

Four-Year-Old Palestinian Child Severely Burned in Settler Attack

By Lisa Barley

Narimann Bilal Farrah, a four-year-old Palestinian girl from the Old City of Jerusalem, was injured on Aug. 11, 1990 when, reportedly, Israeli settlers threw a flammable object into her car while her father went to buy cigarettes. This event occurred one day after two Jews were found stabbed to death near Beit Hanina in a drug-related incident, leading to anti-Arab riots in the occupied territories and Israel.

The young Palestinian girl sustained burns over 60 percent of her body and suffered greatly due to the lack of a Palestinian burn unit. After learning that Narimann continued to suffer from her injuries, Steve Sosebee, an American freelance writer originally from Ohio, who covers the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for *The Washington Report* and other publications, began organizing treatment for Narimann in the United States.

Narimann is not the first Palestinian child Sosebee has brought to the US for medical treatment. Last year, he brought Mansour and Sabah Abu Sneineh to the Crystal Clinic and Yanke Bionics in Ohio. The brother and sister were gravely injured when an Israeli soldier threw an anti-tank grenade at their family near their home in Hebron. Mansour lost both his legs, his right arm and his eye, and Sabah suffered compound fractures in both legs (see "Two Injured Palestinian Children Undergo Medical Treatment in Ohio" in the December 1990 *Washington Report*).

Encouraged by the support the two children received from the Palestinian community in the United States, Sosebee approached Victor Maria of the Space Center Rotary Club in Houston, Texas, who, after reading of Sosebee's work with Mansour and Sabah, had contacted him and offered to help Palestinian kids needing burn treatment.

Through a program started by Dr. Abdel Fustok, a respected plastic surgeon from St. John Hospital, Raymond Khoury, the administrator of St. Joseph Hospital, and Charles Hartman from the Space Center Rotary Club, Maria and Sosebee arranged for Narimann to travel to Texas for treatment.

Dr. Fustok says that St. John Hospital and the Space Center Rotary Club have collaborated to provide reconstructive surgery for burned children from several different

countries. Fifteen children from Mexico alone have received reconstructive surgery after suffering burns.

The program is "targeted toward treating children whose families cannot afford the reconstructive surgery, and who cannot be treated in their own countries," says Charles Hartman. "The Rotary Club's goal is to help children all over the world to have a life like other kids," he explained.



Narimann Bilal Farrah

Gary Stremel, the administrator of St. John Hospital, also played a key role in coordinating Narimann's treatment. "The Rotary International committee composed of local Rotary Club members meets monthly, and they accept applications from different potential cases from developing countries or countries that are war-torn," he said.

"All are participants on the team," Stremel explained. "The Rotary Club arranges the logistics and housing, the Hospital covers the hospital stay, and the doctors and staff provide their medical services free of charge."

Commenting on Narimann's case, Dr. Fustok, who is of Syrian descent, said: "I feel we are so fortunate in this country. People are suffering back home and anything we

can do to alleviate the suffering must be done."

On April 8, 1991, Dr. Fustok performed reconstructive surgery on Narimann, while other physicians, nurses, radiologists, and lab technicians at St. John assisted. After Narimann was burned, she developed "scar contraction" in her right armpit, wrist and hand area. The contracting of the skin "inhibited her shoulder and wrist motion," Dr. Fustok says, adding that "the skin was so badly contracted on her right hand that it was deforming the knuckles."

In Palestine, Narimann couldn't close her hand. During the surgery, Dr. Fustok removed scar tissue from under Narimann's right arm and wrist area. Skin was then grafted from her abdomen and placed on the arm. Her fingers were also cut and skin was grafted into them and then the fingers were stitched closed.

"She Was All Smiles"

After Narimann's surgery was completed, the sisters and nurses at St. John Hospital gave her round-the-clock attention and brought her toys. Victor Maria reports that after Narimann came home from the hospital, "we took her with her father to the Rotary Club and she was all smiles. She wanted to grab every finger of each Rotary member to show them how she was able to move her hand."

Dr. Fustok decided Narimann should return to Texas in two years when her body is more developed so that he can do more reconstructive surgery on her face and continue treatment on her arms. "I would like to work with her until she feels comfortable with herself," he stated.

Another individual of great help to Narimann was Gregory Clariday, an ophthalmologist at St. John Hospital. One of Clariday's assistants examined both of Narimann's eyes and concluded that the right eye was more scarred than the left, and that the scarring occurred below the vision path. Clariday concluded himself that the scarring in both eyes would not interfere with her vision, but that he, too, would like to re-examine her vision in two years.

Unfortunately, after Narimann's reconstructive surgery and eye examination were completed, she encountered other complications. Maria's wife, Norma, noticed that every time she brushed Narimann's teeth the girl would cry. They then arranged for Narimann to see a children's dentist, David Taylor, also a member of the Rotary Club. Taylor found extensive dental problems and removed three molars, and capped three more, all free of charge. Taylor's treatment

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of Narimann was special, says Maria. "He really knew how to handle her. He was always very gentle and explained everything fully." Taylor will examine her again when she returns to Texas in two years.

Dr. Fustok said that usually children who have been burned have "an antagonistic or angry personality." Narimann, however, was a unique little girl "who did not cut herself off from the world after this tragic event, but who was very smart, and who has a positive outlook and an open mind." He emphasized that her "type of personality is rare to find after someone has been burned so badly."

Victor Maria agrees, saying that "for all she has been through, she really has a positive outlook. Sometimes things are hard to coordinate, but what makes it all worthwhile is seeing the children's faces after their treatment. You can see in their faces that they like themselves better, because others react more naturally to them."

Many members of the Arab-American community of Houston also welcomed Narimann into their homes, assisted in transporting her to appointments and made hospital visits to make the girl and father feel welcome.

Helping More Palestinian Children in Need

Narimann's story is an illustration of the deep commitment of American individuals and Arab-American communities to help children in time of need. As for Sosebee, he has recently established the Palestine Children's Relief Fund to help more injured Palestinian children who need to come to the US for treatment.

"The collective commitment and support by the Arab community in the United States helps to boost the badly damaged morale of the Palestinians, by showing that people outside Palestine do care," Sosebee commented. "It's important that the Palestinians know that, given the opportunity to help, many Americans do truly feel for the bleeding of the Palestinian nation."

Individuals willing to assist Sosebee in arranging help for Palestinian children in urgent need of US treatment can reach him at PO Box 7000-178, Redondo Beach, CA 90277, (216) 945-7630.

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