

Operation goodwill: An Iraqi child's story

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A dark-eyed, 4-year-old boy gazes intently in the photograph, clutching the hand of an adult and the neck of a small, stuffed reindeer.

His dark brown hair is neatly combed, his yellow shirt lifted to reveal a rash and two irregular spots -- signs of an intestinal birth defect.

U.S. soldiers took his photo months ago in Jurf Al-Sakhr, a former al-Qaeda stronghold in Iraq. An Army officer who grew up in Tamaqua sent the pictures home. And largely because of the officer's family, two Pennsylvania Rotary clubs and an Iraqi sheik, the boy is now in the Lehigh Valley awaiting surgery that would give him a more normal life.

It didn't matter to them that the boy, Mohammed Kareem Moh Alshehabi, came from an area particularly hostile to Americans, known as the "Triangle of Death."

"Many, many people sacrificed and did this because it was just the right thing to do, regardless of nationality, religion or sect," Lt. Col. Robert Balcavage said from his base in Alaska.

Born without an opening to eliminate solid waste, Mohammed needs surgery to create one, in a procedure known as a colostomy. The red spots near his navel are remnants of an emergency procedure Iraqi doctors performed shortly after his birth but did not complete. Mohammed was born April 4, 2003, about two weeks after U.S. forces launched its air attack against Baghdad. Since then, many Iraqi surgeons left the country or concentrated on tending to the wounded.

If all goes as planned, Mohammed will receive surgery to restore normal bowel function at Lehigh Valley Hospital-Cedar Crest. He will stay with a family in Laurys Station for about three months before returning to his village.

The mission of peace and goodwill started when Balcavage's brother, Eric, a chiropractor in Glen Mills, Delaware County, saw a photo of Mohammed on his brother's lap and asked what was wrong with the child.

Eric Balcavage is a member of the Concordville-Chadds Ford Rotary Club, which had been shipping toothpaste, DVDs, children's toys and even dumbbells to his brother's platoon and nearly 70 others, for more than a year. When he learned the child needed supplies for a colostomy, Eric knew where to turn.

His mother, Carol Balcavage, is a nurse manager at LVH who in 1977 started a specialized wound care service for patients like Mohammed. Surely she would know what companies to ask for free supplies.

"Yes, I think so," she recalled telling him.

Carol Balcavage, in fact, had helped care for a 7-year-old girl from South America who came to LVH for a similar operation 25 years ago. Rosario Gutierrez is now a teacher in her native Bolivia.

While his mother looked into obtaining supplies, Eric and his brother searched their own networks of people about the possibility of bringing Mohammed stateside for the operation.

Bradley Stanton, a member of the same Rotary Club to which Eric belongs, had experience flying heart surgeons around the world to children who needed the care. He looked for hospitals in the Philadelphia area willing to care for Mohammed while others tried hospitals in San Diego and New York City. One hospital offered to do the surgery for a fee; LVH agreed to do it for free.

Knowing time was of the essence, Carol Balcavage called LVH doctors who might be involved should Mohammed come here for care, from pediatricians and radiologists to anesthesiologists and surgeons. All agreed to donate their services to the boy.

"That's one thing that was edifying," said Chuck Lewis, senior vice president for marketing and public affairs at the Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. Every doctor and administrator who was asked wanted to help, he said. "The question really was, 'How can we make this happen?'"

LVH's purpose is to care for local patients, not Iraqi children, Lewis said. It was a stretch, he said, for administrators to authorize the expense -- about \$34,600 for the hospital alone. But for the sake of the little boy, officials ultimately decided that helping the Balcavages with Mohammed was serving the local community.

Mohammed's surgery, which requires separate operations to first open, then reconnect the intestine to the bowel, could begin after the holidays and may be the easiest part of the mission.

Leaving Mohammed's hometown was not easy. Jurf Al-Sakhr is a desolate area where two U.S. soldiers were tortured and killed in June 2006. It is now run by insurgents-turned-leaders and has been rebuilt with \$1 million in U.S. aid.

"It was the most dangerous and challenging town in our battalion's area of operations over the past year," said Robert Balcavage, who was there for more than a year. "After months of sustained combat, we created conditions that brought the Sunni sheiks to the peace table. The sheiks of the town honored us with a feast in the middle of the same street that we had traded grenades, mortars and gunfire for 10 months."