

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

INTERNATIONAL: Israeli humanitarian group saves Gazan boy

Save a Child's Heart has strong links to McGill student organizations

By: James Gilman

Posted: 2/3/09

A child related to a powerful Hamas leader killed by Israel during the recent Gaza conflict underwent life-saving surgery this past weekend at the Wolfson Medical Centre near Tel Aviv.

The six-year-old boy, Abdullah Siam, was brought to Israel last Tuesday for heart surgery by the humanitarian project Save a Child's Heart, which has a chapter at McGill. He is a relative of Said Siam, who was a top Hamas figure often described as the group's interior minister before he was killed on January 15 in an Israeli airstrike. Siam was believed to have been a crucial player in Hamas' 2007 violent takeover of Gaza, when it ousted its secular rival party Fatah.

"Six-year-old Abdullah Siam was operated on Thursday, January 29, 2009—the operation was very successful," said Dr. Lior Sasson, director of the Cardiothoracic Department and head of the Pediatric Cardiac Surgery Unit at Wolfson. "Abdullah recovered very quickly. He is now feeling better and smiling; he is out of the Pediatric Emergency Intensive Care, and is now in the Children's Ward."

Save a Child's Heart was founded in 1995, aiming to improve pediatric cardiac care for children from developing countries and conflict zones. Shirlee Harel, the organisation's youth leadership director, came to McGill last week as part of a campus tour visiting a number of schools in Canada and the United States. Harel, a McGill alumna (B.Ed. '05), explained Save a Child's Heart objectives.

"We bring children from developing countries to do heart surgery for them in Israel," she said. "And we do medical missions to train doctors and nurses, so that these countries can eventually become independent on their own."

The organization has treated more than 2,000 children since its inception, almost half of whom have been Palestinian children.

"We have a ... clinic on Tuesdays where children come from Gaza and the West Bank for a free clinic at the Wolfson Medical Center," Harel said. "There have been children coming to that clinic throughout all the hardest times in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even during the intifada, and continued through the [recent Gaza] conflict."

Although it is usually impossible for Palestinians from Gaza to cross into Israel, there are some exceptions for patients with serious medical conditions who need sophisticated treatment. The child's relationship to Siam was unknown when he was first brought in for treatment.

McGill's Save a Child's Heart club was founded last year by U2 physiology student Alexis Steinberg. Although young, the club has put on a number of events to raise money for the charity and has an ambitious goal of raising \$10,000 dollars by the end of next year, and impressed Harel while she was here.

"I've been really proud of McGill as a McGill alumni [sic], and really just impressed with all of the amazing work that they're doing," she said, referring to both the Save a Child's Heart club and to Hillel McGill, which she said has been very supportive of them.

Steinberg, who first found out about Save a Child's Heart on a group tour to Israel, said she thought that the organization's work during the Gaza conflict was great.

"One of the things that I love about the organisation is that they take kids from all races and ethnicities and don't discriminate," Steinberg said.

"Our job, as doctors and as a charity, is to help anyone who needs help and make sure the children return home healthy," Sasson said. "We save the lives of children regardless of their origin, religion, colour of the skin or financial situation. If the side effect of this is narrowing the gaps between the people and making this world a better place, then this is great. "

© Copyright 2009 The McGill Tribune