



Amel Yahyah, Eric Balcavage, Kipta Nasar Faehan Al-Shhbany, Rotary member Dawn Costello and Lt. Col. Robert Balcavage all played a role in helping 4-year-old Mohammed Kareem Moh Alshehabi obtain a colostomy, a surgery in which an artificial excretory opening is created from the colon and a life-changing procedure the Iraqi youth would not have otherwise been able to experience.

-- PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT Balcavage

A huge coordination effort, the goodwill of many people and the commitment to make it happen: this is what it took to bring a 4-year-old Iraqi boy to the United States for a colostomy.

It began in the heart of an Iraqi al-Qaida stronghold - a place called Jurf as-Sakhr.

Lt. Col. Robert M. Balcavage, who's based out of Fort Richardson, watched the tides of Iraqi public sentiment in a predominantly Sunni area shift in a matter of a month from pro-al-Qaida to pro-American forces.

“As al-Qaida began hurting its own people, we began to win the faith of the locals, he said.

A leader in the area named Sheikh Sabah proved to be a pivotal part of this shift. As a Sunni and a member of the former Republican Guard, his decision to turn against al-Qaida and work with the U.S. troops led much of the community to follow suit, Balcavage said.

Sabah and Balcavage, who serves with the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, worked closely together. They made progress in the fight against al-Qaida, and Sabah became the mayor of Jurf as-Sakhr.

As a way of saying thanks for the support, Sabah held a festival for Balcavage and his troops.

In the midst of the celebrations, a man held out his young son to Balcavage. The boy, who Balcavage described as small and frail and very loveable, was in clear need of medical attention.

He was born without an anus and instead relied on a crude incision in his abdomen to excrete bodily waste, Balcavage said.

Your heart just bleeds for these little guys, he said.

Balcavage said he picked up the boy named Mohammed Kareem Moh Alshehabi, held him and took some photos.

Later, he said he sent the photos to his brother, Eric Balcavage, in Pennsylvania. An active member in Rotary, he had taken the initiative to support the troops serving abroad through an adopt-a-battalion program.

After seeing photos of the boy, Eric Balcavage hit the ground running to determine how he could help get him a colostomy, which surgically creates an artificial excretory opening from the colon, Robert Balcavage said.

Eric Balcavage found someone who would pay for the 4-year-old and his guardian to travel to the United States, Robert Balcavage said. He also found a woman willing to host the two while in the country, and he found a surgeon, who volunteered to perform the operation.

But many obstacles still needed to be overcome before Mohammed could come to the United States for surgery.

At this point, Robert Balcavage said he turned to a physician's assistant named Capt. Craig Sink.

If you need something done, he's going to figure out a way to do it, Balcavage said. Craig busted through the bureaucracy, and he found a captain that worked in civil affairs that would help us in Baghdad.

They arranged for Mohammed to get a visa and travel to Jordan, where a doctor could provide a recommendation as to whether or not the boy would be a good candidate for surgery in the United States, Robert Balcavage said. The Jordanian doctor determined that Mohammed would benefit from surgery.

With this diagnosis, the next hurdle was to find Mohammed a guardian who could travel with him to Pennsylvania, Robert Balcavage said, where the surgery would take place, as his mom is deceased, and his dad couldn't go because of the prolonged time it takes for Iraqi male adults to get a United States visa.

Balcavage said he approached Sabah about finding a guardian for Mohammed, who asked his cousin to provide one of his wives to be the guardian.

Mohammed and Kipta Nasar Faehan Al-Shhbany arrived at a Pennsylvania airport Dec. 23, Robert Balcavage said. Many people connected to the local Rotary clubs and Balcavage received the two with open arms, offering gifts and words of encouragement despite the language barrier.

But while they had arrived in Pennsylvania, the journey was not over.

The surgeon who had initially volunteered to perform the operation turned out to be unable to do so, Robert Balcavage said. Additionally, Mohammed suffered from giardia, an intestinal parasite that causes diarrhea, which needed to be cleared out of his system before operating.

When Robert Balcavage went to visit his brother and check in on Mohammed, things seemed to be somewhat stalled, he said.

As time stretched out, Al-Shhbany, Mohammed's guardian, was getting anxious to return home, Robert Balcavage said. For her, Pennsylvania in the winter is a far cry from the warm sun beating down on the banks of the Euphrates River.

The answers to these dilemmas soon came. Another surgeon volunteered to help Mohammed, Robert Balcavage said, and Amel Yahyah, who had been hosting Mohammed and Al-Shhbany, offered to be Mohammed's legal guardian so that Al-Shhbany could return to Iraq.

Mohammed went into Lehigh Valley Hospital for a colostomy a couple weeks ago, Robert Balcavage said, adding that the surgery was a success. In six weeks, Mohammed will have his next surgery, which will close the incision he has used all his life to excrete bodily waste.

After that, he'll spend another four to six months recovering in Pennsylvania, Robert Balcavage said.

Our hope is that we can do the surgery and that he can go back and have a safe, healthy life, Eric Balcavage said. "Ten years from now, 15 years from now, we've put him in a better place.

What has this experience shown Eric Balcavage?

I think the big story here is all the Americans that are willing and able to help people, he said.

Robert Balcavage also recognizes the positive impact it has for the security of the troops now in Jurf as-Sukhr, saying it has built trust and confidence with the people in the village.

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