

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Medical Mystery. 8-year-old boy from Lebanon survives rare disease against all odds, and looks for hope and solutions from American doctors. ALO Cultural Foundation coordinates massive effort on behalf of Hussein Balhas.

It is the year 2000 in Lebanon, and a young mother searches for a doctor to deliver her baby. The first one turns her away after examining the x-ray. Another recommends termination, but the parents cannot bring themselves to end a nine-month pregnancy. They have no money for a C-section, and tiny Hussein Balhas is born with overwhelming congenital defects including a left eye completely covered with skin and a right one incapable of fully closing. Doctors perform hasty operations to correct the critical malformations, but so much more is needed. The child is left with little chance of survival.

Miraculously, he does survive. And eight years later, Hussein Balhas is a bright, spirited child with dreams of a better future. "His one wish is to look normal and see the world the way everyone sees it," said Wafa Kanan, president of the marketing agency Unique Image Inc. and founder of the ALO Cultural Foundation (ACF). Kanan learned of Hussein's struggle while distributing hearing aids in Beirut following the 2006 conflict in Lebanon. Moved by the boy's determined spirit, she recommended that ACF take up his cause.

After nearly two years of planning, Hussein arrived at Los Angeles International Airport in September to a Hollywood welcome with television cameras and a greeting from LA Lakers legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. His visa afforded him six months to find answers. Kanan and ACF, with assistance from Caroline Shrednick of Tranquility Respite Care LLC., have lined up a team of the best physicians to examine the boy, including leading reconstructive surgeons Dr. Guy Massry, Dr. Babak Azzizadeh, clinical professor of ophthalmology Dr. John Shammas, plastic surgeon Dr. Paul Nassif, Dr. Joseph L. Demer of the Jules Stein Eye Institute, and Dr. Stephen E. Haddad of Ocular Prosthetics, Inc.

Most of the evaluating doctors now believe that Hussein suffers from Fraser's Syndrome, a rare disease that typically results in tumors, mutations, webbing of extremities and near certain death before age five. "He has survived the critical phase," said Michael Lloyd, an officer on the ACF Board of Directors. "Now he is here to fix everything that went wrong, or at least everything possible. And we won't rest until he has received all the medical treatment he deserves."

The evaluating doctors so far see no way to resuscitate Hussein's left eye. Even the most ambitious operations will not restore vision, nor even make this eye look normal. The best known hope lies in prosthetics, but even this will require unprecedented innovation. ACF has engaged the staff at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in conjunction with the International Children's Surgery Fund, directed by Greg Fontana MD, to correct Hussein's other medical problems: hearing difficulties, syndactyly (fused digits), hypospadias, agenesis of one kidney and incomplete closure of the skull. A number of procedures and operations have been scheduled.

The ALO Cultural Foundation is dedicated to building stronger healthier communities through social investment, community outreach and education programs focusing on cultural exchange, women's empowerment, and youth mentoring programs, and other forms of philanthropy.

First his story must be told.

Hussein asks: "Why did God make me this way?" His case is one-in-a-million, but his question challenges all of us. We have the power to make a difference in this young man's life. How can we turn away from a boy who has miraculously survived death and wants nothing more than a semblance of normal life?

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