

Gaza MD lost 3 children to violence, but preaches peace

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Izzeldin Abuelaish holds his son Abdallah in a car near their home in Jebaliya Jan. 21, 2009. He was able to escape Gaza with what remained of his family after Israeli tank shells ripped through his house and killed three of his daughters.

BEN CURTIS/AP FILE PHOTO

Toronto is many different things to many different people, but there is at least one thing this city most certainly is not. It is not Gaza.

And that, right now, is a source of immense relief and deeply rooted pleasure for Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish and what remains of his family.

"I am happy, but what makes me happiest is to see my children happy," says the Palestinian gynecologist as he presides over his brood in the handsomely appointed living room of the spacious, three-storey North Toronto house that is now their home.

"I want to be in a place where my children are happy."

At least for now, and at least for this one family, Toronto fits that bill perfectly, trumping Gaza on the happiness scale hands down.

It is the end of another school day, and the 54-year-old doctor's five surviving children are either studying in their bedrooms upstairs or huddled on a living-room sofa, attending to their father as he reflects on the events of the past year.

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It is a year that began with much sound, more fury and an appalling surfeit of death.

Three of Abuelaish's children – who once numbered eight – were among the fallen.

In January, during the final hours of Israel's three-week war in Gaza, a pair of Israeli tank shells blasted through a bedroom on the third floor of the Abuelaish home in Jebaliya, north of Gaza City.

Never fully explained, the strike ended the lives of three of Abuelaish's daughters – Bisan, 20, Mayar, 15, and Aya, 13. The shells also killed their cousin, Nour, 14, and badly injured another sister, Shatha, then 16, as well as another cousin, Ghaida, 13.

Abuelaish's wife, Nadia, was not obliged to endure the misery of that day. She had lost a battle with leukemia four months earlier.

Over glasses of fruit juice and demitasses of Arabic coffee, Abuelaish recounts the events of that terrible afternoon, but he also encourages his remaining children to describe their memories.

Daughter Rafah recalls she was alone in the kitchen of the family's Gaza home, making herself a sandwich, when the first missile struck.

Using the sofa and a chair, she demonstrates how she squeezed between the freezer and the refrigerator for protection and remained there until the smoke cleared.

Later, she stumbled upon her cousin, Ghaida.

"Her leg, it was exploded," she says.

Ten years old and clad now in a pair of bright red pyjamas, Rafah acts out the scene, flopping onto her back on the couch and lying perfectly still, as if on the brink of death. "Consider me Ghaida."

Distraught and desperate, Abuelaish contacted Israeli TV journalist Shlomi Eldar on his cellphone, and his frenzied pleas for help were broadcast live across Israel on Channel 10 and soon circled the globe via YouTube and other video websites.

In the eyes of much of the world, this carnage, combined with a father's very public anguish, promptly became the central symbols of the three-week Israeli invasion of Gaza, which killed some 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

Eldar was able to arrange clearance into Israel for the doctor and the wounded.

After a frantic journey out of Gaza, the party found themselves at the Sheba Medical Center near Tel Aviv, where the injured girls received medical treatment of the highest

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quality and where the paradoxes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, never scarce, seemed only to multiply.

Here, after all, were two innocent Palestinian victims of Israeli firepower undergoing treatment for their wounds in one of Israel's finest hospitals, while Abuelaish preached a fervent message of peace – a message he continues to communicate.

He stubbornly refuses to submit to the anger he surely must feel.

"This anger is not leading anywhere. I don't want any bad feeling to control me and dominate."

Instead, taking advantage of the notoriety that has inevitably come his way, Abuelaish continues to promote peace to Jews, Arabs and anyone who will listen – as many seem eager to do.

Public-speaking engagements crop up several times a week, and he is under contract with Random House of Canada to write a book about his experiences and the Middle Eastern conflict, which has shaped so much of his life.

Before the deaths of his daughters 10 months ago, Abuelaish had received an offer of a teaching and research post at the University of Toronto, and it was while he hunkered down in Gaza during the war that he decided to accept.

The family landed in Toronto on July 22, a day after leaving Gaza.

Now his business cards identify Abuelaish as the Michael and Amira Dan Professor in Global Health at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto.

His contract is good for an initial period of five years and comes with a house, an office, a research assistant and a Chevrolet minivan.

Abuelaish says he intends to lecture graduate students on the intertwined themes of peace and health.

"I am against any violence, from both sides," he says. "I am against violent action, against rockets. I fully believe this is futile."

With a hard-line, security-conscious government in Israel, and with Palestinian leadership split between the inflexible militants of Hamas and a demoralized Fatah, many observers consider the prospects for peace in the Middle East to be near their lowest ebb ever. But Abuelaish is not among them.

"I am optimistic. We must take action to bridge the broken trust."

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He is, however, sharply critical of Israel's refusal to halt illegal settlement activity in East Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank.

Meanwhile, the doctor's three younger children all report delight with their experience in Toronto's public school system. There is little, if any, homework, they say – a major contrast with Gaza – and they love their new friends and teachers.

Abuelaish's two elder daughters, Dalal, 20, and Shatha, now 17, are both attending the University of Toronto – Dalal in civil engineering, Shatha in computer engineering. Shatha has mostly recovered from her injuries in January.

A cyberspace tribute to the three who died can be found at www.daughtersforlife.com.

By one standard of measurement, the Israeli attack that shattered the doctor's world lasted only a matter of seconds. By another, of course, it will never end.

Certainly, Abuelaish is determined to make of his children's deaths something lasting, something good. "I lost three precious daughters, but there are a lot of things I can do in their memory," he says. "I feel a huge responsibility that this tragedy was for good, and it will be for good."

His eyes are glistening as he speaks, and he quickly broadens his attention to include the children he still has. In addition to Dalal, Shasta and Rafah, there is Mohammed, 13, and Abdallah, 7.

"With the people you love, spend as much time as you can," counsels the most famous single father from the Palestinian territories. "Be with them, because these moments will never come back."