

## **Getting from Children's Art, to Medicine, to Music: The path that led us to *Bach to Baghdad***

The Iraqi Children's Art Exchange (ICAE) uses art, art-inspired projects and documenting photographs to create a dialogue -- across language, culture and politics-- between Iraqi children and youth and children and youth in the U.S. We encourage and support drawing, painting and sculpting for the sheer pleasure of it. Beyond that we recognize art as an important language of childhood, one that offers children and youth an opportunity to express themselves, to speak to each other and to the wider community, and to have their views taken seriously.

ICAE began in December 2000 with a visit to what is now Children's Welfare Teaching Hospital in Medical City Baghdad. There we met Drs. Salma Al-Hadad and Mazin Al-Jadiry who helped facilitate our first art exchange, giving children on both sides an opportunity for expression, a chance to "say" something to each other. We have maintained a working relationship with these two doctors over the last thirteen years. Despite enormous personal and professional challenges, they have stayed on at the hospital where they continue striving to provide the very best, up-to-date medical care available to their patients. The Iraqi medical system, once boasting the best doctors and hospitals in the Middle East has been devastated, unable to meet the increasing --and increasingly serious-- medical needs of the population.

Over the years we have worked together to develop and implement a number of art-inspired projects with the broad goal of meeting the needs of the community of people on the pediatric cancer unit: children with cancer, their families, doctors and other medical personnel. Our goal is to supplement and support medical care. Our approach is multidisciplinary, crossing traditional lines to borrow and integrate theory and best practice in child development, psychology, arts, science and medicine. We are inspired by the emerging fields of Arts in Healthcare and Medical Humanism. The project sits at an intersection of resilience, psychosocial intervention and art.

In the fall of 2012, we formed *Baghdad Resolve: An International Collaboration to Improve Cancer Care in Iraq*. In March of 2013 I, along with two doctors from Harvard Medical School and the Nurse Director from Dana Farber Cancer Institute, and five oncologists and hematologists from La Sapienza University in Rome spent a week observing, lecturing and training at Children's Welfare Teaching Hospital in Medical City Baghdad. It was during this exciting and exhausting visit that Dr. Salma turned on her cell phone and played Pavarotti.

This incident is the inspiration for *Bach to Baghdad*. I'm not sure why it surprised me to hear Italian Opera in Baghdad. The doctors, after all, have been firm believers in the strength and possibility of art and the arts. But the image of us in that environment, and of Dr. Salma's face as she talked about her favorite arias has proved to be a source of both inspiration and hope as Iraq and these doctors face yet another serious crisis.

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For more information: [www.iraqichildrensart.org](http://www.iraqichildrensart.org)