

## **Help From a World Away**

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The Children's Hospital at Montefiore is a family-friendly place. Pull-out couches in the hospital rooms allow parents to sleep over and there's a family-learning center in the upper lobby, filled with reference books. Whimsical cartoon-like sculptures climb over handrails and peek out from behind posts. The ceilings are embossed with stars, and the walls are covered with brightly colored murals of animals and plants. A glass Foucault pendulum swings in the main lobby over a silver-and-bronze relief map of the world that is centered on New York City, where Montefiore is located.

Still, no matter how you dress it up, a hospital can be an intimidating place—especially if everyone around you is speaking a language you can't understand, your wife and family are 6,000 miles away in a war-torn city, and your son has just had his chest cut open by a man you met three days ago. "I was very confused and overwhelmed," said Rabea Abo Senda, through a translator, early Monday afternoon. Then, his brown eyes welling up with tears, he added, "But now I am very happy."

Three hours earlier, his 11-year-old son Wsim had emerged from the operating room, asking for his father. Now he slept soundly in a bed on the 10th floor, his heart pumping normally for perhaps the first time in his young life.

Wsim had been diagnosed with an obstruction below the aortic valve in his heart, a problem that likely would have been detected and corrected when he was still a young child had he been born in the United States. But in Iraq, where Wsim and his family live, Senda said there are many more sick kids than there are doctors who can treat them. He waited two years to get Wsim an appointment with a cardiologist. In the interval, his son developed diabetes and a seizure disorder. By the time Senda got a diagnosis for his then 6-year-old son in 2000, he was told the boy probably had just years to live.

"I came home and cried," he remembers.

In the five years since, Senda, a taxi driver in Kut (a town about 100 miles from Baghdad), has traveled throughout the country seeking help for his son—even as such trips became increasingly dangerous following the U.S. invasion in the spring of 2003 and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's government. "But always, the doctors turned me away," says Senda, now 27. "They told me, 'Leave it to God.'"

Finally, six months ago, he submitted his son's medical records to the National Iraqi Assistance Center in Baghdad. Staffed jointly by Iraqis and by U.S. Army Civil Affairs soldiers, the center handles records and requests for extraordinary medical cases.

In September, Senda learned his son was one of about 60 Iraqi children selected as potential candidates for heart surgery in the United States through a humanitarian program called the Gift of Life International, which helps to arrange for children with life-threatening illnesses to get medical treatment abroad.

Sgt. Marikay Satryano, a liaison team leader for the 353rd Civic Affairs Command in Baghdad who works with the National Iraqi Assistance Center, had contacted a Rotary Club in Amman, Jordan, to arrange for the children to be evaluated by a Jordanian pediatric cardiologist, Dr. Khaled Salaymeh. Senda and his son joined several other families on a treacherous 12-hour bus trip, along roads pockmarked with craters from homemade bombs set off over the past several months by insurgents targeting U.S. and Iraqi government forces. "We didn't have any other options," said Senda.

Worried about becoming targets themselves, the families didn't even tell anyone but close relatives that their children might be getting medical treatment in the United States. Over the next few months, Senda and his son would make the 12-hour trip to Amman two more times—once to have additional tests performed and again, last week, in a race with three other fathers and their children to cross the border with Jordan before it was closed for the Iraqi elections.

Dr. Samuel Weinstein, a pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore, had offered to perform surgery this week for no charge on Wsim and the three other children—a 12-year-old girl named Ashjan Khaled, a frail 14-year-old boy named Asaid Sibreai, and a 6-year-old boy named Sivar Mohammed—to correct problems that would likely kill them before they reached adulthood. The Gift of Life, which is part of Rotary International, and the non-profit Rachel Cooper Foundation had agreed to cover additional costs, including housing the children for the four to six weeks they'll need to recover in New York before returning to Iraq.

By the time the procedures had been scheduled and the visas had finally been approved for all eight of them last week, Wsim couldn't walk more than a few meters without stopping to catch his breath. He'd also begun to have fainting spells. "Each time, I thought he was dying," says Senda.

He was. Wsim had become so weak, in fact, that Dr. Salaymeh, the cardiologist who'd examined him in Amman, worried he might not survive the 11-hour flight to New York. But when the doctors asked if he wanted to take the risk, Senda didn't hesitate. "We can't let this opportunity pass," he told them. He knew it might be his last.

Just hours before the flight was scheduled to leave, the doctors relented and allowed them to board with the other children and their fathers. An ambulance was waiting to take Wsim to the Children's Hospital at Montefiore after his flight landed on Friday night.

"It was the most severe sub-aortic obstruction case I have ever seen," said Weinstein, after examining Wsim. "Without surgery, he had potentially months to live. The pressure on the ventricle in his heart was three times what it should be ... there was a risk of sudden death."

The surgery began before dawn on Monday. By noon, Weinstein said he and Senda were joking with Wsim about when he might be able to start playing soccer. Then Wsim drifted off to sleep again, and his father went to the lobby to drink tea with the other fathers. Every time someone mentioned his son, his face lit up. "Today I am very happy," he said, "very happy."

In the early afternoon, Sgt. Satryano went up to Wsim's hospital room with Bill Currie, president of the New York Rotary Club, and Rob Donno, chairman of the Gift of Life International. Wsim lifted his head slightly and smiled when he saw them. Currie and Donno emerged moments later, wiping tears from their eyes. But Satryano remained. She held one of Wsim's hands. With the other, he traced the line on his chest where the incision had been made to fix his heart.

"That scar will be a constant reminder of what someone did for him in a time of need," said Donno, a Rotarian who started the Gift of Life program about 30 years ago when he brought a five-year-old Ugandan girl to New York for heart surgery. It has since grown into a worldwide program that has saved more than 6,000 children.

Inspired, he and Currie hope to bring another 200 Iraqi children to the United States for medical care. "The focus is to help the child, but in helping the child, a lot of other things happen," said Donno. "You're helping a child, a family, a community. You may not change the world. But you've changed their world."