



Barbara Zanetto, an orthopedic nurse from New Jersey with Abeer

ISMS Operation Kids in Egypt

Doctors and nurses travel the world to help children in need.

BY ALICE WHITNEY

MAJOR PHOTOGRAPHY
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Last March a team of highly specialized doctors and nurses volunteered their time and talents for one week on a mission trip to Benha, Egypt with ISMS Operation Kids (International Surgical Mission Support). This not for profit medical outreach organization provides free surgical and medical care for children in need.

For Barbara Zanetto, an orthopedic operating room nurse from New Jersey, this was her first mission with ISMS Operation Kids. "I had always wanted to participate in a medical mission trip," says Barbara. "Getting married and having kids at an early age, I didn't have the time or money to travel. Once my girls were older, I heard about the amazing experience my friend had on the mission to Morocco. I made sure this group knew I was interested in going on their next trip."

ISMS Operation Kids is a 20-person team consisting of five surgeons, a pediatric hematologist/oncologist, pediatric anesthesiologists, a complete OR nurse and scrub technician team, and pediatric ICU nurses. They chose Benha, Egypt as the location for their 2010 mission because although Egyptian children have access to free healthcare, some cases are beyond the scope of what the country's hospitals can provide. It is the goal of ISMS Operation Kids not only to provide excellent care for these children, but also to educate the doctors and nurses through a collaborative effort.

In January 2010, Barbara got a call from ISMS Operation Kids: One of



3. Nurse Samira and Lisa Plug, PICU RN in the Benha City Hospital recovery room.

4. Patients waiting to consult with ISMS Operation Kids doctors. 5. Cindi Steele Felici, MD, Hematologist/Oncologist with a (three-generation) family in the recovery room. 6. Barbara with patient. 7. The hospital threw a party for patients & families. 8. Mother & daughter waiting for daughter to be checked in for surgery.



their nurses was no longer able to go on the trip to Egypt in March, and they were wondering if Barbara could take her place. "There was no hesitation!" says Barbara. "I told them I would definitely go."

In the weeks before the trip, Barbara and the team carefully packed all of the medical supplies and equipment they would need. Since ISMS never knows what to expect at the hospitals they visit, the team brings enough supplies so that they are prepared for anything, and do not incur any expense to the host country. They also collect toys and extra medical supplies to leave behind as a donation.

When the group arrived at Benha Hospital, it was evening and hundreds of parents and children were waiting for them. The team immediately started triaging patients, ranking them by need but also by the health of the child and how much follow-up treatment would be needed.

The group finished triaging at 2:00 a.m. and were up early the next morning to start their first day of surgeries. They set up three operating rooms: orthopedic, plastic, and ENT and general surgery. Throughout the week they treated mostly very young children, with conditions such as cleft palettes and cooking burns.

"It was the most amazing experience; to learn from one another, and get a better understanding of each other's culture,"

Barbara said.



1. Karen Cartwright, MD, General Pediatric Surgeon consulting with the Egyptian Pediatric Surgeons. 2. Lance Fowler, Surgical Technician; Egyptian Orthopedic Nurse; and Mark Rieger, MD, Pediatric Orthopedic Surgeon.

The ISMS team worked 12-15 hours every day and performed over **70 successful surgeries** that week.



9

One patient really stands out in Barbara's mind: "I was carrying a little girl to the operating room, and even though she was speaking Egyptian, I knew she was absolutely terrified. That moment was so heartbreaking for me, realizing that I didn't have the words to comfort her, because she wouldn't understand. But then to see the big smile on her face the next day – that was wonderful."

The ISMS Operation Kids team and the Benha Hospital staff quickly became friends. At first it was difficult to communicate with one another, but with the help of an Egyptian translator, they were easily communicating by the end of the week. "It was the most amazing experience; to learn from one another, and get a better understanding of each other's culture," Barbara said.

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the team arrived at the hospital on Friday for their last day of surgeries, the Benha nurses were there to meet them: They had spent the night sleeping in the nurses' lounge, just so they could say good-bye.

"We were really touched," Barbara says. That day they all took pictures together, and the patients and their families came to watch and cheer for them. The ISMS team invited the Benha staff out to dinner in Cairo. "It was great to share our last meal together," Barbara says. "There were many tears when we left."

Many of the team members wished to do some sightseeing while in Egypt, so their travel counselor arranged an incredible post-mission tour. "I had always dreamed of traveling to Egypt," says Barbara, "and after a hard week of volunteering, and gaining a personal connection with Egyptian people, the experience was that much more rewarding."

"We spent three days cruising along the Nile, which was so peaceful. On the banks of the river, life looks unchanged from thousands of years ago; it was another world. One of my favorite sites was the Temple of Philae: Only accessible by boat, it was so quiet and beautiful. Entering the Pyramid of Khufu and climbing to the tomb in the middle was also a highlight, and standing in front of the Sphinx felt unreal – it truly took my breath away. It amazed me that everything is so well-preserved and accessible to the public."



10

"I am so grateful that I had this opportunity. It was an exhausting trip, yet our entire team has committed to next year's mission. It's hard to describe, this was such an incredible experience – being able to help children in need and fulfill my dreams of traveling – it was the best vacation ever." ❖

To learn more about ISMS Operation Kids and how you can help, visit www.ismsoperationkids.org.



11

9. Little girl in the recovery room. 10. Barbara in front of the Sphinx. 11. ISMS Operation Kids Team & Egyptian Team celebrating mission complete!