



Chronicle photo • Cory Morse

Karim Ahmad stops coloring so his American "mom," Liz Zagar, can administer eye drops. The disease has stretched Karim's skin so badly that he cannot close his eyelids.

► KARIM from 1A

word question: "School?"

In a white shirt and dark pants like the other boys wear, Karim goes to class. He goes outside for recess. He colors and plays and listens to stories.

He also raises his arm frequently, whether he knows what the teacher is saying or not.

He is a part of something. He belongs.

The school experience

Karim, who has lived in isolation most of his life, came to America in July with his mother.

They were brought here by Liz and Joe Zagar of Laketon Township after Liz saw a picture of the child on the Internet. They brought him here for medical treatment and have raised funds for his expenses.

A generous public responded to Karim's needs in a "stunning show" of generosity, Zagar said.

But the Zagars soon learned that Karim's needs went beyond reducing his physical pain. They saw that he needed acceptance by other children, that he needed to have fun and go places and learn things.

And they saw how much he wanted to go to school.

There are some things he can't control, like eyelids that do not shut or baldness because of hair that won't grow. He knows there is no cure for his disease.

But, he also knows that in America every child can go to school. It is a goal he can meet.

Karim finds the first grade in the former St. Francis de Sales Elementary School is a good place for him.

He is no bigger than the children in the room. He does not speak much English. He cannot walk without pain. He cannot read or write, even in his own language. But he is bright and always has wanted to go to school.

He loves it right away and lamented having to miss days at the end of last week to travel to Ann Arbor to be fitted with prosthetics, which will include grasping hooks that will allow him to pick up small objects, hold a book, dress himself, and play games.

Only when he has doctor appointments does he miss an hour of school. Only when he is exhausted because the relentless pain kept him awake the night before does he go home to the Zagar's to nap before the last bell rings.

Karim's journey

This is the fourth in an occasional series about a young Syrian boy from Lebanon with Olmsted's Syndrome, a rare genetic skin disease, who is receiving medical treatment in Muskegon and Grand Haven.

You can help

Donations to help fund medical care for Karim are being accepted at National City Bank's nine area locations or sent to Liz Zagar, 422 Westwind, Muskegon, 49445. Checks should be made out to "Elizabeth Zagar fbo Karim Ahmad." Arrangements have been made for Karim, who will return home to Lebanon this month, to get medical supplies. Zagar can be contacted at elizzagar@comcast.net or by phone at 744-8886.

"Mama Liz ... School? School?" he asks each day. "Yes," she tells him.

Learning and loving

Liz has to go to school with Karim.

She has given up her job as a full-time substitute teacher at Wesley School to care for him because Ebtisam went back to Lebanon to care for Nabil. The long absence from his brother and mother was compounding his sadness.

Karim cannot go to school alone. He needs Liz to push his wheelchair and to get cups of water for him so he can douse his burning, itching hands in them.

But mostly, it is the other children who care for Karim.

In Lebanon, some people who run schools say it would be "too traumatic" for the other children to have Karim in their midst. But the children at the Norton Shores school have enveloped him with acceptance.

Karim lies on the floor in the reading alcove his teacher, Jill Baker, has created in a corner of the room and his new friend, Kameron, picks up tiny plastic animals in an exercise of one-on-one show-and-tell.

"Zebra," Kameron says. "Zebra," says Karim.

"Giraffe," Kameron says. "Giraffe," Karim repeats.

"You're smart," Kameron says. "Good, Karim!"

Karim sits at a table as the children prepare reading worksheets. He takes a crayon and positions it deftly between his wrists. He colors within the lines of his picture. The three girls who have joined him stare in awe. They are impressed.

"I think Karim should teach art class!" Baker exclaims. "You are doing great."

Karim smiles. He enjoys the praise.

He dips his hands in the paper cups of water to relieve the burning. The little girls stare

in wonder for a moment and then understand that the water is soothing him. They go back to their work as if it is something all their classmates do.

"I like him," Erin Powers says. "He is very nice. Just because he has a disease doesn't mean he is any different than anyone else."

Karim leaves school early the next day because the students at Oakridge High School want to meet him.

The student government and current issues class, taught by Bob Wood at Oakridge, have "adopted" Karim and his family. They will spend two years raising money for them. The first items the money is targeted for are space heaters for the Ahmad house, a small building that formerly housed cattle. There is electricity, but no heat and the temperature often falls to freezing.

The buying of heaters seems symbolic of the warmth that has enveloped Karim in this country.

It has come from the volunteer doctors from Muskegon and Grand Haven who have done so much research to find treatments to help him. It has come from church groups and strangers who have sent donations. It has come from people holding fund-raisers. It has come from "M Charities" at the University of Michigan, which is paying the \$10,000 bill for the prosthetics custom made for him last week that will allow him to pick up and hold objects.

It is coming from a Detroit woman who had a 40th birthday party and asked for donations for Karim instead of birthday gifts.

But for a little boy who just wants to be like other little boys, perhaps the warmest gift has come from his classmates: Angelina, Lauren, Sarah, Erin, Isaac, Ryan, Kameron, Owen, Simon, Bea, Brendon and Avery.

► GRANT from 1A

International Baccalaureate program for motivated students, Lewis said.

Competition was fierce for the \$86 million federal grants available to high schools with at least 1,000 students. Of 235 proposals that were submitted, 38 were funded.

Muskegon High was included in a proposal submitted by the Michigan Smaller Learning Communities Consortium, developed by the Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools. Muskegon and five other schools — Grand Rapids' Creston and Union high schools, Marquette High School and Traverse City's Central and West high schools — will share expertise and experiences in developing "smaller learning communities," said Tom Ellis, a Muskegon High teacher who has represented the school at the consortium.

The Coalition of Essential Schools is part of a national effort at reforming schools, and is working with Muskegon Public Schools to turn Steele Middle School into a charter "international school."

Ellis said a primary focus of the Smaller Learning Communities grant is to improve achievement by breaking out students into "smaller schools" within the high school. The school has particular concerns about freshmen, one-third of whom are considered to not be achieving at their grade level, Ellis said.

They have been targeted in a pilot "transitions" class — essentially a school within a school for about 15 freshmen who were struggling as eighth-graders and already were behind when they began high school. The students have one teacher and come to school later and stay later than other students — a time adjustment that seems to work for teens who tend to stay up late, said Muskegon High Assistant Principal Corry Lohmann.

That type of flexibility should be considered for other types of students targeted by the grant, particularly those at risk of dropping out, said teacher Lisa Mencer, who is working on the school's dropout prevention plan. Students who have children of their own or who must work for economic reasons need a less structured school day with times that can accommodate their changing schedules, Mencer said.

"The actual idea of a school day is changing,"

Lewis said. "To make the changes we need to make, we must think differently. You can't use what you use today to change tomorrow."

Central to a school's flexibility is online learning, something Muskegon High has started and plans to expand with several of its "Smaller Learning Communities" initiatives. The transitions class uses online learning for credit recovery and to help the teacher cover various subject areas. It is the same format used in a credit recovery class that runs for two hours after school and has a waiting list to get into.

Such credit recovery is another critical component in preventing school dropouts, high school officials said.

The problem of dropouts at Muskegon High recently was highlighted in a national study on the topic by Johns Hopkins University. Muskegon was the only school in the county to be included on a list of schools with graduation rates of 60 percent or less.

On the other hand, Muskegon High is working to develop an International Baccalaureate program for motivated juniors and seniors which provides a diploma that is globally recognized as representing rigorous course work. The Smaller Communities grant is expected to help the school develop the "IB" program, which requires planning, preparation and curriculum approved by the International Baccalaureate program. Officials hope Muskegon's IB program will be in place by 2010.

Students who complete two years of IB classes can take a test to earn the diploma and possibly college credits, said Kim Beattie, a Muskegon High teacher heading up the school's IB efforts.

An IB diploma is essentially a "stamp of approval" that indicates students are "able to compete with anyone globally," Lewis said.

Much of the Smaller Communities grant — which amounts to \$211,000 per year — will be used for staff development and teacher training that are needed to help faculty learn about and implement innovative programs, Lewis said.

"We realize this money isn't going to be here forever," he said. "The money isn't the answer. It's what we implement that's the answer."

► VETS from 1A

1788 E. Sternberg, begins at 4 p.m. Monday.

Puthoff also is offering a bonus for World War II veterans at his three local Lee's Chicken outlets. WW II vets who sign up for a special discount card, and provide a personal photo of their time in the military to be placed on an "honor roll" board in one of the restaurants, will get 50 percent off meals for

life.

Puthoff is providing the offer to honor his father, the late Curtis Puthoff of Richmond, Ind., and those who served with him in World War II. The elder Puthoff served in the European theater as a Army medical officer before returning to home where he was an engineer for Ford Motor Co., his son said.

"I think that generation

of my Dad's were the ones that made America what it is today ... they created the American work ethic," said Puthoff, who came to Muskegon in the mid-1970s to run the Lee's Chicken outlets.

Many of the veterans from WW II already have died.

The Lee's outlets are at 856 W. Sherman and 1317 E. Apple and 200 N. Causeway in North Muskegon.

Mammosite®
5-Day Targeted
Radiation Therapy.
New breakthrough
treatment for breast cancer.

hackley.org

HackleyHospital

If you are fighting breast cancer, time may be the most precious commodity of all. Time to spend with family and friends. Time to prepare your body and mind for the journey ahead. Time to juggle the life you want to lead with a host of appointments, consultations and treatments. Time to think and feel and come to grips with everything that accompanies a diagnosis of cancer. When you need it most, suddenly time becomes scarce.

Thanks to the Cancer Center at Hackley Hospital, more of that precious time will belong to you. Introducing Mammosite® 5-Day Targeted Radiation Therapy, a revolutionary program that allows patients to complete their radiation treatment in just five days. Traditional radiation treatment takes six to seven weeks, but this innovative technology delivers a more focused treatment in just five days. Fewer trips for appointments. Fewer interruptions in your life. And more time for you.

► TAX from 1A

ers were in session before a scheduled two-week break for deer hunting and Thanksgiving.

Senate Majority Leader Michael Bishop, R-Rochester, said members could come in during that break to approve the tax change. The Michigan Manufacturers Association, author of the MBT surcharge proposal, wants final action by Nov. 15 so its member firms don't have to spend any more money preparing to pay a service tax they hope never takes effect.

The 6-percent use tax on services, which by law takes effect Dec. 1, took another round of pummeling this week from business owners and lobbyists who said it would wreak financial havoc.

Landscapers already battling a lagging economy and soaring fuel prices told the Senate Finance Committee they'd have to eat the 6 percent or lose business to less-scrupulous lawn care companies that accept only cash. Environmental consulting firms said while it was billed as a charge for discretionary services, the tax would apply to work mandated by government, such as the removal of underground fuel storage tanks. Warehousing companies said they'd move operations south of the border to Ohio or Indiana.

Automakers Wednesday complained they'd take the biggest hit. Eric Henning, a lobbyist for General Motors Corp., said, for example,

the tax would apply to marketing consulting provided by a New York firm for work done in China. That's because that work product first would be used in GM's Detroit headquarters.

"This will cost us tens and tens and tens of millions of dollars," Henning told House committee members.

A \$2 million cap in additional MBT payments would limit the tax liability for GM and Michigan's other major corporations. The surcharge, however, could whack out-of-state companies and profitable Michigan firms that don't benefit as much from lucrative MBT property tax and employment credits.

It's unclear whether House Republicans who have generally opposed tax increases this fall would support the surcharge. Rep. John Pastor, R-Livonia, said business groups should demand that spending cuts pay for a service tax repeal. "We have to live within our means," he said.

The Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce was the latest business group to back both a repeal of the service tax and a revenue replacement. Legislative Affairs Director Jared Rodriguez said the 3,000-member organization supports longer-term reforms to cut health care and prison costs, but that political pragmatism mandates a replacement tax.

"We need to do what we can do to get the service tax repealed — now," he said.