

Facing a brighter future

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His right eyelid droops over the hole where his eye once was. The skin below is creased with scars and deeply sunken from the hollow created by his pulverized cheekbones.

And flesh from his forehead was used to fill in a chunk of his nose that had been blown off.

The damage to the right side of Uday's face - caused by gunfire from Saddam Hussein loyalists - has left the Iraqi horribly disfigured.

He was ambushed and shot because he worked as a translator for the U.S. Army in Baghdad, but soon Uday may look close to his old self.

The 47-year-old married father will undergo three reconstructive surgeries performed by two Garden City plastic surgeons.

"This is a story ... about good people who do the right thing to help a brave man get a second chance in life," said Michael Dowling, president of North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset, where the procedures will be done at no cost.

Uday - whose last name the Pentagon has kept confidential to protect his wife and four children in Iraq - volunteered to work for American forces shortly after they landed in Baghdad.

"He did marvelous work for us," said U.S. Army Reserve Major Kate Vanauken.

But one day in May 2003, Uday was asked by troops with the 101st Airborne Division to make a detour on his way into the "forward support" base.

"The soldiers were complaining that they needed some soda pop. He said he would get some," the major said. "That's the kind of guy he is."

After picking up the case of soda in downtown Baghdad, Uday was ambushed by three gunmen armed with Kalashnikov rifles.

"They ask me, 'Why you help the American army. They came to destroy Iraq.' I told them 'No. They came to help us. And I like to help them,'" Uday recalled.

An assailant pointed a gun at his head and fired. The bullet pierced his right forearm, which Uday had raised to shield his head, and shattered its bones before it tore out his eye and crushed the bones in his cheeks.

After being treated at a mobile combat hospital, Uday was transferred to a hospital in Kuwait where he was housed with children being treated for missing limbs and other war-related injuries.

Despite his own severe injuries, Uday translated for the young victims so that the U.S. military could locate their families in Iraq, Vanauken said.

It was at the Kuwait hospital where Uday met Elissa Montanti, the Staten Island woman who would change his life.

Montanti runs Global Medical Relief Fund, an organization that helps children from war-torn regions get prosthetic limbs and other medical needs.

"When I met Uday and learned about his story, I said, 'Unfortunately, I help children but somehow, some way I will find you help,'" she said.

And eventually she did. After meeting Dr. Thomas Davenport at a benefit concert, she recruited him and his colleague, Dr. Kaveh Alizadeh, to perform the much-needed surgery on Uday.

Though he had already undergone eight surgeries in Kuwait, Uday still faces 15 hours of additional surgery.

"He has massive soft tissue and bone loss to the right side of his face," Alizadeh said.

Uday said after the last of his surgeries next month, he hopes to stay in the U.S. and have his family brought here as well.

"I love America. I love all the people here," he said. "I found them good people and very nice people."