

# **An Iraqi girl travels to Clifton for life-changing surgery**

By **BETSY QUERNA HERALD NEWS**

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The mood is tense. Zainab Jabbar, an 11-year old with severe scoliosis, a debilitating curvature of the spine, lies in a stretcher just minutes away from life-changing surgery.

Her mother, Azhar, sits next to her, as she has for weeks, ever since Zainab entered St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson. She sits stiffly, her face raw with tears. Sometimes she leans in to her daughter to comfort the girl, and likely herself. It's hard for Azhar to relax. She has waited more than a decade and brought her daughter here from their home in Baghdad for this operation.

Zainab's father calls their cellphone from Iraq. He tells his daughter that he is too nervous to eat. She tells him not to worry, that Mom will cook for them all when they come home.

Zainab's mischievous personality is all that lightens the mood. When she wins a hand of Uno, the card game, she smiles and points under her bed sheets, saying, "I got cards over here."

Born with severe scoliosis, Zainab leans severely to her left side. Her shoulders are lopsided and, on an X-ray, her spine looks like a meandering river winding up her back. She tires easily and can walk only short distances because her spine curves into her right lung, impeding her breathing. Without surgery, she likely would have lost function in her legs, doctors at St. Joseph's say.

"We do a lot of scoliosis surgeries, and this is definitely (one of) the most complex we've had," says Dr. Arash Emami, an orthopedic surgeon. The curvature of Zainab's spine is unusually high, he says, extending to the base of her skull. She also had a bone ridge, splitting her spinal cord in two. Babies born in the United States with a deformity this severe would likely undergo surgery in the first weeks of life, says Dr. Richard Anderson, a neurosurgeon at St. Joseph's.

Once, Iraq may have offered such surgery, Azhar says through a translator. But international sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait led to deterioration of the country's medical system. Then, in 2003, the war began and doctors -- who had offered hope as Zainab was growing up -- told her parents that help would not come from inside the country. "Before the war (the hospital system) wasn't good," says Azhar through a translator. "Now it's completely nothing."

Day-to-day living in Iraq presented 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 Abdeljaber, 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 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 examination. 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 several 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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