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Hi, Grace ▾

FEATURES

Columbus community rallies behind teenage refugee who lost his leg



Grace Tucker

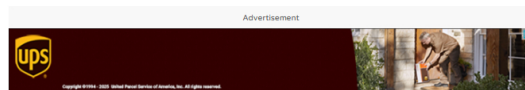
July 17, 2023 | Updated July 22, 2023, 5:50 p.m. ET



Abdullah Mukhaimer, 16, plays with the Adaptive Sports Connection's amputee soccer team at the TOCA Soccer center in Lewis Center on July 10. Barbara J. Perenic/The Columbus Dispatch

The posse of athletes that made up the July 10 Adaptive Sports Connection's [amputee soccer game](#) were a disjointed bunch at first glance — some well into their 40s, others still in grade school, some playing amputated limbs, others completely able-bodied, some Ohioan born-and-raised, others hailing from as far as West Africa or the Middle East.

But despite their differences, each player on the team had one essential thing in common: a need for speed.



Teen from Gaza who plays for national amputee soccer team comes to Columbus for new prosthesis

Palestinian refugee travels from Gaza Strip to Columbus for medical help, new prosthesis

Abdullah Abu Mukhaimer, 16, came from the Gaza Strip to Columbus for free prosthetic services, courtesy of the Palestine Children's Relief Fund. Barbara J. Perenic, The Columbus Dispatch

And 16-year-old Palestinian refugee Abdullah Abu Mukhaimer was no different, traveling across the field with his forearm crutches like a lightning bolt, in a bright yellow jersey from his favorite team — FC Barcelona.

Last month, the teen, who lost his left leg to bone cancer in 2015, traveled over 18 hours from the Gaza Strip to Ohio through a Treatment Abroad Program hosted by [Palestine Children's Relief Fund](#) (PCRF). As part of the program, Mukhaimer, now in remission, has received a prosthetic leg and other free medical care he did not have access to in Gaza — a territory currently [under level 4 travel advisory](#) for terrorism, civil unrest and armed conflict.

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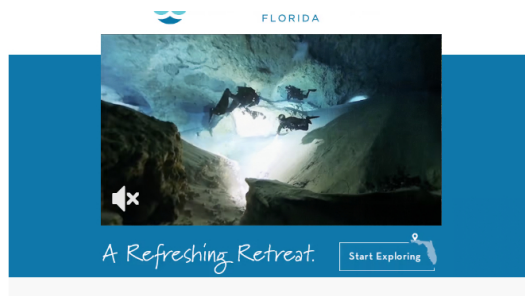
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Though Mukhaimer’s footwork was effortless during the soccer game, the occasion represented the culmination of tireless efforts made by entities across Greater Columbus to turn his treatment into a reality — namely PCRf’s [Columbus chapter](#) for securing a host family and planning fun outings for the amputee, and the small [team at Ace Prosthetics, Inc](#) for its free services.

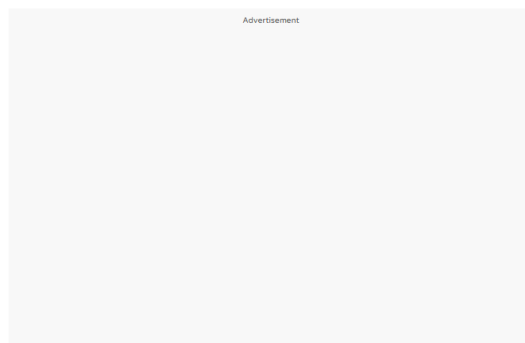
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Soccer-loving Palestinian refugee travels from Gaza Strip to Ohio for medical help
Columbus community rallies behind refugee from Palestine who lost his leg to cancer. Ace Prosthetics donated a new leg to the teen who loves soccer.

Small business Ace Prosthetics provides free services

Ace Prosthetics founder John Hays knew next to nothing about Mukhaimer or his circumstances in Gaza when PCRf reached out to the local prosthetist in 2019 with a big ask: pro bono services and a prosthetic leg for the then-12-year-old boy living amongst Middle Eastern conflict.



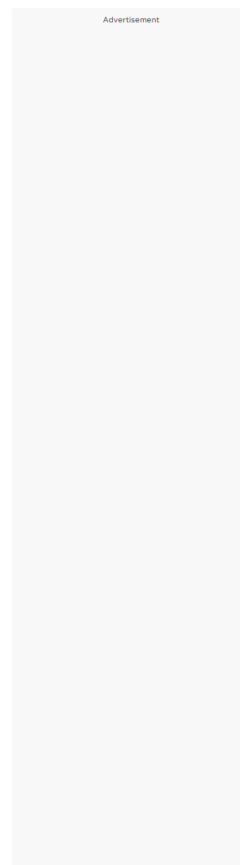
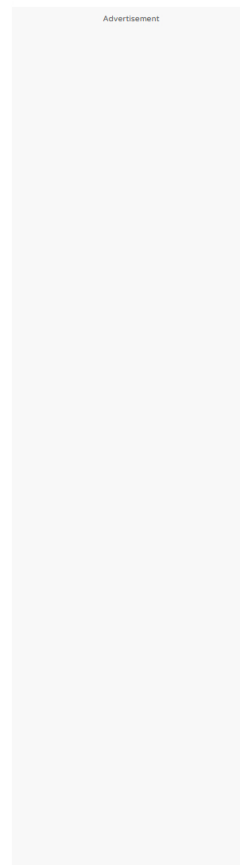
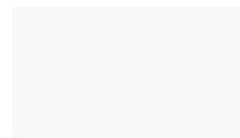
“There are hundreds of kids in Gaza who need prosthetic legs, and the technology ... and expertise is just not there,” said Nadia Rasoul, the president of PCRf’s Columbus chapter.

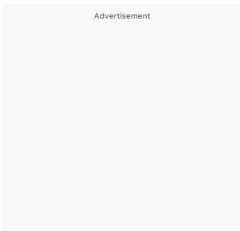
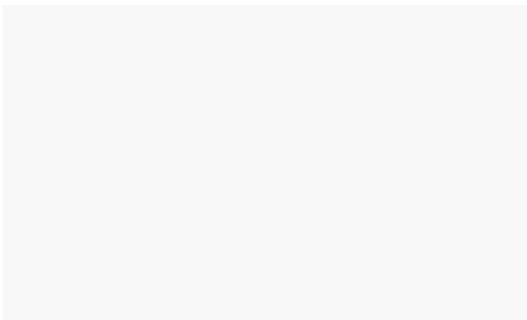
Prosthetics for youth: New prosthetic can grow with a child after cancer surgery

Hays, a University of Toledo alum, immediately agreed to helping Mukhaimer simply because that’s what he and his Upper Arlington-based small business like to do, he said.

“I really just want to be able to feed my family ... pay my rent and pay my employees. If we’re doing all that, I don’t need to drive a Tesla or anything like that. And I don’t. If you saw my car, you’d be embarrassed,” Hays said, laughing.

“If I could do (my work) for free all the time, I totally would.”





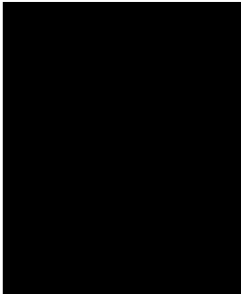
His team was happy to follow through with servicing the now 16-year-old Mukhaimer after PCRf spent years sorting out the logistics of getting the teen clearance to travel from the Middle East to Ohio.

Mukhaimer underwent several fitting appointments before receiving his prosthetic leg on June 28. The artificial body part is decorated with an FC Barcelona sticker — Hays' special touch.

What life in Palestine is like for kids like Mukhaimer

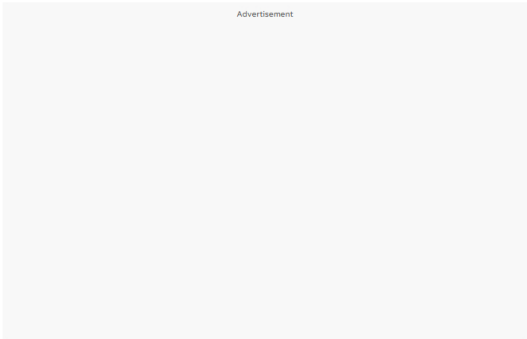
Stasia Suleiman found herself in tears in the middle of a PCRf fundraiser when Zeena Sosebee, wife of PCRf founder Steve Sosebee, was giving a presentation about how the nonprofit was in the midst of constructing the first and only pediatric cancer treatment facility in the Gaza Strip.

Prior to this venture, Sosebee explained, Mukhaimer and kids like him had to travel alone outside of Gaza for chemotherapy.



Abdullah Mukhaimer, 16, visits Ace Prosthetics in Upper Arlington for an appointment to fine-tune his new prosthetic, which the company donated and decorated with an FC Barcelona sticker in honor of Mukhaimer's favorite team. *Barbara J. Perenic/The Columbus Dispatch*

"I cannot imagine putting my child on a bus (and sending them to Jordan) for three or four months ... for cancer treatment," Suleiman said.



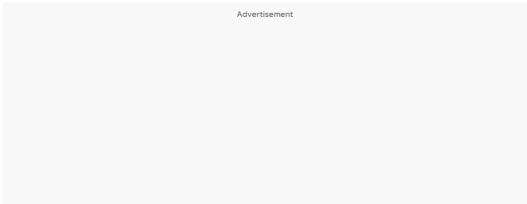
Determined to support PCRf's efforts, the mother of two joined on as a pediatric design advisor for the hospital, which officially [opened in Gaza in February 2019](#).

In May 2018, Suleiman got the chance to visit Gaza and see the progress of the hospital's construction. The experience, she said, was rattling at times.

"It was so surreal going through the checkpoints and experiencing what life is like for people on the other side. It's truly like an open prison," Suleiman said about entering the territory, which consisted of passing through a half-mile-long cage closely monitored by drones.

Her husband, Fadi Suleiman, who was born in Ramallah, Palestine, and moved to Columbus to attend Ohio State, explained that the decades-long conflict between Israel and Palestine and an Israeli-led blockade has converted Gaza into a land of "refugee camps."

"There's restrictions over who can leave (for) medical needs or otherwise," he said.



The scrutiny also extends to goods. "Every tomato (that comes across Gaza's borders), they have to screen it," he added.

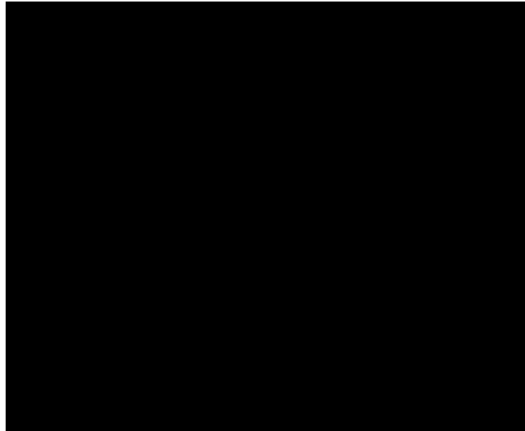
Stasia Suleiman said that, following her visit to Gaza, she now believes there is "really such a stark contrast of such genuine people who really want to make a better life for themselves, but they're truly limited in their capacity to do that because of where they live."

Mukhaimer's experience serves as a testament to this. At 9 years old, he had to travel up to four hours, one way, by himself every week to receive chemotherapy in Jerusalem, he explained in an interview translated to English by Rasoul. It was a journey of approximately 48 miles that, without the territory's intensive checkpoints, should otherwise take only 45 minutes to complete.

Columbus' interfaith movement: [A mosque, a synagogue and an unlikely friendship that kindled Columbus' interfaith movement](#)

Ultimately, the Suleimans are grateful that PCRF allows Mukhaimer and others like him to experience life outside Gaza and receive life-changing medical care.

"This isn't about politics. This is about setting up the next generation to have a better life, a better opportunity, more exposure, more experiences," Stasia Suleiman said.



Abdullah Mukhaimer, 16, had many fans spectating as he played with Adaptive Sports Connection's amputee soccer team at the TOCA Soccer center in Lewis Center on July 10. *Barbara J. Perenti/The Columbus Dispatch*

Friends, community marveled at Mukhaimer's happy spirit, soccer skills

Rasoul, who founded the Columbus chapter of PCRF in 2014, is in a WhatsApp group chat of other PCRF members and Palestinian American friends in the Columbus area — a group that once had about 12 people.

But once photos started circling of Mukhaimer swimming, playing soccer and doing any sport under the sun even in the days before he got this prosthetic, Rasoul's network grew.

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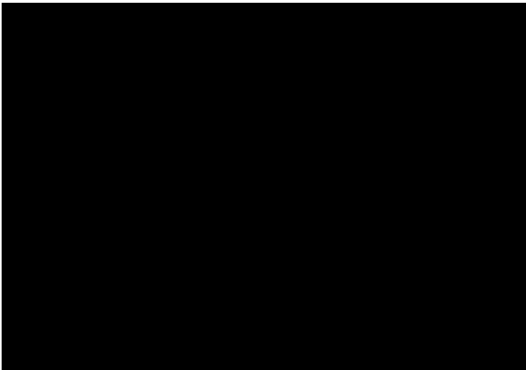
"The word spread, and now there are 61 people (in the group chat)," she said.

As soon as he landed in Ohio, his host mother, Reem Abusalha, of Powell, said, "He was running with the crutches, playing soccer with the crutches. He didn't wait to have his prosthetic to be active. ... and he was swimming in my pool with one leg and he was faster than ... other kids his age."

In celebration of his talents, those in the WhatsApp group organized a soccer game for him to play with other kids his age. And because of the confidence and joy he exudes on the field, Rasoul said, people opened up their hearts to him.

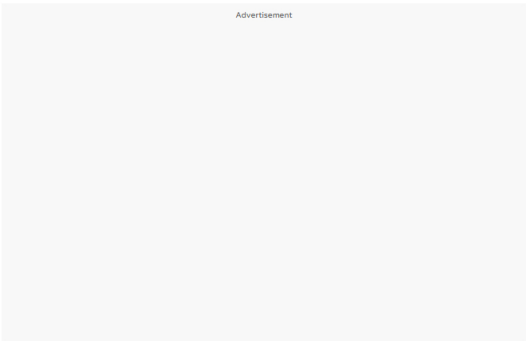
“The teens and the young adults in our community who are second generation Palestinian Americans or any connection to Middle East. ... They see he’s a lot like them. He loves soccer, he’s athletic. They feel that connection first,” she said.

“Believe it or not, a lot of these kids (in Columbus) do not speak Arabic and Abdullah only speaks Arabic. But sports and athletics and swimming and basketball are bringing all these kids together, even if we don’t speak the language fully.”



Abdullah Mukhaimer, 16, lost his leg to cancer while he was a child in the Gaza Strip. The Palestine Children's Relief Fund financed his trip to Columbus to receive a new prosthetic leg from Ace Prosthetics in Upper Arlington. Mukhaimer plays on a national amputee soccer team in Palestine. *Barbara J. Perenc/The Columbus Dispatch*

Rasoul and her friends rallied behind the 16-year-old during his month-long stay in the city, treating Mukhaimer to a Columbus Crew game and a meet-and-greet with the players, a tour of Ohio State’s campus and trips to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium and Center of Science and Industry (COSI).



Of all his adventures, his favorite was seeing the dinosaur exhibit at COSI, Mukhaimer said.

Ahead of his return home on Tuesday, Mukhaimer said he was looking forward to playing soccer with his new prosthetic leg, continuing to participate on the Palestine [National Team for Amputees](#) and, one day, returning to the United States for college.

Despite looking forward to reuniting with his family, Mukhaimer said he is grateful for all the support given to him by his doctors and the Columbus community.

“(Everyone here) is empathetic towards me, and I haven’t had that feeling in a long time.”

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