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## A new vision

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Here is the latest on little Noor, the 5-year-old Iraqi girl who recently traveled to the U.S. for eye



surgery.

A new vision By Sgt. Kevin Stabinsky 2nd BCT, 3rd ID PAO FOB KALSU, Iraq – He gave her sight. Her father gave him vision. “They’ve changed me as much as I’ve changed them,” said 1st Lt. Michael Kendrick, 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, of his interaction with the people of al Bu’yatha, a village in the Arab Jabour region south of Baghdad. Bu’yatha is where Taha Najee first met Kendrick, the soldier who helped transport his daughter, Noor, to the United States for eye surgery. The gift of sight Five-year-old Noor Al-Ithawi was born blind as the result of a genetic disease that prevented the development of her corneas. Now, a cooperative effort with the United States Army, the University of Rochester (New York) Eye Institute, Baush and Lomb and the Los Angeles Eye Defects Research Foundation, Noor finally has the chance to see. “We’ve paved the way for vision to develop,” said Jacquie Navratil, director of development, Eye Defects Research Foundation, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles. “She’s quite the little gift to get to know. She’s so young, so full of life,” Kendrick said. “Once we discovered who she was, the type of person she was, we pushed it up our chain of command to see if there was anything we could do.” The 1-30th battalion surgeon, Lt. Col. Hee-Choon S. Lee of Lorton, Va., examined Noor and deemed it may be possible to give her some sort of vision. Armed with that knowledge, Kendrick worked to initiate the process. Army doctors, including an Army ophthalmologist in Balad, all helped assess Noor. “Every time we came to a stand-still, someone came in to keep the ball rolling.”



Eventually, the news of her story reached doctors at the Eye Defects Research Foundation, who said they would take on the project, Kendrick said. “Initially, my hope was to have one of our doctors here in Los Angeles perform the surgery, but soon came to find her case was so challenging,” Navratil said. “The only option would be to plead with Dr. Aquavella to take on her case, and as our budget was limited, at no charge.” Dr. James Aquavella is one of the few doctors in the world who can perform the surgery Noor needed; he has performed about 100 surgeries of this kind. The surgery, pediatric keratoprosthesis, involves inserting an artificial implant into the eye. The implant consists of four parts and a protective contact lens. Most of the surgeries Aquavella performed were successful for adult patients. Although slightly more difficult and less successful for children like Noor, the surgery was her only chance of ever gaining vision, Navratil said. Aquavella performed the surgery in Rochester



June 2 and 3. He is optimistic about Noor’s chances. Noor could previously see only slight shades of light, her father, Taha, said. Now she is seeing more light and a perception of forms. “Her brain is still working to process what she is seeing,” Navratil said. The future of her eyesight, despite the successful surgery, is still in the air. Much of the outcome depends on the follow-up care she will receive in Iraq. “The biggest challenge is providing Noor a basic level of quality care in a country which is at war,” Navratil said. She will need a fully trained ophthalmologist to administer necessary medication to her eyes. The medicine provided requires a fully trained doctor to mix and administer the solution to Noor’s

eyes. Dr. Lee arranged for an Iraqi doctor, Dr. Faris, to take up the challenge of treating Noor, according to Navratil. Dr. Faris will check Noor's eyes for any complications from surgery, such as glaucoma and determine if she will need glasses or other corrective lenses in the future, said Navratil. The Los Angeles Eye Defects Research Foundation also filmed tapes with Dr. Aquavella to explain follow-up appointments and procedures to assist Dr. Faris. Soldiers continue to support the family and help facilitate her meetings with the doctors. "She is an extremely smart and well-behaved little girl who would thrive given the support she needs," Navratil said. "This opens up so many other avenues for her: the possibility of an education, to go to school, see pictures, read books, be a little kid," Kendrick added. An unexpected friendship Noor could not see the violence in her village, but her family could. Taha knew it was not the future he wanted for his family. "There were a lot of problems," Kendrick said. "We tried to fix as many as we could." Problems weren't just limited to the insurgency. Citizens who did not take up arms against the Soldiers still harbored ill will and fear toward them, Taha said. When Taha first saw American soldiers in al Bu'yatha, he feared the worst. The media's coverage of the war affected the way he and other people in al Bu'yatha initially viewed the soldiers. Kendrick said he remembers the time vividly. During the initial push into the area, violence was common; the sight of people was not. The streets were desolate; schools were empty; shops were boarded up; children hid in their homes rather than play outside. Among those children were Taha's daughter, Noor, her younger brother and several cousins, all living in the same household. To limit the insurgency, the Iraqi Government shut down most power into the area, leaving families without electricity to run the water pumps to get from the canals to their homes and farms or air conditioning to escape the summer heat. Insurgent's roadside bombs injured innocent Iraqis. The economy was dwindling and schools were closed – deeply affecting Taha, who worked as a school teacher. Coalition forces pushed forward, and restored a sense of security and normalcy to the area. Seeing this, Taha began to offer his help. Kendrick attributed much of his unit's success to Taha's assistance. Taha's grasp of the English language, education and connections in the community made him an important contact for Kendrick. "He's been very helpful to coalition forces here in this area," Kendrick said. "His willingness to sit down and talk, share ideas; you just don't meet people like that every day, with more than their self interest at the forefront of what they do," Kendrick said. "When I came over I did not expect to have a family or (an) individual make such an impact on me." The village sees Kendrick as a hero of sorts for all the work he has done in their community. "All the people in my village know the American Army helped my daughter," Taha said. "All the people in this village like him," he said, playfully adding. "I don't know why; his face is not beautiful." The deep connection between the friends makes parting hard. "He's a friend of mine. We've grown close over the last six to eight months," Kendrick said. "It's always hard to say goodbye to friends. It's been more difficult than I thought,



saying goodbye." Taha put together a farewell dinner for Kendrick and his platoon. "Our time here is about to come to an end, this is the last hour," Taha said there. "I will not forget this hour or this company." The two exchanged photos, phone

numbers and email addresses. "I hope to visit the U.S. one day. I want to say thank you face-to-face (to the doctors who worked on Noor)," Taha said, adding his respect for America has grown even more based on the reports his wife, Shaymaa, gave him while in America with Noor for surgery. Kendrick hopes his photos will remain with Taha as a memory of their friendship and a sign of his gift to Noor. One day, he hopes she too will see him. "This is what Americans need to see," Taha said. "The best thing about this story is we are great friends. I want people in the United States to know this is my friend," he added pointing to Kendrick. "We're different, but of the same heart. Through that friendship, Kendrick and Taha gained insight and created a vision of respect and cooperation for the people of Bu'yatha. "The biggest lesson here is we were needed, we were wanted and we'll be missed in this area," Kendrick said. "We've made our mark. These people will remember what we've done here."

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