

Walker's Community, Current and Past, Reaches out to Support Afghan Students

West Hartford dentist Peter S. Katz has never been the type of person who expected to change the world. But he just might be, one tooth at a time.

The opportunity to make what he hopes might be a small contribution to world peace came one day in late September when he received a phone call from The Ethel Walker School. His daughter Jessica's experience (Class of 1999) at Walker's had left him with "a soft spot" for the School, so he listened to the inquiry.

The request from Walker's was somewhat daunting. A new student had arrived from Afghanistan needing significant dental work, though she had received regular dental care at home. Walker's inquired as to whether Dr. Katz would consider helping Sahra, pro bono.

Katz was sympathetic, but cautious. "I thought about it, the lab work, the money, the time, the staff, the materials..." At first he said no. Then, he reconsidered. "Wouldn't it be cool if this Afghan girl is treated by an American, number one, and by a Jewish American, number two?"

When she arrived for her first appointment at Katz's office on LaSalle Road in West Hartford, Sahra Ibrahim had a toothache that was keeping her awake at night and was distracting her from her schoolwork. She had arrived in Connecticut in early September, one of two girls from Afghanistan who joined Walker's community this year. Sahra is a sophomore who aspires to be a doctor and to return to her country to prove that girls have as much value as boys.

In her native Kabul, Sahra attended a girls' school, but she and her parents believed that studying in the United States would be the only way she could achieve her dream of becoming a professional woman. Sahra and Sajia Darwish attend Walker's through a program supported by the



Dr. Katz, Sahra, and Jessica Katz '99.

organization Seeds of Peace, which is dedicated to empowering young leaders from regions of conflict with the leadership skills required to advance reconciliation and coexistence.

Katz said he has been amazed at Sahra's courage and her command of English. He said he tries to explain every procedure and apologizes every time he has to give her an injection of novocaine — of which she has had many. She never complains. Recently, Katz started rebuilding a broken front tooth that Sahra hides with her hand when she talks.

Although he was reluctant at first, Katz said he has "enjoyed every minute" of his time with Sahra, which will ultimately total at least 10 office visits. Then, this 62-year-old dentist whose practice now includes both of his daughters — Jessica, a hygienist, and Stephanie, a newly minted dentist — got a bit philosophical. "I hope she'll have a nice smile and have a nice experience and go home and say those Americans are nice people. They treated me well.

"It's not on a worldwide scale, but if one person can make a difference, maybe we can make the world a better place."

Hilary Waldman is the mother of Jill O'Brien '13 and host parent to Sahra Ibrahim '13. She kindly contributed this story to The Sundial.



Walker's students from Afghanistan, Sajia and Sahra, flank Awista Ayub, who spoke at Walker's in September. Ayub, author of *Kabul Girls Soccer Club*, is actively involved in assisting girls from Afghanistan as they pursue their dreams and ambitions.

Sajia and Sahra's attendance at Walker's is made possible by a generous donor.