

Global Medical Relief Fund: One child at a time – CBS News
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(CBS News)

Of all the tragedies of war, none are greater than those that involve children. Caught in the crossfire or hit by a roadside bomb, children are often wounded but rarely receive the heroic, high tech medical care that our troops depend on.

Recently, we heard about a woman in Staten Island, New York, who has devoted herself to wounded children. Elissa Montanti has little money and no training in humanitarian relief, but against the odds she has changed the fortunes of more than 100 crippled children, one child at a time.

"60 Minutes" and correspondent Scott Pelley wanted to see how she does it, so, for four months we followed Montanti on a journey with one child, a nine year old boy from Iraq named Wa'ad.

Wa'ad arrived in America last April with his mother Waffa. Montanti brought them to the U.S. after an American soldier told her Wa'ad's story.

"He was walking with his friends and they were kicking a bottle. I think the first child kicked a bottle. And then maybe the second. And then he kicked it and it exploded," she explained.

What Wa'ad had kicked was a bomb.

The blast shattered his face, tore out his eye, and took away his right arm and left leg. Wa'ad would receive treatment for all those wounds from a network of volunteers and charities that Montanti has recruited one by one over the last 15 years.

Wa'ad first stop was at the Shriners Hospital in Philadelphia; Shriners has 22 hospitals that provide free care to burned and crippled children.

Wa'ad pushed through physical therapy to strengthen his muscles, but slowed down long enough to get fitted for a new arm and leg that the Shriners made for him. Then it was a trip to see an ocular specialist, Annette Kirzrot, who also volunteers for Montanti. A prosthetic eye was the first step in improving Wa'ad's appearance.

But the tougher part would be reconstructing his face. That was the challenge for plastic surgeon Kaveh Alizadeh. He's with Long Island Plastic Surgical Group and was recruited by Montanti.

"So, there's this increasing pool of people that get drawn into her world. And if you have, if you're lucky or unlucky enough to be excited about this stuff, you get pulled in," Alizadeh explained.

"When you first approach a hospital or a doctor to ask them for potentially, hundreds of thousands of dollars in free medical care, what's your pitch? What do you tell 'em?" Pelley asked Montanti.

"I tell 'em this true story. Here's a child that's battered. I just tell them the reality. I expect them to help. I'm grateful 'cause they don't have to help. But I expect that they would, because how could you not?" she asked.

After the earthquake hit in Haiti, she went to the island and brought back three girls who lost limbs. Montanti's work with crippled children began back in 1996 when a friend asked her to raise money to buy school supplies for kids in war-torn Bosnia. That led to a meeting with the Bosnian ambassador to the U.N.

"And he said to me, 'You know, quite frankly, we have much stronger needs right now than pencil cases.' He reached in his drawer. And he handed me this letter that this boy had written to him asking for help, two new arms and a leg. And I saw his picture. And that's really when my whole life started to change," she remembered.

She brought that boy to the U.S. for treatment. Kenan Malkic, now 28, helps Montanti run her tiny charity with a mighty name: the "Global Medical Relief Fund."

"Global Medical Relief sounds really big," Pelley pointed out.

"It's big in the sense that we reach out to the world. But it's small in that it's really me," Montanti said.

She runs Global Medical Relief out of her home - a 57-year-old single woman with a computer and a phone.

"My office is my former walk-in closet. And I added a window. And it works. And I speak to the world right outta my walk-in closet," she told Pelley.

Asked where the 112 children she has helped come from, Montanti told Pelley, "Bosnia, El Salvador, Liberia, Niger, Sierra Leone, Iraq, China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Haiti. Did I say Nepal?"

Asked how she keeps it running, Montanti told Pelley, "On a prayer."

She simply begs and borrows from doctors and hospitals - whatever it takes. She has traveled to the Middle East, arranging passports, cutting red tape and getting wounded children out one at a time. Word spread among soldiers in Iraq that an American charity called Global Medical Relief is a lifeline.

Now she gets a dozen e-mails a month from the war zone, most of which start with "Dear Sir."

"How do these letters end?" Pelley asked.

"Please help," Montanti said.

It was an e-mail like that that started Wa'ad on his journey with Montanti. Seven weeks after he arrived, Wa'ad was scheduled for his first surgery to repair his face. He walked into the hospital thanks to his new prosthetic leg.

"When you first met Miss Elissa, do you remember what she told you that she would do for you?" Pelley asked the little boy.

"She said they will help me to make surgery and fix my arm, leg," Wa'ad said.

Dr. Alizadeh's goal is to minimize the scar that runs from Wa'ad's scalp down to his chin. The surgery was done at North Shore University Hospital, which donated its facilities.

"My plan today is to go ahead and expand the skin surrounding the scar, putting a sophisticated tissue balloon underneath the skin and the skin slowly stretches over time," Alizadeh explained.

That tissue balloon, implanted under his cheek, will be inflated gradually over the course of weeks.

"So, over time, they're gonna stretch his skin out, essentially creating new skin," Pelley observed. "And then you're gonna cut the scars out and move the new skin together?"

"I hope so. That's the plan," Alizadeh said.

"What's the best you can hope for?" Pelley asked.

"My goal with Wa'ad is that the defects that he has will not be noticeable when he becomes a young man," Alizadeh said.

Asked if he has a great deal of confidence in that, the doctor replied. "I do."

But Wa'ad's appearance would have to become much worse before he had a chance to get better.

During his time in the U.S., Montanti arranged for Wa'ad to live in temporary housing, a Jesuit retreat on Staten Island along with the three Haitian girls. Together they formed a family, kids who didn't speak the same language but helping each other through a painful experience.

Even with all the free care, Montanti spends about \$50,000 a year a year for plane tickets and expenses. She raises it from donors including Richmond County Savings Foundation, a Staten Island bank.

But sometimes it's tough going.

"How often do you run into people who say, 'Look, those kids are from overseas. And we'd rather donate our money to kids here in the United States,?'" Pelley asked.

"Often," she said.

"I've gotten hate mail, you know," she told Pelley. "You know, 'How can you help children from Iraq when they're going to grow and just hate the United States. You should help the children here.'"

"And to those people you would say what?" Pelley asked.

"I say, 'We don't have landmines in this country, thank God. And these children are innocent,'" Montanti said.

Nearly three months into Wa'ad's treatment, the kids went to an amusement park. The balloons under Wa'ad's face had been successfully inflated.

Imagine what it takes to be a stranger in America and place your faith in a painful procedure you don't understand. Some people need courage for a roller coaster, but Wa'ad sat right up front, to see what it's like to be a kid again.

Two days later came his final surgery. Over two hours, Dr. Alizadeh removed the balloons from under Wa'ad's skin, cut out the scars and joined the new skin together.

Plastic surgery requires months of healing, and in recovery Wa'ad had a long way to go.

For the first time, his mother began to recognize the face she hadn't seen in more than two years. "Thank you, thank so much," Waffa tearfully said, looking at her son.

"I'm curious why you do this," Pelley asked Dr. Kaveh Alizadeh

"I do this probably for the most selfish reason, which is that it feels good," he replied.

Asked what she thinks, Montanti told Pelley, "Well, my charity is very personal. It becomes a global family. All these children, I say 'my children' so often. Because I feel that that they are - I love all of them. It's more than just an organization that is giving a child a leg or fixing his face. These children go back as little ambassadors. And they tell their town, their village, who say, 'How wonderful the American people are.'"

In early August, Wa'ad had one more check-up with Dr. Alizadeh.

His scars will continue to fade over time, but this isn't the end of Wa'ad's treatment. The plan is for him to come back from time to time for touch ups as he grows older.

Four months after they arrived in America, Wa'ad and his mother headed home to Iraq. Montanti, standing outside the airport terminal, told Pelley it's very hard to say goodbye. "I cry all the time."

"You must worry that you won't see him again," Pelley remarked.

"I do, because it's always that worry 'What if?' You know, what if something happens while they're in Iraq? What if I can't do this anymore?" she replied.

A few weeks later, we checked in on Wa'ad back in his neighborhood in Iraq. We found the boy who'd been disfigured and left to hop on one leg was back with a smile and a pretty solid kick, playing soccer with his friends.