

# Zainab: An Iraqi girl journeys to Clifton for life-changing surgery

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challenges for Zainab, who couldn't carry her books to school and could walk only a few minutes before resting. Other children teased her. A neighbor said such cruel things that Zainab hated leaving home, says Shehnaz Abdeljabbar, a daughter of the family that is hosting the Jabbars in Clifton. "Grown women point to her on the street," she says. "It takes a psychological toll on Mom, too."

Once the war started, violence visited their neighborhood, called Mashtal. A bomb explosion cancelled school at least once last year, Azhar says. Most days, if the family needs supplies, they go out after the shooting calms down. American troops are a regular fixture.

With hospitals decimated by the war, the family transferred hope to international aid groups, says Azhar. One, Healing the Children, sponsored their trip to the United States for surgery.

Her host family, Ahmed and Nazimeh Sheik, who came to the United States from Palestine more than 30 years ago, try to make life as normal as possible for their guests. They shuttle Zainab and Azhar to doctor's appointments, physical therapy and the hospital. They help Zainab in her classes at School 14 in Clifton, where she is enrolled as a fifth grader and has learned an impressive amount of English.

As her 11th birthday approached in February, Zainab pestered her mother about whether there would be a party. "You're too old," her mother fibbed, knowing that the Sheiks were planning a surprise party.

On her birthday, Zainab walked in to find a gathering of friends and family — and a house decorated with peace signs. The guests ate cake with pink frosting, Zainab's favorite color, and danced to Arabic music and Shakira, the Latin-cum-international pop superstar. Zainab wore a green dress, but soon she was dancing around the room in a dress made of wrapping paper, which the other children fashioned for her. "She was happy," says Nazimeh, her host mother. "We try to make her happy all the time."

Still, reminders of home are everywhere. Almost daily reports of violence in Baghdad spur Azhar to call home and make sure her husband and their 5- and 8-year-old daughters are OK.

Phone calls often draw tears, reminding both Azhar and Zainab how much they miss their family. One time, when Azhar described the gifts she planned to bring home, 5-year-old Sara said, "I just want you to come home and hold me."

Anderson performed Zainab's first major surgery, to repair a spinal cord malformation, in December. In late April, she returned to the hospital to have a traction device attached to her head. It looks like a medieval torture tool and pulls up on her head with 15 pounds of pressure to straighten her bones. It hurts so much, Zainab needs constant pain medication. Morphine drips steadily into her arm through an IV.

"I don't think she would be able to take it without the medication," says Ahmed Rezk, a pediatric resident.

On the May morning of her second surgery, Zainab dozes all morning in her darkened room of St. Joseph's pediatric wing. Her mother watches, sometimes reading passages from the Quran and taking anxious calls from Iraq on her cellphone.

The medications make the pain bearable, but even slight movements hurt. When pediatric nurse Paddy Fallon explains that Zainab will be transferred from her bed to a stretcher, the girl's face falls with worry. Please, please put me to sleep, she begs.

Fallon gives Zainab anti-anxiety medications, but not enough to erase her fear. "My neck!" she cries as she is moved. But the pain fails to blunt Zainab's quick sense of humor. "She's such a smart aleck," Fallon says. When the nurse asks how she is doing just after telling her about the need to move her to another bed, Zainab deadpans: "Not good."

"She keeps up a fight," says Martha Huffin, a patient care associate, one of many people who stop by Zainab's room just to see her. Huffin, whose 23-year-old son was recently diagnosed with leukemia, says Zainab's strength keeps her going. "She brings tears to my eyes when I go in her room," Huffin



Photos by KEVIN WEXLER/Herald News

Top left: Azhar Jabbar holds the Quran so her daughter, Zainab, can read it from her bedside before she undergoes surgery to help correct her severe scoliosis.

Top right: Despite difficulties walking and standing straight, Zainab is still strong enough to climb at the playground near her host family's home in Clifton.

Above: Azhar cries as her daughter holds her hand before having surgery at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson.

Left: Zainab screams out in pain as nurse practitioner Michelle Brenner tries to find a comfortable position in which to place the 11-year-old for spinal X-rays.



## RESOURCES

**National Scoliosis Foundation**  
www.scoliosis.org

**Healing the Children**  
www.healingthechildren.org

**Dr. Arash Emami**  
Orthopedic surgeon  
1135 Broad St., Clifton  
973-773-2600

**Dr. Richard Anderson**  
Pediatric neurosurgeon  
St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center, Paterson  
973-754-3616

Zainab and her mother walk back to their host family's home in Clifton after spending some time in a nearby playground on a recent afternoon.

says, blinking them away.

As she enters Zainab's room, she touches the girl's forehead. "I love you," she says. "I love you too," Zainab answers.

Just before surgery, Emami comes to check on his patient. Nazimeh's daughter translates for Azhar as she implores the doctor through tears: "Take good care of her daughter. Take care of her daughter and do whatever you can for her."

In the operating room, the anesthesia takes effect quickly, quieting the whimpering girl.

They take the traction brace off her head, exposing screw-size cuts where the device connected with her head. Zainab is rolled onto another table, where she lies on her stomach. Emami pushes her hair up so it falls over her face, almost as though he is comforting the child rather than preparing for a clinical ex-

amination. He shaves her back and makes an incision.

Azhar sits outside in a courtyard. She stares absently at her coffee, waiting for the surgery to end.

Several weeks later, Zainab sees Emami again, this time in his Clifton office. She walks in on her own. Although the surgery was successful, she is still not feeling well and has lost sev-

eral pounds. She stands somewhat straighter, helped by two large rods and a series of screws that have remade the upper portion of her spine. Physical therapy will help straighten her muscles, which pull her to the left, contracted from years of deformity. She may need more surgery to reconstruct her ribcage and neck in a year or so, Emami says. They plan on going home to Iraq soon but may have to

come back for further treatment.

Zainab says she is feeling better, but, "It's still hard to walk because the bar in my back is heavy." She says she hopes to get used to it. She is already planning her future: "I want to be a doctor," she says, "for scoliosis."

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