

# West Michigan asked to help Karim

FROM LOCAL REPORTS

A fund to help Karim has been established via a local bank.

Funds have been used for airfare for Karim and his mother, for nondonated medical services and supplies, clothing, translation services, food, transportation, and other essential items.

Some money also has been used to better the child's quality of life. International phone cards have been purchased so he can call his father and brother in Lebanon and admission fees for John Ball Park Zoo and Putter's Creek, have come from the fund.

"We are so thankful for all the people who already gave," said Elizabeth Zagar, who brought the child to Muskegon and with her husband, Joe, is caring for him and his mother in her home. "Karim's family is astounded by the generosity of the American people."

Expenses are expected to rise greatly, particularly if a Chicago medical center agrees to create prostheses for his hands as is the hope.

Any money remaining in the fund when the child goes home to Lebanon will be given to the family. It is already known that Karim will need eyedrops every hour and his skin will have to be continually treated with lubricants for the rest of his life to reduce his suffering.

Donations can be sent to any National City Bank, which has nine locations in Muskegon County. Donations may also be sent to Elizabeth Zagar, 422 Westwind, Muskegon, 49445. All donations must be made payable to "Elizabeth Zagar FBO Karim Ahmad" or they cannot be deposited.

Zagar can be reached at (231) 744-8886 or at elizzagar@comcast.net.

Follow Zagar's blog about Karim online at [www.journeywithfriends.blogspot.com](http://www.journeywithfriends.blogspot.com)

## ► KARIM from 1A

the door because it means Karim is calling on the priest's cellular phone. Sometimes they can talk a long time because of international phone cards purchased by the Zagars through donations.

### What's wrong?

Karim was 2 months old when his mother noticed the rash on his abdomen and around his back. She took him to doctors but no one knew what it was.

The rash was eating away Karim's skin and tissue, leaving areas raw and scabbed.

Karim's mother worked more hours cleaning to get more money for more doctors.

But the answer was always the same — no one could explain the mysterious rashes.

The family was told it could be one of three or four skin diseases, all incurable and untreatable. One relative told them to just give the baby away.

The disease slowly has destroyed all of Karim's fingers. It is taking his toes. The bottoms of his feet sometimes look like charred beefsteak.

Then there is the pain. Always pain.

Elfalgahi, who was Liz Zagar's spiritual advisor at an Ava Maria Center in Ann Arbor a few years ago, was assigned to the church in his native Lebanon in 2005, but kept in touch with Zagar via e-mail and an Internet blog.

Elfalgahi wanted to find "the poorest people," and a Red Cross worker directed him to Karim.

He could not get the tiny boy out of his mind.

"I have met Lazarus," he wrote in his blog, referring to the Biblical figure given new life by Christ. "He lies at my gate."

Zagar offered to help.

She lined up doctors in Muskegon and Grand Haven who would look at the boy for free. She got Tom Powers to work with Mercy General Health Partners in securing free medications, supplies, tests and whatever else was needed.

She asked for public donations for airline tickets, visas, clothing and other expenses, and the public responded.

She and her husband, Joe, and their children Laura, 23; Sarah, 17; and Andy, 15, agreed to make Karim and his mother part of their family for "as long as it takes."

Ellen George Saqqa agreed to serve as the Arabic-English translator and interpret medical records for physicians and the hospital.

Saqqa, 33, first came to the United States from Kuwait when she was 2, seeking treatment for leukemia.

She was cured and is hoping for the same results for Karim.

### Karim's Dream Team

A team of local doctors has volunteered to help Karim.

The team includes doctors Jason Van Ittersum, dermatology; Yosif Hamati, (Saqqa's uncle), orthopedic surgery; Stephen Fisher, plastic and reconstructive hand surgery; John Mullally, dentistry; Richard Golz, pediatrics; and Timothy Barron, ophthalmology.

One doctor said it is likely Karim will lose his toes. And doctors agree that if prosthetics, or surgeries to create fingers out of the bones in the hands, are even possible, those procedures likely will need to take place at a major medical center.

There are a host of problems associated with Karim's disease.

His eyes are dry because the lids are shrunken and do



Chronicle photos • Cory Morse

Karim Ahmad's face, covered with black patches of dead skin, improved with cream prescribed by Dr. Jason VanIttersum of Lakeshore Dermatology, who diagnosed the boy's skin mutation as Olmsted's Syndrome.



Dr. Jason VanIttersum's hope is that Karim's feet can improve so that he can walk without pain. There is no medical data on how to treat Olmsted's Syndrome; no research to access.

not close, requiring eyedrops every hour for the rest of his life. Without the drops, he would have gone blind, said Barron.

Karim also is severely anemic and has intestinal and dental problems. His entire body is inflamed.

When Van Ittersum first saw a picture of Karim on his computer screen, he remembered something he'd read about in his dermatology studies at the University of Michigan's medical school — Olmsted's Syndrome.

It is distinct, he said, noting the pattern of scabs on Karim's face matched Olmsted's. Though it is not something that is studied — especially since there is little or no information available — it is not something a medical student forgets, he said.

Identified in 1927, there have been perhaps 40 cases worldwide in recorded medical history, Van Ittersum said.

Karim is perhaps one of a few people today who suffer from Olmsted's Syndrome.

Van Ittersum said no one knows what genetic glitch is responsible for the disease, which causes the skin to dry, shrink and die, suffocating tissues below it.

The syndrome attacks the groin, the face, elbows, knees, and midsection with a vengeance. Raw spots become infected. Pain rages. Itching is constant.

he leaves for home, he can walk to the airplane.

In many ways, Karim is a medical experiment and he is thankful for the doctors trying to help him.

When Karim leaves Van Ittersum's office, he says the doctor is "a good man. He helps me and it comes from his heart," Karim tells Saqqa.

### Continuing the fight

Armed with preliminary evaluations from Muskegon doctors, Zagar, a substitute teacher at Wesley School, is looking for help from major medical centers.

Last week she sent a letter to the Mayo Clinic. She also has contacted Shriner's Hospital in Chicago.

But there are no resources. The family is poor. There is nothing left to sell.

### Just a boy

Karim loves Pepsi and chocolate ice cream and strawberry shortcake.

He is learning some English words. He is riding on bumper cars and going to the mall. Last week he asked if he could have some shoes, so Zagar got him roomy sandals and running shoes which he wore all day despite the pain.

"He eats like a teenager," Zagar said.

He loves baths and television and singing.

"Why are all these people doing this for us?" Karim's mother asks Zagar.

"Love," Zagar replies.

"Thank you," Ibtissam says.

## ► FOSTER from 1A

The results are predictable, said William Bell, president of Seattle-based Casey Family Programs: A disproportionate number end up homeless or in jail.

"We can choose to pay while they're still in our care or we will continue to pay once they leave," Bell said.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., has introduced federal legislation that would make it easier for states to extend benefits to people up to 21 years old, and would provide some matching money from the federal government. But her legislation, introduced in May, has so far attracted just one other co-sponsor.

The ABA is expected to back several measures on fos-

ter care, including supporting changes in the law like those Boxer is proposing.

Another resolution calls attention to discrimination faced by gay foster children, who surveys say make up as much as 60 percent of the foster care population.

"These are the kids who are the most rejected, the most discriminated against, the most abused," said ABA president Karen Mathis.

But, she added, most foster youth are considered "throw-aways" by society, even by some lawyers and judges who work in the juvenile justice system.

"Too many judges want to know how the kids got screwed up," she said.

Pico said he knows people in foster care who have never met with the lawyers who represent them in regular court hearings. Alice Bussiere, a staff attorney with the Youth Law Center in San Francisco, said she has heard similar comments from judges.

Pico, far more aware than most foster youth of the benefits he is entitled to and how to seek help, listed the three lawyers, 15 social workers and 17 therapists he has encountered over the years.

He sat through the conference and listened to the experts talk about foster care's deficiencies.

"Tell me something I don't know," he said.

## ► HOUSE from 1A

As released by Muskegon police, the route will follow Peck south to Larch Avenue, turn right and then right again onto Sanford Street — where it will be going the "wrong way" on the one-way street — until it gets to Strong Avenue.

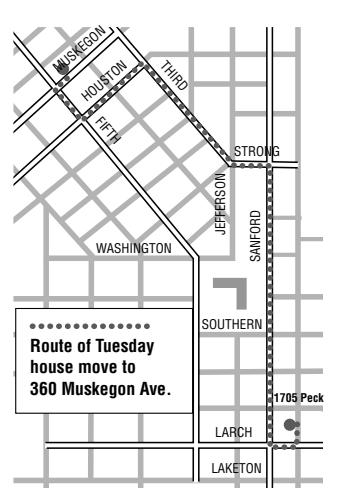
From there it will angle left onto Third Street, rumble along for a few more blocks, then take a left turn at Houston Avenue.

When it reaches Fifth Street, Deitz's truck will turn right and proceed one more block to Muskegon Avenue.

Traffic may have to be temporarily halted or rerouted during the move.

Eden said this route was chosen in part because of the high cost of moving major overhead power and fiber-optic cables on Laketon.

Peck and Southern Avenue were rejected as possible routes because of a large number of overhanging tree



Map • The Chronicle

Once that is done, the house will be jacked up over the hole, then lowered when the foundation is finished.

Eden's home will be the 10th to move into the fill-in district along Muskegon and Webster avenues between Fourth and Fifth streets. Eden bought the lot for the city for \$1,000.

Built in the early 1900s, the two-and-a-half story home's architectural features are basically unchanged, and include the original stained-glass windows.

Eden purchased the home from the Muskegon Rescue Mission, which raised a neighborhood controversy two years ago when it tried to use the home for offices next door to its women and children's shelter at 1691 Peck.

The Rescue Mission now plans to use the resulting vacant lot as a small private playground and sitting area for its clients.

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