



SECTION D
HERALDNEWS

Tuesday,
September 26, 2006

Health

Peanuts or Cracker Jack?

Have fun, but know that some stadium snacks are healthier than others.

Diet Detective, D3

A father's LOVE

In a foreign land with an ailing son – and family at home in Iraq

By **BETSY QUERNA**
Herald News

Kareem Abdullah Mahdi understands few English words. Some he learns during the days spent next to his son's hospital bed. He learns "plasma" as he watches nurses hook bags filled with the brown-tinted liquid up to IV tubes that run into his son's arms and legs. He learns "calcium" when people come to the hospital bed talking about fluctuating levels in the boy's body. He learns "water" so that when his son wakes up crying "Maii!" Kareem knows what to ask for. And he learns "six," because when the longer hand on the clock reaches six, nurses told him, his son can drink water without risk of vomiting.

The 46-year old Iraqi doesn't know many of the things most Americans take for granted, that Tylenol can help a headache or what town he's in. He doesn't know anyone in this country, save for Ali, his 2-and-a-half-year-old son, and the handful of people who have become familiar faces over the past several weeks he has been in New Jersey – the man whose home he's staying at, the man who gave his son a stuffed Mickey Mouse doll, the woman who wouldn't let him smoke in her house.

He doesn't know whom to talk to about the stress he's going through just by traveling to this country, a place he's never been before. He doesn't know whom to turn to when seeing Ali wrapped in tubes and bandages is too much. No one here is familiar to him, and the few people who know Arabic well enough to understand him come and go quickly.

So he worries and grieves and gets scared alone. At 6:30 a.m. Sept. 18, when Ali is wheeled into the operating room at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson for open-heart surgery, he turns around and, without looking back at the boy, walks down the hallway. He covers his face and lets out one anguished, audible sob. He pauses briefly in the waiting room, then walks out to the hospital patio and cries. Alone.

Kareem says that he cried for his family. His pregnant wife, Hannah, is back home in Baghdad with their 5-year-old daughter, Doah. The couple has already lost one son to heart problems and a brother-in-law to violence. When the tears stop, he wipes his face with a handkerchief he carries in the breast pocket of his leather vest and stares blankly at the flower pots on the patio. He smokes a Marlboro Red, the kind he says he can buy for a dollar a pack in Iraq. Alone, he will wait for five hours while his son is in surgery.

A fatal condition

Ali was only 10 days old in 2003 when a community hospital diagnosed him with tachycardia, a rapid heartbeat. A second opinion from the country's premier cardiac center, the Ibn al-Bitar Hospital in Baghdad, revealed a much more serious problem: Ali had a fatal heart defect. Doctors told Kareem and Hannah that the condition could only be fixed surgically and that the surgery was too complex for any Iraqi hospital. Unless they could find a way to go elsewhere, Ali would probably die before his ninth birthday.

It's likely Ali had been doomed by his second month in utero. It's during that time that the heart develops and when, if something goes wrong, defects form. Ali's heart devel-



GETTING AID TO CHILDREN

OUR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL
What: A local organization founded in 2005 to provide life-saving medical services to disadvantaged children from around the world

How You Can Help: Our Children International can use monetary donations, translators and host families.

For More Information: Visit ourchildreninternational.org or call Sue Vallese at 551-427-6160.

GIFT OF LIFE
What: A project started by various rotary clubs in 1974 to help children who need lifesaving cardiac surgery

How You Can Help: Gift of Life needs monetary donations as well as other items including car seats, strollers and large suitcases. They can also use translators and people willing to host a child and parent here for surgery.

For More Information: Contact Ray Hough, chairman, at 201-342-3300 or GiftofLife7490@aol.com.

Kareem Abdullah Mahdi, top photo, comforts his son, Ali Mahdi, while he recovers from heart surgery at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson. Father and son traveled from Iraq, with help from American organizations, the hospital and doctors, to receive the necessary medical care for Ali's congenital heart defect.

Please see **FATHER, D4**

Photos by **AMY NEWMAN/Herald News**