

Faces of Peace

Saving a War-Torn Childhood

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After 10 years, Project Life visits Tsunami orphans in Sri Lanka

From 2006 to 2008 Project Life hosted Tsunami orphans from Sri Lanka. Their homes and villages had been devastated by the 2004 Asian Tsunami, a catastrophic event caused by a Category 9 earthquake centered in Indonesia. In Sri Lanka there were nearly 50,000 deaths and one and a half million people displaced by the water which came as much as 2 km inland from its normal level.

The children Project Life hosted had suffered doubly. They were orphans of natural disaster as well as victims of a civil war that had ravaged their district for almost 30 years. Despite a history of religious tolerance in Sri Lanka, there was a period of intense conflict in the north of the country prior to the tsunami. The Tamil Tigers, who sought to create an independent Tamil state, attacked local villages.

In January a group of volunteers travelled to the village of Nilaveli to visit the orphans and their families. They are all doing well, and our group managed to see all but one of them. "The orphans all brought out their photo albums from Waterport. It was very touching. They remembered everyone and everything that happened on their trip to Project Life, in detail," said volunteer David E. Bell.

The residents of Nilaveli have resumed their lives to a good degree, earning their livelihoods from fishing and farming. Homes now are one or two-room concrete structures. Families have television

service but most don't have computers. Almost everyone has a smart phone. The mountainous island was never fully served by landlines, so this is a big improvement in their lives.

Khalif (2006) is now 22. He works in a cell phone shop. His father is a fisherman. Most of the women in his family died in the tsunami. Irshad (2006) is now 19. He's about 6'2", though when in Waterport he was the shortest of any of the orphans! Safan (2007) is now 22. He is studying Agricultural Science near the capital city, Colombo, and came back home to visit with the Project Life visitors. He's doing well and is very motivated. His whole family invited the group of the visitors for a meal. He acted as a tour guide at all the museums and local sites. Haseena (2007) was the only Project Life child that the group did not manage to visit on this trip. Nilufa (2008), now 20, came with her stepmother. She spent the day with the visiting girls and women. She attends religious school and declined to be photographed. Mubasser (2008) is still very shy. He came with his older brother and also invited the travelers for a home-cooked meal.

"They felt their stay in the U.S. was a valuable experience, especially to build their English skills. They feel like part of a global community and they all come from families who would never have the chance to travel anywhere," Bell added.



Khalif and Irshad 2006, just leaving for trip to western New York



Khalif with Waterport host Alana Ross, Sri Lanka 2017



Safan at the beach, 2017



Haseena at Butterfly Museum, Rochester 2007

Project's voluntary director recognized for her contributions

This has been a year of awards and accomplishments for Project Life Director Linda Redfield Shakoor.

In January she received the Orleans Hub Outstanding Citizen Award at a lively ceremony in Albion, N.Y. This award, given by our local online newspaper, goes to people who contribute to making a better community and who are driven by love for their neighbors.

In May, Linda received her doctoral degree from Niagara University's Department of Leadership and Policy after three years of arduous work. She pushed herself very hard to complete her courses and then write her dissertation by the graduation deadline.

This month she was also chosen for a Faith in Action Award by the Greater Rochester Community of Churches Faith in Action Network. Their June 6 banquet had the theme "Welcoming the Stranger." Awardees received certificates with the wording: "We celebrate those who glorify God by loving God's people, by serving with compassion and courage...and by creating a vision for a just, whole, and holy people."

Well done and well deserved, Dr. Redfield Shakoor!



Project Life marks 20th year! Come celebrate on August 13!

It's been 20 years since five nervous young boys from Sarajevo touched down in Rochester to join the Waterport community for the inaugural year of Project Life. To date, Project Life has hosted more than 130 international orphans from Bosnia, the Russian Caucasus, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan. We're planning a party in Waterport to celebrate our 20th season. Please plan to join us on Sunday, August 13 and bring your pictures and reminiscences to share. We'll be in touch soon with more information.

Afghan boy, so far from home, meets medical and emotional challenges



Mohammad prior to surgery 2014

Mohammad of Afghanistan came to Project Life in 2014 for what he expected would be a 3 month visit. Almost three years later, he remains in western New York to receive treatment for thalassemia, a life threatening form of anemia. Mohammad is now 15 and a 7th grader. He's had to face the challenges of new language, new country, new culture, and new medical treatments, without the support of his mother and siblings. He's been helped along this road by numerous volunteers and caregivers, as well as his own inner strength and determination.

"Mohammad's health has improved steadily because his blood disorder is better managed now. He's still not cured, and he still has a life threatening condition, but he has become stronger and more able to do regular activities such as play soccer," said Chris Wilson, who coordinates Mohammad's medical care.

When he arrived in the States Mohammad was extremely short for his age. "His struggle to survive had suspended his body's ability to grow," Wilson said. Imagine his delight when, at a recent visit to the endocrinologist, Mohammad learned that he had finally edged into the normal range of height and weight for his age. Family and friends back home who see him on Skype barely recognize him! (continued on p. 3)



Mohammad early this spring in Waterport

AFGHAN (continued from p. 2) Wilson said that “Mohammad also received the good news that he is fully recovered from Hepatitis B, a liver disease which was found after his arrival. His body now has full immunity to the virus, and he has no permanent liver damage.”

Mohammad endured many hours in the dentist chair this year. He had several teeth extracted, and many more that required fillings. Now he just needs regular maintenance and a cap for his root canal when he’s older.

With all this being said, Wilson pointed out that Mohammad’s underlying condition remains unchanged. “It’s just being better managed, through advanced care at Women’s and Children’s Hospital of Buffalo. His health is still too fragile for this young man to return home,” Wilson added.

Mohammad has suffered a lot of emotional ups and downs during his time here, but is finally starting to feel more settled in his new situation. Long time tutor Deanne Borrie said, “I’ve watched Mohammad grow from an angry and unhappy boy into a young man who is beginning to feel good about himself and the things he has accomplished. I think the most memorable moment for me was when I asked him how school was going (which I do weekly), and instead of the usual, “not good,” he actually said “I had a good day.”

Along with Deanne, director Linda used to tutor Mohammad regularly. This year middle school teachers have taken over the task. Deanne and Linda both keep up their support of Mohammad, usually meeting with him after school at Tim Horton’s.

He’s such a regular at Tim Horton’s that staff already know his order: two toasted bagels with cream cheese, and one medium, hot tea “triple triple” that he is now well able to order by himself,” said Linda.

The most recent adventure is his decision to run for student council vice president. “The last time I met him he was really excited. He asked his homeroom teacher what it meant to run for student government. When he heard what it was all about, his homeroom teacher encouraged him to go for it. So he decided to run!” said Linda.

“His face was full of enthusiasm, although as normal he expressed some doubts. He said “I never did anything like that.” He enthusiastically told me how many kids came up to him and said they would vote for him. He said he had no idea how many students actually liked him,” Linda said.

“Over the week-end he got some help making posters by gluing M&M’s (symbolizing his first and last names which both start with M). Students were hoping to eat the M&M’s but he warned them about the glue,” Linda said.

Mohammad is having an effect on his middle school in other ways too. He listens to traditional Afghan dance music in Pashto language on his phone. Recently, some of his tunes were played along with American pop favorites during the cafeteria lunch. American kids got up and danced!

Mohammad is concerned about those who are less fortunate. In March his teacher told him about an opportunity to volunteer at a Rotary Club fundraising dinner. Proceeds would go to the Interact Club (Junior Rotary) for a refugee project. Mohammad jumped at the opportunity to act as a server at the event. He showed up early, dressed in his best suit, and did a wonderful job helping out all evening.

Mohammad has a serious sense of style. He’s very particular about his wardrobe and his appearance in general. Volunteer Pat Nureddin has become expert at helping him choose what to buy, and they make regular shopping trips together.

It appears that each experience in his new country gives Mohammed more confidence. Like most seventh graders he hopes to be accepted, but unlike most seventh graders he has seen violence, sickness, death, and daily struggle in his homeland.

What does he miss the most, other than his family and friends in Afghanistan? “Sleeping outdoors under the stars, which most Afghan families do on their roof tops during the warmer months,” said Chris Wilson.

Though we don’t know the results of the school election yet, “Every new adventure propels him to more confidence and smiles,” said Linda.

From the Director's Desk

With regret, Project Life has decided not to sponsor new orphans for the summer of 2017. It was already very difficult to obtain visas for international children. We think in the current political climate it might be impossible. We hope this is only a brief pause while we determine how to move forward in helping young victims of war and civil conflict. We appreciate your continued support of our program, and especially of Mohammad's needs.

--Linda Redfield, Director and Deborah Wilson, Deputy Director

Two boys recount experience of the 2006 Asian Tsunami

(From our 2006 Archives: Interview with orphans who survived the tsunami, by David E. Bell)

The tsunami came at 9:55 a.m. (The boys) say that when there is a fair sized storm, the sea laps at their home. That's how close their houses are built to the coast.

One of the boys said his mother ran along the coast saying "The sea is coming, the sea is coming!" His father grabbed him and put him in a boat...the boat went into the water...(the boy) got out.

When he was floating, a man tied himself to a rope, and then tied himself to a tree, and then grabbed onto the boy. He didn't know the man, and the man didn't know him...The man was just hanging off the tree, (and) grabbed his leg.

Meanwhile his father took his younger brother, the five year old, and swam into the water...as the water was receding, his father kept trying to stay afloat, with the five year old in his arms.

His mother grabbed his sister...her hair got caught on the fence...she got stuck there with the three year old in her arms...and she went under water. (Later) they took her to the hospital, but the ones who drank the water became poisoned.

So, all of these people are dying...they have turned purple...and they have declared them dead. At the time, looters came and took all of their possessions.

The other boy says he ran away from the sea...to the main road...they could see the sea coming, so they ran.

(One of the boy's) house is completely gone, and the other boy's house, there are some walls remaining.

Everyone who went into the sea was recovered...they came washed back. Everyone was accounted for...everyone who died and didn't die. Both boys lost a mother or sister each. And one also lost a grandmother.

The whole thing lasted only five minutes, hanging dangling for five minutes...gazing toward the sea.



Moulana Naseer, who helped select orphans, with Safan, Khalif, Irshad, and Waterport volunteer Bilal Huzair in Nilaveli, Sri Lanka 2017

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Support Mohammad and other war orphans.

Contribute by mail or give online. Please help!

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