

Bond With Family Boosts Iraqi Amputee

Boy Finds Warm U.S. Host As He Awaits a Prosthesis

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Ali Ameer stood on a dusty street in Basra, Iraq, one afternoon a year ago, guarding his father's cart of oil jugs. As Salwah Ameer worked nearby, the skinny, dark-haired 13-year-old -- the oldest of Salwah's five sons -- noticed something on the ground.

Succumbing to curiosity, Ali picked up the object -- a grenade -- setting off an explosion and a chain of events that eventually led him more than 6,000 miles from home, to the city of Manassas.

The blast last spring did so much damage to Ali's right hand that a doctor at Basra's Al-Tahreer Hospital amputated it a few inches above the wrist.

A world away -- in a comfortable, well-kept Manassas neighborhood -- Ali anxiously waited last week to be fitted with a replacement hand at a U.S. hospital. He also was getting a taste of American life as he spent time with Christina Frank, 42, her family and others who worked to get him here and make getting the "below-arm prosthetic arm" possible.

Ali beamed as he played a duet of "Heart and Soul" on the living-room piano with Frank, who is the mother of two youngsters and the wife of Lawrence D. Hughes, the Manassas city manager and Prince William's director of criminal justice services.

Using his left forefinger, Ali carefully struck the keys. The right cuff of his long-sleeved blue shirt hung empty.

Ali, who speaks no English, learned the song by watching Frank. When he missed a note, she nudged him playfully. They laughed.

Frank never expected to meet Ali, let alone host him in her home.

Last December, she read an article in Parade magazine about the boy and a Staten Island-based nonprofit that was trying to get him to the United States so he could be fitted for a prosthetic arm at Shriners Hospital for Children in Philadelphia.

Frank called to make a donation and hit it off with the organization's founder and executive director, Elissa Montanti. Frank volunteered to help the cause.

First, Frank's daughter Lauren Hughes, 8, and Lauren's second-grade class at Manassas's Jennie Dean Elementary School started sending letters to Ali and toys to other injured children who Montanti had identified at the Basra hospital.

Then late last month, Frank found herself on the border between Kuwait and Iraq, surrounded by military escorts, facing Ali and his aunt, Narges Amir, 36.

"It was incredible. . . . Once we saw Ali, we were all frozen in our tracks," Frank said. "He was just grinning from ear to ear. It's been a high ever since. It's refueled me."

Frank and several others from Montanti's Global Medical Relief Fund accompanied Ali and his aunt to Kuwait, then New York, Manassas and finally Philadelphia, where technicians this week began to measure Ali for his prosthesis.

In Manassas, Ali met with Lauren's class, whose letters had given him hope after his accident, said Nafisah Kamal, 38, an interpreter who traveled with Ali and his aunt.

Frank said she looked forward to maintaining a relationship between Jennie Dean Elementary and other children at Basra's Al-Tahreer Hospital.

"Our hope is we can bring another Ali next year, and maybe each year bring a student from a foreign country to meet their friends in America and see their generous side," she said. "And students can appreciate what we have here and share their good fortune with other kids around the world."

On Tuesday, Ali visited Capitol Hill and Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.), whose office pushed through the Homeland Security department the paperwork that made the boy's trip possible.

"This is very important," said Wolf, who has visited Iraq twice since last spring. "I know there are a lot of kids who have been wounded, and there are a lot without arms and legs. . . . In a society like that, the person would fall by the wayside."

Kamal said that Ali has been both anxious and resolute about the prospect of his prosthesis.

Again and again, he asked, "Is today the day?" she said. On Wednesday, it was. Doctors took initial measurements for the prosthesis. Over the next three weeks, the hospital will custom-build two artificial limbs for Ali at no cost. For the next month, he will live at Mount Loretto, a renovated orphanage on Staten Island, N.Y., where he will receive medical treatment and learn how to use the arms.

Such high-quality, functional prostheses and medical care are not available in Iraq, Montanti said.

"There's no electricity and the hospitals are working on not even an emergency generator, and there's no rubbing alcohol or painkillers," said Montanti, describing what she's seen. "You just can't imagine that this exists. It's hard to comprehend."

She said she is determined to help at least nine other Iraqi children in Basra who have lost limbs.

When he returns to Basra, the first thing Ali plans to do, he said, is shake hands with his 63-year-old grandmother, Nadiya, and hug and kiss her.

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