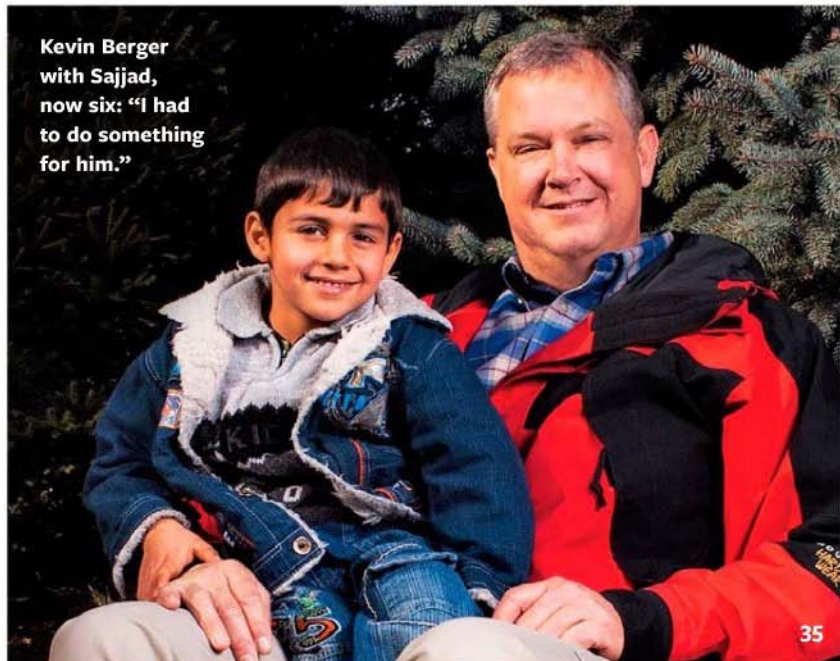
## Saving Sajjad

An Air Force reservist's chance encounter with an injured Iraqi boy changed both of their lives

BY JENNIFER HAUPT

**T**he ominous command blared repeatedly from the loudspeakers: "All medical personnel, report to the Air Force Theater Hospital." Major Kevin Berger, a 49-year-old Air Force reservist and civil engineer, had come to the base near Balad, Iraq, to rebuild broken bridges. But back home, in Glen Ellen, California, he volunteered as a firefighter and an emergency medical technician, so he'd signed up to do

**Kevin Berger  
with Sajjad,  
now six: "I had  
to do something  
for him."**



hospital duty in his free time. What better place to get training in saving lives than a war zone? he figured.

Nothing could have prepared Berger for what he saw that day. When he got to the hospital, he learned that a car bomb had exploded in a nearby village. Dozens of seriously

## Leftah spotted his son on the ground, shrapnel wounds on his face and arms.

wounded victims now crowded the ER—among them a small boy lying on a stretcher, caked in blood and dust, his limp hand resting in his father's palm.

Berger locked eyes with the weary Iraqi man. The boy couldn't have been more than five. Berger had a daughter the same age.

**It was the 12th day** of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in September 2008, and four-year-old Sajjad [his last name is withheld for security reasons] had been on his way to his father's barbershop with his two older brothers, Ali, eight, and Jusein, seven. Their dad, Leftah, 42, had been fasting all day, and they were coming to fetch him for dinner.

As the boys reached the front of the shop, the car bomb went off. Leftah dashed out to the smoke-filled street. He spotted Sajjad on the ground, his leg mangled,

bloody shrapnel wounds covering his face and arms.

Leftah scooped him up and ran through the streets, looking for his other two sons. He couldn't find them, and Sajjad needed medical attention. A friend drove them to a hospital, where doctors took one look at Sajjad and sent father and son by chopper to the nearby Air Force hospital.

**A**s Kevin Berger stood with the doctors examining Sajjad that evening, they said they would need to amputate the boy's leg below the knee. Berger headed back to the waiting room and put his hand on Leftah's shoulder. "This father looked up with such concern in his eyes, no translation was needed," Berger recalls. It will be all right, he wanted to say.

The next day, Berger stopped by the room where Sajjad was recovering. Leftah stood and raised his right hand to his chest: a Muslim sign of greeting and respect.

Berger pointed to his mouth. *Are you hungry?* he pantomimed.

Leftah made a V with his fingers. *I need a cigarette.*

Berger took him outside for a smoke. The two didn't talk, but a bond was growing. We are both fathers, Berger thought. We both care about this boy. He decided right then: I will do something to help.

Later, when Berger returned to Sajjad's room, Leftah was gone.





Sajjad with Elissa Montanti, founder of the U.S. charity that helped him.

squirts and giggles. That's something my son would do, Berger thought.

He asked the doctors how to get Sajjad a prosthetic leg, but they told him they couldn't help one child without helping the rest. Neither could any of the other local hospitals Berger called. But searching online, Berger found the website of the Global Medical Relief Fund ([globmed.org](http://globmed.org)), which provides prosthetic limbs to children injured in war zones and disasters around the world. It's worth a shot, he thought, and fired off an e-mail.

Elissa Montanti, who runs GMRF out of her Staten Island, New York, home, was used to

desperate pleas. While volunteering in the early '90s, she received a heart-breaking letter from an 11-year-old Bosnian boy who'd lost three limbs to a land mine. After bringing him to the United States for care, she went on to help 92 other kids, with services often donated by Shriners Hospitals for Children in Philadelphia.

Berger's request, Montanti says, came amid "piles and piles" of similar letters from American military personnel in Iraq. But Berger's description of Sajjad, and the deaths of his brothers, got to her. "It was just so heart-wrenching that I put him before other children," she says.

When Berger checked his e-mail the next night, he couldn't believe what he read: "Don't worry,"

Somebody at the base had finally called his house to tell his wife, Lameah, that her youngest son was in the hospital and his father was with him. She dispatched her eldest child to bring Leftah home.

When Leftah arrived at the house, mourners were streaming out, and he learned the devastating news: Ali and Jusein were dead, two of 31 Iraqis killed in the car-bomb explosion. "Leftah felt like he'd lost everything," Lameah would later say. "Like this was the end for him."

**During the next few days,** Berger checked on Sajjad as the boy recovered from surgery. Someone had given the child a syringe filled with water, and he greeted Berger with

Montanti had written. "We can do this together."

She gave Berger a to-do list, including getting Leftah's permission for the hospital to release his son's medical records. Berger thought of the worried look in Leftah's eyes, standing at his son's bedside, and he knew that part would be easy.

**W**hen Leftah returned to the hospital two days later, Berger explained the new plan through an interpreter. Leftah began to cry. "I feel like you're my father coming to help me when I need it most," he said through the translator.

Montanti secured funding, treatment, and transportation, and in February, Sajjad arrived in New York with his mother to be fitted for his new leg and to start physical therapy.

Berger, having finished his six-

month tour in Iraq, flew east from California for a reunion, along with his two kids, Joe, six, and CC, five.

"Helping Sajjad get his life back is my greatest achievement, other than raising my own children with my wife," he said while watching the three children play on the floor together. "Now I get the added gift of being able to introduce my kids to this brave boy who's been through so much."

These days, Sajjad is back home, walking and running on his new leg. He'll return to the States occasionally in the coming years, with Montanti's help, to be fitted for new prostheses as he grows. For now, through his mother, Sajjad sends e-mails to his American friends, saying he loves and misses them. He wants them to know, too, that he's playing soccer and riding bikes—just like my kids, Kevin Berger can't help thinking.

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## NEIGHBORS IN OCTOBER

All afternoon his tractor pulls a flat wagon  
with bales to the barn, then back to the waiting  
chopped field. It trails a feather of smoke.  
Down the block we bend with the season:  
shoes to polish for a big game,  
storm windows to batten or patch.  
And how like a field is the whole sky now  
that the maples have shed their leaves, too.  
It makes us believers—stationed in groups,  
leaning on rakes, looking into space. We rub blisters  
over billows of leaf smoke. Or stand alone,  
bagging gold for the cold days to come. *By David Baker*

THE TRUTH ABOUT SMALL TOWNS (UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS PRESS).  
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