

Operation goodwill: An Iraqi child's story

By **Ann Wlazelek** - *Of The Morning Call, Allentown, PA*

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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 Lehigh Valley Hospital 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



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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.”

The first photo of **Mohammed** was taken at that feast.

Other battalions had tried to help **Mohammed** get the medical care he needed, the army officer learned, but got stymied along the way. So the pressure was on — politically and time-wise to try to complete the mission before **Balcavage** returned to his home base in Alaska.

Mohammed had a passport but needed medical records, an escort, a visa and assurances that his trip, stay and procedures would be paid for.

Iraqi national police transported him safely through volatile territories. Consulates gave power of attorney to **Mohammed**'s escort, **Kitba Nasar Faehan Al-Shhbany**, the wife of one of the sheiks in charge and one of the boy's relatives. Neither speaks English.

At one point, hopes were dashed when word came to local advocates that **Mohammed** could not be found. Civil Affairs officials advised against the boy's father accompanying him, saying men sometimes abandoned their children and disappeared after arriving in the states. **Mohammed**'s mother had died, a relative said.

Another time, the boy's family appeared to be stalling.

“I had to go to the head sheik and tell him that this was really important to me and that many Americans were already invested in this effort and that this opportunity might not come around again if we didn't follow through,” **Robert Balcavage** said.

The Muslim Association of Lehigh Valley found a host family to provide **Mohammed** and his escort with a place to stay, transportation and translation. **Amel Yahya**, a local real estate agent and active member of the mosque, opened her home to the guests, saying she understood their plight. One of her three boys was seriously ill as a child and had to be at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia for nearly two years, and another son spent time in Iraq as a marine at the start of the war.

“I'd love to help,” **Yahya** said about responding to the plea to help the boy. “I'll take him.”

Other area Muslims have offered to drive the boy to his medical appointments.

“If there is something good going on and we could be a part, that's what we want to do,” said Dr. **Waseem Akhter**, a neonatologist from St. Luke's Hospital and chairman of the Muslim Association's outreach committee.

Dawn Costello, a friend of **Carol Balcavage** and member of the Rotary Club of Allentown West-Western Lehigh County, will take over any other local transportation needs.

Mohammed arrived in New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport on Dec. 16, when a freezing rain and ice storm threatened to delay his arrival once more. The **Balcavage**'s car swerved once to avoid an accident on the way.

On Thursday, **Mohammed** arrived at ABC Family Pediatricians in Allentown for his first physical examination — a prerequisite for his surgery.

Dressed in a new winter coat and boots donated by Yahya's co-workers, **Mohammed** offered shy smiles to several Arabic-speaking assistants who called him “**Hamoodi**,” a nickname for **Mohammed**.

The boy weighed considerably less, at 26.5 pounds, than the average for his age, doctors said, but appeared otherwise healthy, cheerful and energetic.

He correctly identified shapes during an eye test and clutched a different stuffed toy — a “shadow buddy” nurses gave him to learn about his condition.

On Saturday, three days before Christians celebrate the birth of Christ, the Muslim boy, his escort and new-found friends were invited to celebrate Eid al-Adha, one of the most important holidays of the Islamic calendar, with a feast at a mosque in Whitehall Township.

The **Balcavages** and others who played a part in bringing him here marveled at how one small boy could bridge the divide between religions, cultures and countries at war.

