

# Faces of Peace

## Saving a War-Torn Childhood

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### Teens transformed by work with needy young orphans

*Albion, N.Y. teens Lydia and Gretta share thoughts after their Project Life summer:*

**Words cannot explain** how much the Project Life kids changed my life. From the moment I met the orphans I knew that I was going to remember this particular summer for a long time. Each child taught me something different. They taught me much more than I taught them. The kids helped me to appreciate everything I have in my life.

These children each came here burdened with something, something that had caused them to lose the joy of their childhood. Every summer day when I woke up, my goal was to make the orphans smile.

From the very first moment Magomed grabbed my hand and held it for the entire day I knew that I was a part of something so incredibly special. I grew especially close to him.

It was so tough to see the kids go. I never want to live that day again. Watching them walk onto the plane and fly away left me with a feeling of emptiness. On some days since the kids left, I swear I hear the little voice of Magomed calling my name. It breaks my heart to think that maybe he misses me just as much as I miss him. One day I hope I get to see him again, all grown up. --*Lydia*

**At first I was very nervous** to work with the kids and wasn't so sure how it would go. Actually I didn't know they spoke only Russian until I was in the car on the way to meet them. I

figured I would just volunteer two or three times and be done with it as we wouldn't be able to communicate in English.

Even though we don't speak the same language the kids have taught me so much about myself and my life. I have learned not to take anything for granted and to appreciate everything I am given. I have learned to not stress over the small things. I learned this because the kids aren't even teenagers yet and they have gone through more than I may ever have to. I look at the kids with admiration for how strong they are.

Project Life took up a lot of my time, but just seeing the kids smile and having the time of their lives made every minute worth it. These kids mean so much to me; words can't describe how being with them has worked in me. Though we may never see each other again, we have memories to last forever. I feel so blessed to have been part of it. The orphans have changed my life like I never imagined. --*Gretta*



### *Program plans for new season*

Project Life's directors have set their sights on renewing the Afghan program for 2012. It's been a few years since we've been able to bring new orphans from that part of the world. We're hopeful that several impoverished children who have lost their families in the long-term conflict in Afghanistan will have the chance to visit western New York for three months, along with orphans of the Russian Caucasus region.

## Generous friends of summer 2011



Jerry Samet and Youth Leaders International visited county fair in Washington D.C. area.



Art therapist Dena Adler took a trip with orphans to Rochester Museum and Science Center.

### *Afghan orphan set to finish high school, aims to be engineer*

Afghan orphan Sabir is striving to follow his deceased father's footsteps and become an engineer. He plans to start the process by attending Monroe Community College in Rochester next fall. After that he hopes to attend the University of Rochester.

Host mom Stella Gresham tells us that "Sabir spent 24 hours at UR's Engineering Open House in November. He had a wonderful time!" Stella said that "Sabir is also interested in engineering schools at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the University of Buffalo."

Sabir and his sister Fauzia came to Project Life in 2004. Because Sabir suffers from severe hemophilia the two have remained in the U.S. on a long-term basis under the guardianship of Stella and husband Idris Salih of Waterport, N.Y.

Sabir is set to graduate from high school in June 2012 and Fauzia is an honor student in Grade 10 at Lyndonville Central School.

As Sabir still does not have permanent residency in the United States he will be treated as a foreign student at whatever college he chooses. This means he will face much higher tuition fees than residents, despite the fact that he has spent most of the last 8 years in western New York. Sabir may not be eligible for student

aid and will require private sponsorship of his expenses.

The family has already been waiting four years for the orphans' application for permanent residency to be granted. They are hoping that these issues will be resolved very soon.

Sabir arrived here very ill in July 2004 and spent his first few months in Buffalo Children's Hospital under the care of the Hemophilia Center of Western New York. He had never received treatment for his condition back home.

Project Director Linda Redfield says that "Sabir has turned his experience around to helping new orphans that come to our program. His attitude helps orphans from around the world feel more comfortable. He has become a leader who understands endurance, patience, and how to rise to meet the physical, emotional, cultural, linguistic and academic challenges of being in a new environment with Project Life. He is also a good friend and teammate at school, where he enjoys soccer, basketball, and track."



## Bighearted D.C. group gives grand welcome to orphans

Special thanks go to Washington based volunteer Natkai Akbar and her neighbors and friends for giving the orphans two days of marvelous activities in the nation's capital. Natkai's group injected new excitement into Project Life with their generosity, enthusiasm and selfless spirit!

Natkai moved to the U.S. from Afghanistan when she was a child, and is currently a graduate student. Her background gives her a special interest in war orphans. She joined Project Life several times during D.C. area picnics and canoe rides in previous years.

But in summer 2011 she took her interest to a whole new level. Natkai and her neighbors and friends washed so many cars that they were able to fully sponsor two fun-filled days for the Project Life visitors.

The first day, the group invited Project Life to join them at the Washington National Aquarium for an enjoyable two hour tour. After this the group was treated to lunch at the nearby Ronald Reagan building. And that wasn't all! Somehow Natkai's group had managed to conceal the fact that they were carrying backpacks which they

presented to the orphans, chock full of toys, school supplies, and personal items.

The next day everyone traveled to Virginia and spent the full day at a water park. Again lunch, snacks and bags of goodies were provided. The group spent a lovely day along with Natkai, her friends and some relatives too.



Natkai Akbar, far right middle row, along with friends and neighbors at water park with Project Life orphans and volunteers summer 2012

### **PROJECT LIFE WAR ORPHANS**

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**WHOM DO WE SERVE?** Orphaned children of war and civil conflict. Children are 9 to 12-year-olds with high socio-economic, psychological, and emotional needs. All children live with family members in their home countries. We do not select children from orphanages or seek permanent fostering or adoption for them in the United States.

**WHY?** We aim to provide peace and support for each child's rest and recuperation from trauma. Our program improves physical and psychological health, builds trust and confidence, and inspires new hope.

**HOW?** A three-month program of education, recreation and health care, along with hosting by volunteer American families in the western New York region. All children return to their families overseas at the completion of the program period.

**FUNDING:** Entirely from private donations. Please help! Cost per child is about \$4,000.

## *Families of returned orphans remark on changes*

*Project Director Linda Redfield Shakoor helped by interpreters Madina Martazanova and Adam Lieberman talked to the children's families in Chechnya and Ingushetia four months after they left the U.S. in September 2011.*

**Inga:** Orphan Inga's brother died last summer while she was in America. Inga's mother did not want her daughter to receive this devastating news while she was thousands of miles away from home. Months later, Inga's mother told us that when Inga arrived home so happy and chubby, and then when she shared her pictures and stories from Project Life, it helped the family heal from their loss. It gave them all new hope.

**Bilal:** Nine-year-old Bilal was always sick and suffering from asthma before coming to America. His mother reports that he is now healthy and more grounded than before. He is much more serious about school.

**Magomed:** In a very touching conversation with hosts Sharon and Matt Sugar and family Magomed shared long awaited "I miss you's" and "I love you's". He invited the Sugar family to visit him, saying poetically, "Come here as fast as you can, then spring will come faster."

Magomed's mother has noticed big changes since he came home. She said his whole perception and understanding of life have changed. He is never bored or upset and has a calming influence on her.

Magomed speaks warmly about his experiences. She feels that when a child has a chance to be healthier and have happy experiences it will never leave him.

**Rada:** We didn't manage to speak to her. Check website for updates!



What the families back home are saying about us:

*From Director's trip diary*

"Project Life families didn't forget us--that is the best thing. We are still in your hearts and that is a nice thing for us. The program helps our nations to know one other and to help each other. It did so much for women's hearts as all the children's fathers had died or are still missing."

"There is a life before America and after America. The children are different when they come home. They are more outgoing, more serious

about their studies and make friends more easily. They are never bored or unhappy. Now they have hope."

"When my husband died I had 4 children to look after. I had long hours to work and could never pay attention to my youngest son who needed me so much. Project Life did for him what I dreamed of. Now he is interested in life again and is succeeding in school. I could never have accomplished this.

"After the war she never went out of the house except for school. Now she's like another person and has many friends. She's always happy."

### **Community Support**

Below, Carlton Methodist committee helped kids make fleece blankets, and Grace Kent of Swan Library inspired them to love reading

