



As you step off a train in any crowded city in India, the first thing a newcomer will notice is the amount of beggars: Little children imploring you with husky voices and outstretched hands, pulling at your clothes if you are not moving quickly enough. You see old men and young women, all with misery in their eyes and dirt in their hair. The most destitute are those with a physical handicap—young men with cheap plastic sandals on their hands as well as their feet, crawling in the dirty streets, selling something to earn enough to eat for the night.

Mohammed Yousuf could have been one of those impoverished young men had he not been so blessed. At the age of two and a half, he came down with high fever and, over the course of few days, he became so weak he wasn't able to walk. His frantic parents took him to the doctor who failed to recognize the polio that had gripped the child's body. By the time the polio was diagnosed, the disease had done its damage to Mohammed's upper body and legs, leaving him unable to walk.

In the early days after the polio had left Mohammed, his parents carried him to one doctor after another looking for a cure. Many false promises for a recovery were made to the Yousufs. No one told them that the best course of action would be to focus on rehabilitation for the child rather than wasting time searching for a non-existent cure.

Acknowledging Allah's Grace

➤ **By Kari Ansari**

One disappointment followed another until family, friends and concerned neighbors finally convinced the Yousufs to give up hunting for miracles and to accept that Mohammed would not lead a "normal" life. They counseled the heart-broken couple to give up their dream of an education for the boy, and to plan instead to purchase a grocery store for Mohammed's adulthood.

Mohammed stayed at home crawling on the floor and playing by himself while other children went to school. His description of the loneliness that he suffered as a little boy is hard to write about as one imagines a little boy unable to walk, unable to play with the children outside his window, and unable to attend school. He says he remembers sitting at the window day after day, counting the cars and rickshaws



that drove by as a way to pass the hours. Mohammed was blessed to come from a middle-class family that was able to afford surgery to straighten his legs. He could walk with the aid of leg braces and crutches in mid-childhood. However, the crutches were seldom used because there was nowhere for a handicapped boy to go. His parents arranged for a tutor for home schooling, though it was not to be a consistent education; Mohammed's father was a civil servant and his job caused the family to relocate often. During the early years of his childhood no one considered the possibility of him attending school; everyone in Mohammed's life believed he was destined to live behind the doors of his family home. Everyone, that is, except Mohammed's grandmother, Sara. When Mohammed was twelve she took him and enrolled him in school. He says he was "so shaky and nervous he couldn't even carry his book bag" so Grandmother Sara hired an ayah (helper) for him and he began the second grade at age 12. Because of the sporadic home schooling, he lacked confidence and skills in the beginning. He failed math the first year, but once he could see the world opening up before him—and with his grandmother's encouragement—he began progressing at breakneck speed. He skipped a grade the next year, and from then on and until the tenth grade, he ranked 2nd in his class.

Because of his love for science and math, he was determined to study engineering. After years of success in school, Mohammed was ready to enter college, fulfilling his and his father's dream of becoming an engineer. Again, Mohammed hit a wall of opposition while striving to achieve the same acceptance and success of any able-bodied person. He was refused a seat in the engineering school and was told he'd be better off studying business or commerce. He stood before a panel who denied him a place in the college simply because he was not able to easily hold a test tube. Not willing to accept this verdict for his future, he and his father found another school that would ac-

cept Mohammed upon the condition that the family would cover any costs associated with any equipment damage in the lab due to his physical limitations.

Much to his disappointment, an engineering degree did not result in a career in engineering nor in an independent life for Mohammed in India. He says, "The feeling among the folks then was to see me become a telephone operator or a clerk. I went from pillar to post asking for suitable employment. But it was not there...people felt that I'd not be able to perform the tasks of an engineer because I had a disability."

He says that the disappointment was actually a blessing in disguise since it forced him to look outside India for opportunities. With the aid of organizations such as Faiz-e-Aam Trust, Islamic Development Bank, and Nizams Trust, he was able to secure a seat in a Master's degree program in the United States.

He came to the US in 1990 and received his Master's Degree in computer engineering in 1992. That same year he was able to obtain a driver's license. He says, "...I was able to drive a vehicle fitted with hand controls for the first time. It felt great to be independent: to be able to go wherever I felt like." He found a good position as an electrical engineer with General Motors, and three years later married a girl from India, Humera. As with many traditional arranged marriages, they saw each other face to face only five minutes before becoming husband and wife. It is evident that love grows through mutual respect and kindness as both credit each other for their marital contentment. They now live in Michigan with their three children.

This is a nice story and it could have ended right there. However, Mohammed Yousuf is the kind of man who doesn't forget the grace that was bestowed upon him by the Creator. Only a few years after settling down, Mohammed began to look back to where he had come from, instead of looking forward to where his new life was taking him.

Diseases that westerners look upon as things of the past still afflict many of India's population. Polio, a disease that has been eradicated in the Western world, continues to afflict many of India's children. Just when it looked as though polio would be a thing of India's past, the country has seen an alarming resurgence in the state of Uttar Pradesh this past year, especially among Muslims (see sidebar). Birth injuries are another significant cause of disabilities: Inexperienced midwives and lack of hospital services result in brain injuries that often manifest in conditions such as Cerebral Palsy. Poverty

While there have been no cases of wild polio in the United States for over twenty years, the disease still exists in many countries, including India. After almost completely eradicating polio three years ago, India saw a big surge in new cases last year. As of November 15, 2006, there were 522 cases reported in India as compared to 66 cases in 2005. Health officials worry that the disease will once again spread throughout the country and beyond the borders. The majority of cases are coming from the impoverished state of Uttar Pradesh where the vaccine program has not been successful, especially among the Muslim communities there. According to the World Health Organization, (WHO), the under served Muslim community comprising of 20% of the population, have a disproportionately higher disease burden with 66% of the cases. Some apparent causes are that the area from where the outbreak is coming is under served by government case-workers, thus homes with children have been missed. There is also the issue of mistrust and misinformation among the poor and uneducated Muslim community. Rumors have spread that the oral polio vaccine is really a birth control vaccine designed to wipe out the Muslim population. WHO workers and Indian health officials have been working with the Muslim community leaders and imams to convince the Muslims to allow their children to be vaccinated.



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and serious resource deficits result in a lack of proper therapy and rehabilitative services that leave children less able-bodied than their western counterparts.

It is estimated that over 90 million people have various forms of disabilities in India. The Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995 was implemented to protect India's disabled with a quota system for government posts and other rules such as governing the inclusion of children in public schools. Although the legislation is on the books, now—twelve years later—the situation for the disabled in India does not show much change. While there are some charitable institutions around the country that see the value of integrating the country's mentally and physically challenged individuals with the rest of the population, their efforts are a drop in the ocean. As a rule, India's disabled are either abandoned on the street, or they are cared for behind closed doors in their family homes, as was the case of Mohammed Yousuf in early childhood. The able-bodied society and the disabled part of society seldom mix together in the work place, in the schools, or even on the social scene. Mr. Yousuf says that it is quite typical for families to hide the disabled person away when strangers come to visit the home, particularly when discussing marriage to someone else in the household—a scenario that exemplifies the systemic separation of able-bodied and disabled persons in developing countries. When society does not see the disabled as a viable segment of the population, they are ostracized and suffer needlessly. As with the case of Mohammed Yousuf, employment is usually unattainable—no matter how educated and bright an individual may be—for most people with a disability in India and other developing nations around the world.

Persons with a physical disability have the same desire to succeed in the world. They also have the same need for independence and self-

reliance, and when the populace does not accept them as contributors to society, life can seem hopeless. Quite often, things like a hearing aid or adaptive transportation are all that stand in the way of an education or a job. Simple as these things may be for Americans to obtain, a poor Indian with a disability can only dream of receiving help like this.

Mohammed Yousuf never lost sight of his blessings, and in 2001 he formed HelpHandicap Foundation (HHF). It is a simple but truly effective organization that helps the disabled in India get a helping hand towards independence and dignity. The organization has been working in three avenues: small business initiatives, medical and transportation equipment assistance, and education/tuition assistance.

Imagine that a simple hearing aid costing the equivalent of \$37 is often out of reach for India's poor. HHF is providing this simple equipment and making a tremendous difference in people's lives. Take the example of Mahjabeen. Despite the challenges associated with polio, she received a scholarship for medical school. However, because of her physical impairment, she wasn't able to travel to and from school. HHF stepped in and gave her a mobility-modified scooter that allows her the independence she needs to pursue a medical career at a cost of less than \$900. This small investment will, insha'Allah, allow Mahjabeen to become a healing physician who can improve the lives of countless others.

Because the integration of India's disabled into the workplace is progressing at a snail's pace, Yusuf says HHF's self-employment programs are quite effective. Since finding a job is often impossible for a disabled person in India, HHF can provide a disabled person with whatever is needed to start a small business and the recipient is then able to support him or herself. HHF supplies equipment for small businesses such as sewing machines for tailoring, or telecommunication equipment for a long distance calling booth. The foundation is careful to supply the materials and/or needed equipment instead of cash, thus making sure that the funding is appropriated to its target.

It is estimated that only 1% of the over 90 million of India's disabled receives an education. HelpHandicap Foundation is heavily focused on providing education for some of India's poorest disabled citizens. The average family income of the HHF scholars is around \$33 a month, and these families are usually supporting several children. Tuition for HHF's scholarship programs is paid directly to the educational institution in the student's name.

We met the Yousuf family at the 2006 ISNA convention in Chicago. America's Muslim Family magazine had a booth in the bazaar in the convention hall, and the Yousuf family had the table next to ours. I watched as they told people (folks who were mainly on the hunt for clothing or Islamic media) about their program. The children played around them while Mr. Yousuf stoically stood on leg braces and crutches for hours at a time, telling the story of the foundation he began with the help of other Muslim professionals in Michigan.

He is quick to tell you that HHF is completely a joint effort managed by the board members of the foundation and that his work for the foundation is just a way to express gratitude to Allah for blessing him with a good life, a good wife and beautiful, healthy children. He says his grandmother died just as he was preparing to leave for the United States. She was not able to see him realize the potential in his life that she so clearly believed in. Mohammed and Humera named their daughter, Sara, in her memory.

Allah's grace comes into our lives in different forms and not all of us recognize it, but Mohammed Yousuf has. ■

Learn more about HelpHandicap Foundation at <http://www.helphandicap.org>

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