

## NEWS AND TOPICS

## MEDICINE

# Out of a Nightmare, New Dreams Are Born

A Scarsdale Couple Takes In an Iranian Teenager Who Was Blinded and Disfigured by Battery Acid

By LYNNE AMES

SCARSDALE

WHEN Sara Haghbin was 3 years old, living in a small Iranian village, her mother had an argument with a neighbor who flung battery acid at both of them. The mother is still institutionalized, having suffered not only physical injury but also a mental breakdown. Sara's facial features were burned away by the caustic substance, and she was blinded.

Sara was sent to live with relatives in a village where other children ran from the sight of her. "I looked scary to them, like something in a horror movie," she said. Eventually she wound up at Taghva, a state run boarding school for the blind in the city of Mashad.

It was there, two-and-a-half years ago, that something Sara describes as "like Cin-

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derella, a fairy tale" happened. Khojasteh Harandi, a well-to-do Iranian-American woman, traveled from her home here to visit her native country. As part of a charitable mission, she toured Taghva. Mrs. Harandi met Sara and was instantly touched by the combination of her brutally disfigured face and her spirited, intelligent personality. She made one of those quick decisions that would change both of their lives forever.

"When I saw Sara, I don't know, something came to my mind, just came from my heart and out of my mouth," Mrs. Harandi said in an interview. "I cannot tell you exactly why, but I said to her: 'Maybe I can do something for you in the United States. Maybe I can help.'"

Unlike many well-meaning "maybes," this

one materialized. In July, after plowing through two years worth of legal paperwork, the Harandis - Mrs. Harandi's husband, Bagher, is a dealer in Persian rugs - became 14-year-old Sara's legal guardians and brought her to live with them.

Their own three children - Dina, who runs D. Harandi Persian Rugs in Manhattan; Amir, a medical student; and Layli, a psychology major - spend most of their time in apartments and college dormitory rooms of their own. Sara has her own bedroom outfitted with a stereo CD player - Ricky Martin is her favorite - a small electric piano, dozens of Braille books, including the Koran.

When she is not attending classes at the New York State Institute for Special Education in the Bronx, or doing homework, she also enjoys the greenhouse room, filled with fragrant flowers and exotic cacti that are interesting to touch. She is, she said, inexpressibly happy.

But her move to America is about more than enjoying comfortable surroundings; about more even than getting a good education and becoming part of a family.

Several weeks ago, Sara underwent a procedure done in the New Haven office of an ophthalmologic surgeon, Dr. Ali A. Khodadoust, an Iranian-American who donated his time and expertise. Performed under local anesthesia, the surgery partially reversed a painful inversion of her eyelids, so that her eyelashes no longer stick into her sensitive, damaged eyes. On

Wednesday, another Iranian-American, Dr. Mokhtar Asaadi, a plastic surgeon who practices in Manhattan and Livingston, N.J., will also donate his time to begin correcting the massive damage the acid wrought 11 years ago.

"Even though she cannot look in a mirror, Sara knows how she looks, because she can feel her face with her hands," Dr. Asaadi said. "she told me on our last visit that she needs a haircut; she 'sees' her hair and her face with her fingertips.

"She is remarkably bright, sensitive, sharp. She listens when I explain things and asks the most unbelievably advanced questions."

Sara's nose was so badly burned that she



Photographs by Susan B. Markisz for The New York Times

Sara Haghbin at home in Scarsdale with her guardian, Bagher Harandi, whose wife, Khojasteh Harandi, rescued Sara from a boarding school for the blind in an Iranian village. Below; Sara is learning to play a keyboard. Besides giving her a home and making her part of their family, the Harandis are helping Sara, 14; get the surgery she needs to correct the damage she suffered when battery acid was thrown on her when she was 3. Doctors are donating their skills to help her.



ly, these flaps will be the raw material from which Dr. Asaadi can construct a new normal-looking nose.

Sara's complexion will also need work. It has vastly improved from even six months ago due to frequent applications of lotion. The color variations, the tan blotches against the flesh tones, are still evident, but one day these too will be corrected.

"The possibilities," Dr. Asaadi said, "are endless."

Endless not just in a technical, medical sense, but also in the realm of

emotions.

The Harandis are completely committed to Sara; the girl herself feels she has landed in a dream world. She is thrilled with her friends from school, who frequently visit at home, and with her adoptive older sisters who take her to The Westchester mall.

She gets good grades in school, is already proficient at the computer, and talks with confidence about becoming a lawyer. Her English, hesitant in the first few months in this country, is getting better daily; her Persian conversations with the Harandis are rapid-fire, filled with laughter, hand gestures and clearly emotional inflections.

Dr. Asaadi will also work on building up her nose for cosmetic purposes. In the first operation he will create nasal-labial flaps, pieces of skin that run from the corner of the nostril to the corner of her mouth. Eventual-

as to expect things to run altogether smoothly. She knows that she was a victim of something awful. She is, she said, "prepared to fight, to work hard, for what I want."

As for the Harandis, they wear their charitable activities lightly. When Mrs. Harandi told her husband she would be bringing Sara home, he simply said, "Of course, why not, she needs help."

They founded Rahmat, an organization to raise funds for the many desperately needy children in Iran. Already they have built a new gymnasium for Taghva; now they are working on other projects.

"There are kids so poor, they have no kitchens in their homes, there is a village so poor that its school has no bus, no heat, no glass for the windows," Mr. Harandi said. "There are children in desperate need of medical care." (To contribute to Rahmat, call 914-725-5511.)

Sara is proud of her new family's charitable work: "I feel bad for the classmates I left behind at my old school, I think about them a lot," she said. She is still committed to her Iranian roots and religion, wearing the scarf traditional for young Muslim women; reading the Koran in Braille daily.

Yet her newly learned American-style ebullience is also evident.

She has developed a philosophy that has probably enabled her to come this far. "I feel I had so much taken away from me early on, I will have, as I go on in life, something very good given to me to make up for it."