

## CV team helps Iraqis tackle 'post-war' life

By Colleen Michele Jones

It's been nearly a year and a half since the last U.S. troops were withdrawn from Iraq in December 2011. But "post-war" doesn't seem to be the right term to describe the nation's state of affairs.

Sectarian and insurgent violence persists, and bombings — albeit, fewer than at the height of the conflict — still leave crater-size chasms in buildings, blocks, and whole neighborhoods, and even greater holes in the hearts of victims' loved ones.

Basic necessities like food, clean drinking water, and other supplies are still in short supply as the fledgling Iraqi government fights to maintain authority, create stability, and direct resources to where they are needed most.

In the midst of these struggles, millions of civilians have gone missing, either because their deaths have not been documented or their remains not yet identified by relatives, many of whom regularly come to search a database of photos of the dead kept by the Iraq Missing Campaign, a grassroots organization set up to help families properly grieve their loved ones so that they can move on in their lives.

And then there are the young people of this war-wounded country. Officials estimate there are between 2 million and 3 million orphans in Iraq — and many more children who struggle with trauma-related problems and behaviors similar to those experienced by veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In 2009, The Children's Village (CV) in Dobbs Ferry was asked by the Sponsor Iraqi Children's Foundation and the Iraqi government to impart some of the techniques and approaches they use as a youth and family service agency to mental health professionals working with children in Iraq.

CV previously worked with the International Rescue Committee to help Croatian children victimized by war in the 1990s.

The Enterprise recently spoke with CV representatives, just returned from their fifth, two-week training mission, to learn more about their experience and also how the partnership has changed over these last three years.

The most obvious change is in the country's relative openness. Whereas the group had only been allowed to move about Baghdad's "Green [militarized] zone" on previous trips, this time around the three CV representatives chosen for the mission stayed within the city itself. The fact that they were hosted by the Iraqi Health Aid Organization and shuttled around the city by that group is itself a sign of progress and rebirth.

However, internally, the wounds are still raw, especially among the country's youngest citizens, according to David Collins, CV's director of adoption and foster boarding homes, who has guided the Iraqi/CV initiative.

"There is a lot of very acute depression, self-harm, aggression toward others, drug abuse, sexual exploitation," said Collins. "So all the things we knew were going on — that we heard were going on — we heard firsthand now."

Another difference this time around was that whereas previously CV had only worked with NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), this time representatives from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs attended the trainings. In Iraq, NGOs receive no funding from the government, but Collins said that having them in the room was a good



Barbara Jenkel and Avril Lindsay Dennis of CV (seated lower left) meet with a group of widows and orphans in the offices of the Iraqi Health Aid Organization in Baghdad, which is led by Hala Saraf (seated upper right).

show of support for their efforts.

Avril Lindsay Dennis, director of the crisis residence at CV, who helped lead the trainings with Collins, said that because children are often sent into the streets to beg, the NGOs have begun replacing that income for the families if they will agree to take advantage of the services they are offering.

CV President and CEO Jeremy Kohomban said that since social work is not built into the structure of society in Iraq, this represents an opportunity "where we can help them design a system that works for them — but it's not going to be a template of what we have; they need a system there that is more family-based. ... family bonds are still strong, despite the war."

In Iraqi culture, foster care is almost unheard of — instead, next-of-kin take in children of relatives who are injured or killed. Grassroots-type community centers serve the purpose large, government-funded social service organizations have here, according to Lindsay Dennis.

"I feel like in this visit we really started to have the lay of the land compared with earlier ones, and to offer something that was really aimed at them and their people," said Collins.

Collins explained that CV's agency training director, Beth Enser, had helped tailor a "culturally relevant" curriculum for use by NGO workers in their work with families and children.

Iraq is truly a land in limbo, suspended in a continual state of reaction and transition.

According to Isabelle Stead, director of the Iraq Missing Campaign, "Not knowing the fate of a missing loved one has been classified as a form of torture by international humanitarian laws. Millions of lives in Iraq have been torn apart by this suffering."

And in such cases, healing is much more difficult.

"The opportunity to grieve is often not there when the conflict is going on, or if there is no real resolution, for example, not knowing if a parent is dead or not," added Collins.

Said Lindsay Dennis, "I think the concept of trauma is different there than what we



Dennis and Jenkel pose with Dr. Mohammed, one of several physicians from Iraq who supported the training program as volunteer facilitators.

think of. You're not talking about just multi-generational issues; you're talking about entire communities [that have experienced trauma]."

Even while they were in Baghdad, there was a bombing of the national Ministry of Culture building in another corner of the city.

"And then 10 or 15 minutes later, everyone was just going about their business as if nothing happened," Collins added.

Barbara Jenkel, who volunteers with CV's service dog training program, had been offering to go with the group for the last several years.

When she finally was invited to accompany other staff on this latest trip, Jenkel was most struck by the resilience of the Iraqis she met.

"They are courageous, wonderful people that want the best for their families," said Jenkel, whose husband, Paul, is also the chair of CV's board of trustees, "just as we want the

best for our families."

Lindsay Dennis echoed those thoughts. "The similarities were striking," she said. "Families have the same struggles. There's illness, there's poverty, there's death, there's abuse — these are the kinds of struggles families here go through, too."

All the CV staff involved in the project said they feel honored to help those who are so grateful for that help, and consider it an amazing professional opportunity. It is the practical application of the techniques introduced through these missions that will be the more challenging part, said Collins, who is hopeful that the Iraqi government itself will express interest in joining their efforts.

Kohomban said that CV will continue to serve Iraq in this capacity as long as they are asked.

"Our commitment to this partnership won't change — in fact, it has only grown," said Kohomban, "and we remain deeply committed to the Iraqi people."