
Local surgeons helping Iraqi who helped U.S.

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The right side of Uday's face is shattered. There's a hole where his cheekbone used to be and his eye is gone. His nose is crooked and bloated.

Uday nearly lost his life because, he said, he helped U.S. troops in the early days of the Iraq war.

Now the Baghdad native is in New York awaiting the second of three operations to rebuild his face. If all goes well, Uday could receive a prosthetic eye when the last surgery is completed early next year. And if Uday's fondest hopes are realized, his wife and four children will join him in the United States.

"My family wants to see my face after the surgery," Uday, 47, said.

The effort by two Garden City plastic surgeons to repair his broken visage completes a three-year odyssey for Uday, who wins friends with a gentle demeanor in stark contrast to the upheaval in his native land.

Because his family remains in Baghdad, where sectarian violence has led to hundreds of deaths in recent weeks, Newsday agreed to withhold Uday's last name.

Before the war, Uday, a Shia Muslim, was a mechanical supervisor for the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. When U.S. troops stormed the capital in April 2003, Uday, who speaks choppy but passable English, was hired as an Arab linguist by the Army's 626th Forward Support Battalion, 101st Airborne. He was kept on when that unit was replaced by the 407th Forward Support Battalion, 82nd Airborne. "I believe they came to help us," Uday said. "So I wanted to help them."

On May 12, Uday said, he was returning to a base in south-central Baghdad after picking up soda and ice for the troops when he was approached by two or three men. He did not know them but believed they were supporters of Saddam Hussein.

"They waiting for me," Uday said. "They stopped me and ask, 'Why you work with them? Why you help them?'"

"They shoot. ... They hurt anybody who help [Americans] like that."

Col. Jeffrey Douville, then a lieutenant colonel with the 407th Forward

Support Battalion, said Uday was "car-jacked" around midday. "Our soldiers heard the gunfire, saw the commotion and provided immediate aid," Douville, 43, said. The attackers ran off before they could be caught. They left Uday to die.

"He was shot in the face point-blank and required extensive, immediate medical and life support," said Douville, now attending the Army War College in Carlisle, Pa. "Our medics and treatment professionals performed initial treatment to save his life and then we evacuated him to the next level of Army medical care, where initial surgery was performed."

Uday said he woke up in a Kuwait hospital five or six days after the attack. The right side of his face was blown away. His left arm had been disfigured by bullets when he lifted his arm to protect himself.

He remained in Kuwait for seven months, enduring 14 surgeries on his arm and face. Uday returned to Baghdad but after three months returned to Kuwait for more treatment. There he met Elissa Montanti, founder of Staten Island-based Global Medical Relief Fund.

"She told me she would try to help me make surgery which I need," Uday said.

Searching for help

Montanti said she met Uday in May 2004 while searching for children in need of surgery.

"I went to the hospital and met Uday, and I was just totally ... overwhelmed," Montanti, 49, said. "He nearly gave his life for our country."

When she returned to the United States, Montanti said, she spoke to doctors who wanted to help but couldn't get clearance from their hospitals. Her fortunes turned in January of this year when she met plastic surgeon Thomas Davenport at a charity event. Davenport approached Michael Dowling, chief executive and president of North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, who said green-lighting the surgery was "an absolute no-brainer."

"Here's a guy who put his life on the line and his family's life on the line to help U.S. troops," Dowling said. "There are times when you do what's right, and this is one of them."

Montanti, her sister and a friend raised about \$1,700 to cover Uday's travel costs and other expenses. Uday arrived in the United States on Sept. 17 and is living at Mount Manresa, a Jesuit retreat on Staten Island.

On Oct. 27, Davenport and Dr. Kaveh Alizadeh, partners at Long Island Plastic Surgical Group in Garden City, implanted a "tissue expander," essentially a balloon that puffs up the right side of Uday's face, causing the overlying skin to grow. Subsequent surgeries next month and in January will involve stretching the new skin to rebuild Uday's face,

Alizadeh said.

Uday's prognosis is good, Alizadeh said. "Once you lose the tissue on your face, it can never be perfect," he said. "When he [Uday] sits there with you, he's self-conscious. We want him to not feel self-conscious."

The doctors are not charging Uday a fee. The surgeries normally cost \$100,000, Alizadeh said.

'Better than before'

On a recent visit to Alizadeh's office, Uday was unfailingly polite, perpetually cheerful -- and studiously apolitical. He was circumspect when asked if Hussein's Nov. 5 conviction for crimes against humanity would help or hurt Iraq.

"I don't know about that," he said. "Maybe it will help. Maybe it don't."

His assessment of Iraq's future seems contradictory. His wife and children endure daily hardship in Baghdad -- "They're afraid," he said, "their lives are not normal" -- yet he exudes the optimism of people who survived a dictatorship and can find reasons for hope.

"It's better than before," he said.

He wants to remain in the United States and hopes to be joined by his family. Between medical appointments, Uday said he visits fellow Iraqis he's met since arriving in New York. It's a long way from Baghdad, where his injuries prevented him from going outside.

"When I was there ... I'm feeling that it's very difficult. Difficult every day. Difficult life, yes," Uday said. "Now here I'm feeling peace."

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