

Gaithersburg resident helps Iraqi amputees with get artificial limbs

Karen Buckelew

Linda A.H. Smythe recently watched an 11-year-old child try on his artificial leg and take his first steps since he was 5. It had been six years since an Iraqi military vehicle ran him down, tore off his leg at the hip and left him for dead.

Smythe, a Gaithersburg resident who a short time ago knew nothing about prosthetics, now understands the implications that artificial limb holds for that child and why its significance is more profound for him than for an American child.

Not only can he now ride a bicycle like other boys his age, but more importantly he can go to school. There are no wheelchair ramps in Iraq, no buses equipped with lifts, no way to ease a child back into the world after amputation.

Smythe is the founder and head of the Basra, Iraq Prosthetics Project, started in 2004 to gather prosthetic limbs for Iraqi amputees.

The project's most poignant lessons, she said, have come from the amputees themselves, such as that little boy.

I can't tell you how inspiring this is, the people you meet, Smythe remarked.

In May she made her first trip as part of the project, a 10-day journey to Jordan to unite American prosthetics experts and physical therapists with six Iraqi amputees, four Iraqi bench workers - the technicians who make and fit limbs - two physical therapists and a physician.

The Iraqi professionals trained with the Americans, and all helped to fit the amputees with new limbs and teach them how to use them.

It was a thrill for Smythe, who has gathered \$100,000 and nearly 40 unused prosthetics throughout the project's tenure for eventual donation to needy Iraqi amputees.

Life changing

Making it happen is quite one thing, said Smythe of the long planning process that went into the trip. Actually experiencing it is another. It's a life-changing experience.

The project began with Smythe's association with Rotary International, a network of public service-minded business professionals, and with her dedication to celebrating the Arab culture in America. Having lived on the island of Bahrain for two decades, in 2004 she began looking for an Arab-oriented service project.

She found her answer through an organization called Physicians for Peace, a medical education group that reaches out to satisfy unmet needs in developing countries.

The organization had been looking into a prosthetics project in Iraq, whose medical programs were woefully maintained under the reign of Saddam Hussein and whose prosthetic experts are working with questionable materials, using antiquated practices.

The life of an Iraqi amputee who uses a wheelchair, Smythe found, is not like that in America. There is no Iraqi equivalent of the Americans with Disabilities Act, no requirement that buildings be outfitted with ramps or elevators to make them accessible to that young boy and his disabled peers.

That can mean no work for disabled adults and no school for young boys in wheelchairs, because artificial limbs are a rarity as the Arab nation struggles to reinvent itself.

It would take 20 years, Smythe somberly figured, for Iraq's current experts to manufacture enough limbs for 50,000 patients who need them now, 5,000 of those in Basra alone.

And that is assuming the unlikely scenario in which no more Iraqi children encounter hidden land mines and no more civilians are

injured in insurgent or military attacks.

Reused, recycled

In America, prosthetic limbs are discarded by the thousands. The limbs must be replaced as they wear out or the patient outgrows them. For children, that can mean just a matter of months with each new prosthetic.

And in the United States, even though the typical amputee prosthetic costs about \$7,000, it is illegal to reuse the limbs; not so in Iraq.

The result of Smythe's effort is dozens of limbs now in storage at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda, which has volunteered to keep them for the project. Those limbs eventually will be broken down and their parts used to fashion new limbs for Iraqis.

Before that can happen, however, Iraqi technicians must be trained in modern techniques. That, Smythe said, was the purpose of the trip to Amman, Jordan.

Precious commodity

Smythe brought with her several fellow Rotarians, doctors from Physicians for Peace and two volunteer prosthetists from Hanger Orthopedic Group Inc. of Bethesda, the world's largest provider of orthotic and prosthetic patient care services.

John Schulte, a certified prosthetist and orthotist, and clinical vice president with Hanger, was one of those experts, along with his Hanger colleague, Joe Elliott, an area practice manager in Birmingham, Ala.

Schulte first visited with the Iraqi experts during a fact-finding trip last September and wrote a training manual based on their needs.

The King Hussein Medical Centre in Amman offered its facilities for the May training program and has promised to host the Iraqi technicians in the future for six-week-long training sessions with Jordanian experts.

Ten days, Smythe said, surely is not long enough for a prosthetist to learn entirely new techniques. The hope is for more training missions - one per year - and for the newly trained experts to share with colleagues that manual and what they've learned.

Schulte and Elliott worked intensely with the Iraqi technicians, making 35 limbs for the six amputees; many of those prosthetics failed attempts made simply for practice.

The technicians, Schulte said, were hungry for knowledge. They're so dedicated. That was the most rewarding part - to see the happiness in their faces when someone walks out on a limb they've made.

And Smythe now understands what prosthetics experts already knew: Prosthetics are a precious commodity in much of the world, said Hanger Chairman and CEO Ivan R. Sabel.

Sabel's firm has provided the project with gifts such as paid time off for its prosthetists to travel to Jordan and a toll-free number for interested donors to call.

Around the world there is a severe need, Sabel said. At least here in the U.S. most people can access care through some sort of a process. Obviously, that doesn't happen around the world.

Schulte said he felt the good those limbs can do as that 11-year-old boy took his first steps toward the prosthetist's outstretched arms.

He hugged me and looked up at me and said, 'I love you, Mr. John,' Schulte recalled. That's the thing that touches your heart.

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