

# VOICES OF RAMTHA

Images: MSF

**“I learnt many things from this project; how to be strong and patient, to direct and motivate people.”**

## **ANAS MASADEH, NURSE SUPERVISOR (2013–2018)**



“The Ramtha project provided the highest level of care to war-wounded patients with the highest standard of infection control and it used the combined experience and expertise of the staff working there to get the job done.

Memories from Ramtha have remained with me; I remember how busy the project was, I remember stories of patients struggling to reach us! I remember how busy and tired my staff and colleagues were, I remember being on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Looking back, I do not think any of us realised how tired and busy we are, because the job there meant putting your own needs to one side and giving priority to those who needed our help the most.

I miss the Ramtha project a lot, I miss the walls and the beds in

what were busy wards back then. Those walls and beds told the many stories and memories of Syrian patients: their feeling, their heartaches and their homesickness for family, relatives and loved ones the war separated them from.

Personally, I learnt many things from this project; how to be strong and patient, how to direct and motivate people, and on a professional level, I learnt not to regret or give up on supporting patients. I also learnt more about team work and I benefitted from the diversity of staff experience.

Ramtha was different from other projects I worked in; in Ramtha, you had to be ready and available at all times, every hour of the day and every day of the week. You might have finished your official working hours doing your regular tasks, then suddenly, you turn off your computer, grab your keys

to leave, and you receive a text message that reads ‘you have a mass casualty’! Then, without even a request from your supervisor, your working day begins again, but you are happy to do it because to you, saving lives is not a job – it is a moral obligation and a humanitarian purpose.

I consider myself lucky to be a member of the MSF family and I am so proud to have worked in this project with a lovely team, and I will always be ready to work with MSF again.”



**“Ramtha project changed me from a regular healthcare provider to the person I am today.”**

## **ABDULLAH ALAWNEH OPERATION THEATRE SUPERVISOR 2013-2018**



“I have been an operation theatre (OT) nurse since 2009, but when I began my work in

the Ramtha project it was totally different in nature and spirit. I was the supervisor of the most critical MSF unit there, with an amazing team looking after the patients at all times. Only in this project could you see a full OT team working after 3am at full capacity, trying to save a person’s life from the jaws of death. Only in a project like this could I have been ready to respond 24 hours a day seven days a week for years. Only in this project could you become the father of a child, comforting him when he is crying because his father is stuck on the other side of the border.

Ramtha changed me from a regular healthcare provider to the person I am today – first and foremost a human

being, someone who really understands the meaning of putting all your knowledge and skills into saving lives.

The clocks in Ramtha felt so fast – one minute can make a lot of difference in the life of a patient. I remember the critical decisions taken in the operating theatres, like the choice between a patient’s life or the amputation of a limb. That is something you wouldn’t see in any other surgical theatre.

Something that haunts my memories of Ramtha is the story of a Syrian mother, standing at the OT door, crying so loud that she broke the hospital’s silence. She kept repeating a phrase I did not understand: ‘save the second one, save the second one’. I asked what that meant and her answer shook me. Her house had been bombed in an airstrike, both herself and her two children were injured, and she tried her best to bring them

both to Jordan, but couldn’t because of the continuous bombing and her injured shoulder that rendered her frail and powerless to carry both children. She was left with the most difficult decision a mother could make: which one of your sons would you choose to save and which one would you leave behind? She had to live with the knowledge that she left her other son behind to die. I know that a piece of her heart is still in Syria, and she’ll never get it back.

Her simple request was to ‘save the second one’ because she had already lost one. Every single time I remember this story, my tears betray me.

If somebody mentions the word ‘Ramtha’ to me, I am immediately filled with feelings of joy, pride, and a higher sense of humanity. Those were the golden days – served with the best guys.”

## DR HAYDAR ALWASH RAMTHA'S FIRST TRAUMA SURGEON

“Looking back on the few weeks I worked there, I remember the enthusiasm of the young members of staff. They were there most of the time, they were always ready to work more and never gave up the fight for every patient’s wellbeing.”

Long years ago, after the first gulf war, I became a refugee. It happened suddenly. In one day, we lost our place, our friends, hospital, house, and belongings and found ourselves in a completely new environment. I could relate to the suffering of the refugee patients” in Ramtha. The pain of their injuries were doubled by the pain of being a refugee.

One of the memories I have was the few years old girl who was brought to Ramtha after an explosion. None of her family accompanied her to the hospital where she stayed alone for few weeks. She had already lost one of her limbs in the explosion. I needed to take her to the operating theater several times. Without her mother with her, it was extremely difficult to comfort her in that situation. I remember how the other ladies in the ward looked after her kindly during the few weeks she stayed without her family. It was heart-wrenching for me.”

**“They were there most of the time, they were always ready to work more and never gave up the fight for every patient’s wellbeing.”**



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Images: MSF



# LETIZIA GUALDONI

## MEDICAL TEAM LEADER 2014-2015



“Ramtha was not an MSF Mission. Ramtha was THE MSF Mission. It was weird because it was not the classic MSF set up: Jordan is peaceful and this was a luxurious mission compared to others (we had good accommodation, amenities and freedom of movement). Nonetheless, Ramtha was THE Mission. It was the mission where I gave my all; the mission where I gained the most. I gave my blood, my tears and my soul to make that hospital work. The team gave their best for the Syrian patients. I gave every last drop of love I had for both the Syrian patients and the Jordanian staff. And from patients and from the staff, I got so much that everything I gave was paid back a million times.

I learned from our patients, from their relatives, from their love of life, from their resilience, from their way of taking care of each other, even from one hospital bed to another, it was amazing. I learned from my Jordanian colleagues, from their devotion to taking care of patients, from their beautiful souls and their capacity to do their best despite everything. My work here gave me a series of life lessons that have changed me deeply. Ramtha made me a better person. Ramtha made me a better human.

I am always so proud to tell the story of one patient in particular. She suffered greatly from burns injuries.

She was so much in pain... shouting all the time, refusing doctors. It was a very long time before she could turn the tears into smiles again.

But finally it happened. As her pain decreased, so did her tears and fears, and she started to trust us. She left her bed to explore the yard.

When we discovered she liked flowers, we decided to buy her a gift. We stopped one day at a flower market on the way to the hospital. When we arrived, our car was full of flowers. The rest of the team must have thought that we'd gone mad. We gave the flowers to our patient, to plant them in the yard, and she was so happy. She took it so seriously. She did a fantastic job. She even wrote the names of the doctors and nurses that had taken care of her with little white stones – it was beautiful. The day she finally left, to go back to her beloved in Syria, I bought her some bulbs of my favorite flowers. I asked her to plant them into the ground in Syria. I wanted a bit of my love to reach Syria and to grow there. I know it's stupid and romantic, but I felt it. I wanted to send her back into a suffering country, with some colour, some kindness, some love. I still dream that in a little garden, outside a safe house in Syria, there are these flowers, and that inside the house, she is happy and in peace.

**“I still dream that in a little garden, outside a safe house in Syria, there are these flowers, and that inside the house, she is happy and in peace.”**

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# MOHAMMAD ODEH TECHNICAL LOGISTICS ASSISTANT 2015–2018



“The emergency room in Ramtha was crowded like a beehive; an ambulance car evacuating the injured, and the operation rooms full of hardworking staff in green scrubs branded with the MSF logo.

I will never forget the smile of an injured man who had lost his vision completely. His high spirits filled my heart with hope. I do not remember his name, but his smile is carved deeply in my memory. The first I heard of

him was that a young man in his early thirties arrived at the hospital with injuries in various places, I heard that he lost his eyesight and an arm. I imagined he would be devastated, shattered by his condition. I decided to go visit him and sit with him, maybe I could change something or offer some support. But when I arrived to see him, I was surprised to find a young man seated among other injured people, laughing excitedly. I asked one of my colleagues about him, and I was surprised to find out it was

him I had come to see. How happy I was to see him and his beautiful soul. His wonderful smile gave us hope, I had to stop staring and smiling, and I went back to work feeling positive and energised.

The Ramtha project was distinguished – it saved precious lives and souls – It saw people arriving, breathing their their last breath and gave them a second chance at life. It was indeed a unique place to be.”

“How happy I was to see him and his beautiful soul. His wonderful smile gave us hope.”



# IBTISAM MASSAD PSYCHOLOGIST 2013–2018

**“It planted hope in the hearts of patients who thought that their lives have stopped; a hope for a brighter future ahead.”**



“I was fortunate to be part of this particular project. I learnt a lot in my time in Ramtha as a mental health counselor.

I faced major challenges such as raising awareness of the importance of mental healthcare, and sensitising people on how to deal with patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I learnt patience, acceptance and the constant pursuit of what is best for the patient’s mental health.

I particularly remember the amputees I had contact with, especially children. They exhibited so much energy, courage, and determination to overcome their trauma and continue to receive their prosthesis and start all over again – a clean slate. Ramtha has definitely cultivated and polished my personality, and changed my viewpoints – based on the situation I came across and managed. I developed the passion to understand, learn and benefit from everyone.

Ramtha to me was the safe haven and the cozy home. I used to call this project “the project that creates hope and draws smiles” – It planted hope in the hearts of patients who thought that their lives have stopped; a hope for a brighter future ahead.

Ramtha will remain in my heart and mind with all its tiny and vivid details.”



# VOICES OF RAMTHA

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“I witnessed the changing situation in Ramtha from the start, when there were influxes of war-wounded Syrians because of the intense fighting across the border – until the eventual closure of the project.

I cannot put the intense periods of work into words, but I can say we worked constantly for 24 hours a day in the emergency room (ER), changing shifts while we continued to receive patients. There were many traumatic limb amputations – minors who reached the ER, some with family members and others unaccompanied. There were fresh wounds – sometimes I felt I could smell the gunpowder mixed with blood.

As staff, we rushed to stabilise patients and prepare them for surgery or a referral. This intensity and the rush to receive the war-wounded influx – I only experienced it with MSF. The feeling of working flat out, but knowing it isn't enough – I only felt that in Ramtha.

Ramtha was my first time working with an international team of medical and non-medical professionals. I saw many different cultures working together in harmony – as if they were one person in the ER.

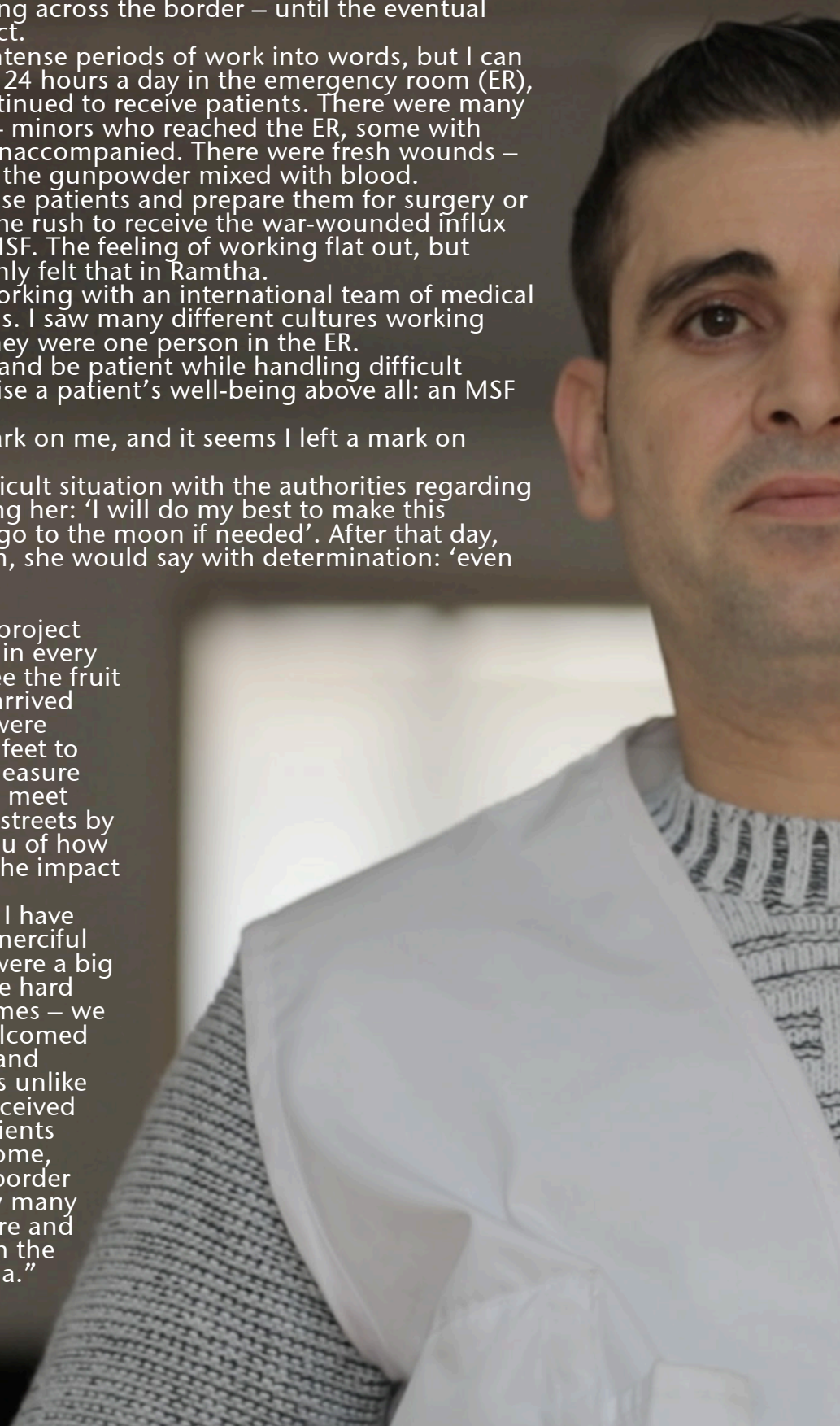
I learned how to keep calm and be patient while handling difficult situations, and how to prioritise a patient's well-being above all: an MSF principle I cherish.

My time in Ramtha left a mark on me, and it seems I left a mark on some.

Once we came across a difficult situation with the authorities regarding one patient; I remember telling her: ‘I will do my best to make this situation work, I would even go to the moon if needed’. After that day, whenever we faced a problem, she would say with determination: ‘even to the moon!’

Being part of MSF and that project was unique. Challenges exist in every job, but with MSF, you can see the fruit of your work: some patients arrived in ER almost dead, and later were discharged and back on their feet to face life again. It's always a pleasure and overwhelming when you meet some of these patients in the streets by coincidence – they remind you of how much MSF did for them and the impact it had on their life.

Saying goodbye is not easy, I have felt conflicted ever since the merciful doors of Ramtha closed. We were a big family, together we shared the hard days of work and the good times – we remained unchanged and welcomed new staff every few months, and briefed them that Ramtha was unlike any other project. We even received breakfast invitations from patients in their wards – they felt at home, although ‘home’ was only a border away. Now I think of just how many great memories we made there and how many stories were told in the wards and corridors of Ramtha.”



**ADHAM  
BASHABSHEH**  
**ASSISTANT  
PROJECT  
COORDINATOR**  
**2013-2018**

“together we shared the hard  
days and the good times.”



## HUSSEIN AL-QUDAH ER/WARD DOCTOR 2013- 2016



“When I left Ramtha, it was only a physical departure – I am still there spiritually. The aid we provided, and the tremendous effort spent was a life lesson. Being a part of the Ramtha project that not only treated severely traumatised people, but helped in reclaiming their dignity, is something I will be proud of my whole life.

I still remember back in 2014 when an unaccompanied Syrian child arrived in Ramtha with amputated legs and an amputated right hand. He was physically and emotionally destroyed when he arrived. Months later, he left Ramtha hospital walking skillfully on his prosthesis. The latest update I received is that he realised his dream; he learnt how to swim despite his new condition. To him, this was not an obstacle he couldn't overcome with stubbornness and persistence. The courage and patience this little child showed is something that us adults are still working to achieve.”

**“The courage and patience this little child showed is something that us adults are still working to achieve.”**



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# TAMARA KAILEH GENERAL SURGEON 2013–2015



**“how strength is born from fragility, how hope blossoms from desperation, how surrender turns into will, and how faith makes all illogical and seemingly impossible things possible!”**



“The days in the Ramtha project were filled with blood, shrapnel, amputated extremities, head injuries, abdominal trauma, burns, and other things that surpass horror movie scenes. Our days were unpredictable, we never knew what we would encounter that day or that hour, how many patients we would receive, or how bad the injuries would be. But waiting restlessly was way better than the moment when our emergency room (ER) turned into a battlefield where everyone fought to save lives! In that moment everyone and everything melted into one force, trying to save as many lives, limbs, heartbeats, and hopes as possible. Even other patients helped – with their prayers.

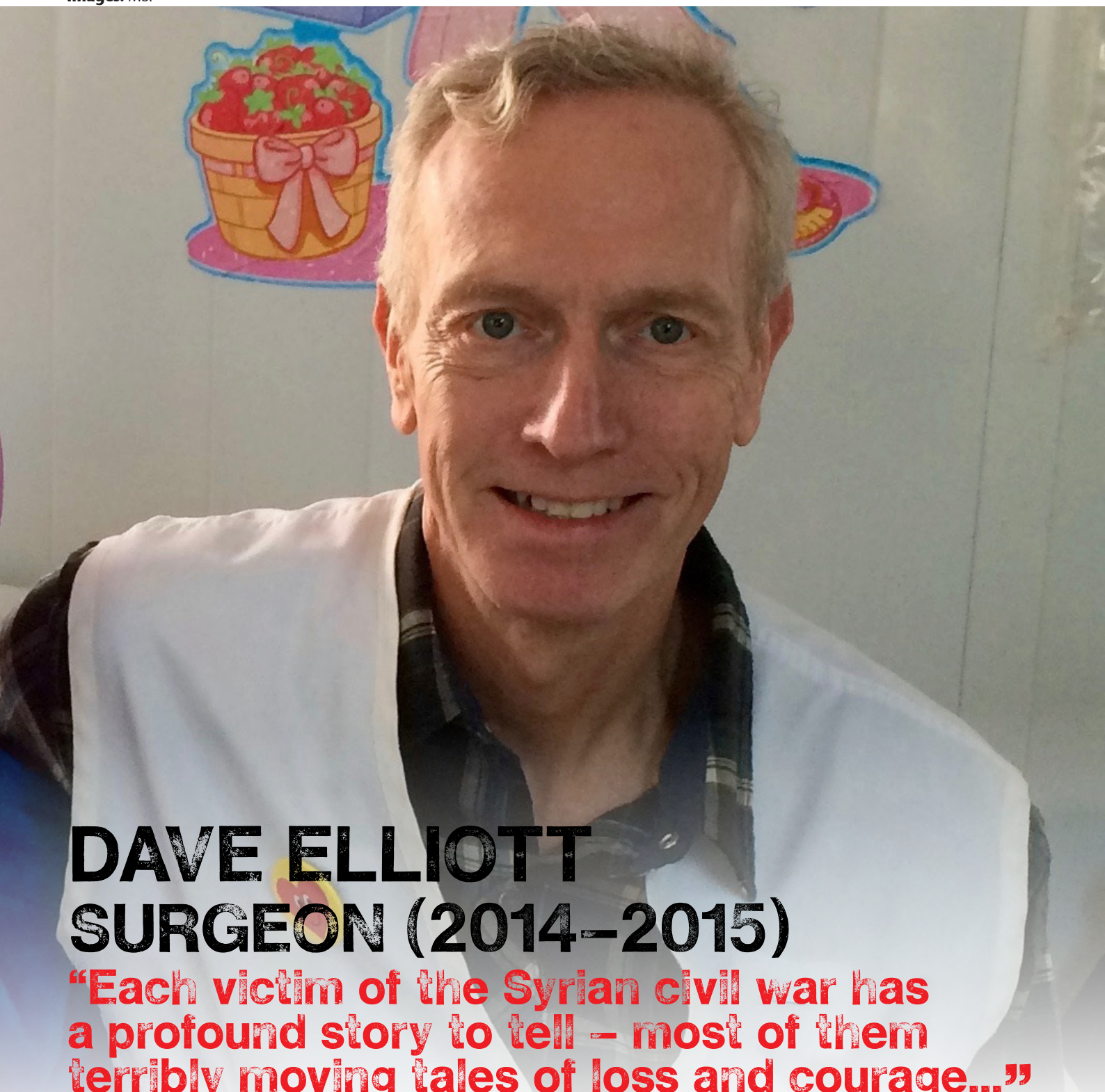
Lots of memories stayed with me from the Ramtha project, when the word Ramtha is mentioned it puts paradoxical thoughts in my mind, how strength is born from fragility, how hope blossoms from desperation, how surrender turns into will, and how faith makes all illogical and seemingly impossible things possible! When I think of Ramtha I remember the small garden that Omar, one of the guards of the Ramtha project, planted at the front of the ward building. How caring he was for every plant, as though he were trying in his own way to encourage the patients, to imitate their homes in Syria, surrounded by greenery and decorated with flowers. It was as if he was telling them that they would be able to rebuild their homes once they were better, and that's why they should be strong and overcome their disabilities.

My work there changed me in a lot of ways. It taught me that life goes on, and that human beings are way stronger than they think they are, and that they're more than just flesh. It made me cherish and treasure the regular boring days we used

to complain about, it made me thankful for the safety of my loved ones, and for every moment in my life that I'm alive and healthy. Ramtha was actually my first mission, I've always dreamt to work with MSF, and was really lucky that I had the chance to fulfill this dream. But Ramtha was unique in so many ways. It was touching to see people from different parts of the world, different nationalities, beliefs, and ages work together for the same cause, holding the same desire and passion to help those who were unfortunate – who did not choose to become victims of a ruthless war.


Many patients are still and will forever be in my memory, patients who were a source of true inspiration. One of them was a little boy who arrived with shrapnel wounds all over his body, an amputated lower limb, an amputated hand, and missing one eye. This boy was a miracle. Despite all his injuries, and his loneliness – since he was alone with no family to accompany him, he had the highest spirits I have ever seen. He was strong, smart, and creative. He was an inspiration to other patients, especially those much older than him who had given up on their inner battles. He showed them that it was way too soon.

What was remarkable about him was that he didn't give up on his dreams, he wanted to grow up and get married and have children and I'm sure he will find a charming girl that will fall in love with him and his strong will in future.”



## DAVE ELLIOTT SURGEON (2014–2015)

**“Each victim of the Syrian civil war has a profound story to tell – most of them terribly moving tales of loss and courage...”**

 “The Ramtha project taught me that being a surgeon entails more than merely providing technical skill and knowledge to treat disease or injury. Given the magnitude of the horrific wounds we encountered, the extensive number the operations we had to perform on each victim, and the length of time our Syrian patients stayed in our hospital, they all became our family (and we became theirs). I've learned that sitting with a patient for as little as 10 minutes, providing a listening ear and then a comforting word, are often more valued than an expertly performed operation. Each victim of the Syrian civil war has a profound story to tell - most of them terribly moving tales of loss and courage - and, like all my fellow international and Jordanian healthcare colleagues, I became a better doctor and human being by serving on the MSF team providing them care.”

**“I found strength, patience and tolerance.”**



## **RULA MARAHFEH PHYSIOTHERAPIST 2013-2018**



“It was not easy for me to shift into an extraordinary and quite difficult job in my career. I

used to encounter patients with simple injuries and stable psychological conditions; patients who received complete support from their families. In 2013, I started working in the Ramtha project in northern Jordan. At that time, there was a major influx of war-wounded Syrians to the hospital because of the ongoing conflict. We had lots of physiotherapy sessions on a daily basis to help our patients cope with their trauma injuries and to help them return to their regular activities, almost close to normal as possible and as much as we could - providing them with

the ambulatory assistance and the prostheses that they needed.

I still remember that precious little kid, 9 years of age, who was admitted into our ward with multiple and severe injuries. He had double lower limb and hand amputations, an eye injury, and on top of this condition, he was in our wards alone for months without the familiar face of a relative or caregiver. He was crying all the time, depressed and unmotivated. With time and with a strong reliable team, a trusted warm family – something you can only find in Ramtha – he no longer felt like a stranger, he even had visitors and gained the admiration of staff and other patients in the hospital. After

many physiotherapy sessions and with a strong will, he started regaining control over his body and he trained to fit his prosthesis. Today, he is not only walking on his prosthesis, but also participating in swimming competitions, he is very sociable, independent and inspiring to any and all who meet him.

I learned a lot in Ramtha. From all the challenges, I found strength, patience and tolerance. I discovered new cultures and acquired further medical knowledge. My personality changed for the better, and I am very proud that I once belonged to a great talented team and a special project called ‘Ramtha’.”



# LUNA HAMMAD MEDICAL DOCTOR 2014–2015



“I moved from MSF’s post-operative rehabilitation project in Zaatari refugee camp in

Mafraq governorate to the Ramtha emergency surgical project in April 2014. It was very hard for me to witness and accept the condition and the number of severely-injured patients arriving in the emergency room (ER). This is war – a man-made evil that causes the greatest suffering to humanity.

The beds of Ramtha project were full, and wards were busy day and night. We were managing the most complex medical conditions and the smallest details as well; such as buying an ice cream to make a small child’s day. We were more than ER/ward doctors in that place, we were also friends, family members and counselors to those patients, just as they were to us.

We would receive four or five patients a day, admit those that we could manage to treat, and try to find a referral option as soon as possible to save the others. We could hear the bombing from the other side of the border, it was non-stop. We were terrified to even think of how many people might be wounded and might have died in that moment – that sound crippled our thoughts and nurtured our fears.

The wounded children of Ramtha left an imprint on my life to this day. There were children who had lost a

limb, an eye, a kidney, with severe face burns or multiple fractures, yet they were the most beautiful children I had ever seen in my life. They were filled with life, love, and fun. We were often exhausted and frustrated because of the challenges we faced in our work, and those children were the positive energy, the hope and the strength that kept us on our feet. They were the reason we were there every day and why we wanted to come to work every morning.

I will never forget the six-year old kid that was playing with his limb stump, comparing it to an ice cream cone and then laughing so hard at his metaphor. At that very moment, he was an inspiration – he reminded others of his beautiful-spirit of his strength in coping with such a painful injury so well.

I will never forget the four-year old kid who once asked for a green lettuce, simply because he likes to eat fresh green leaves.

I will never forget the 13-year old quadriplegic child who, despite his condition, used to sing joyfully and read books on daily basis, turning the pages successfully with his nose, and when asked, his only request would be to scratch his head or brush his hair.

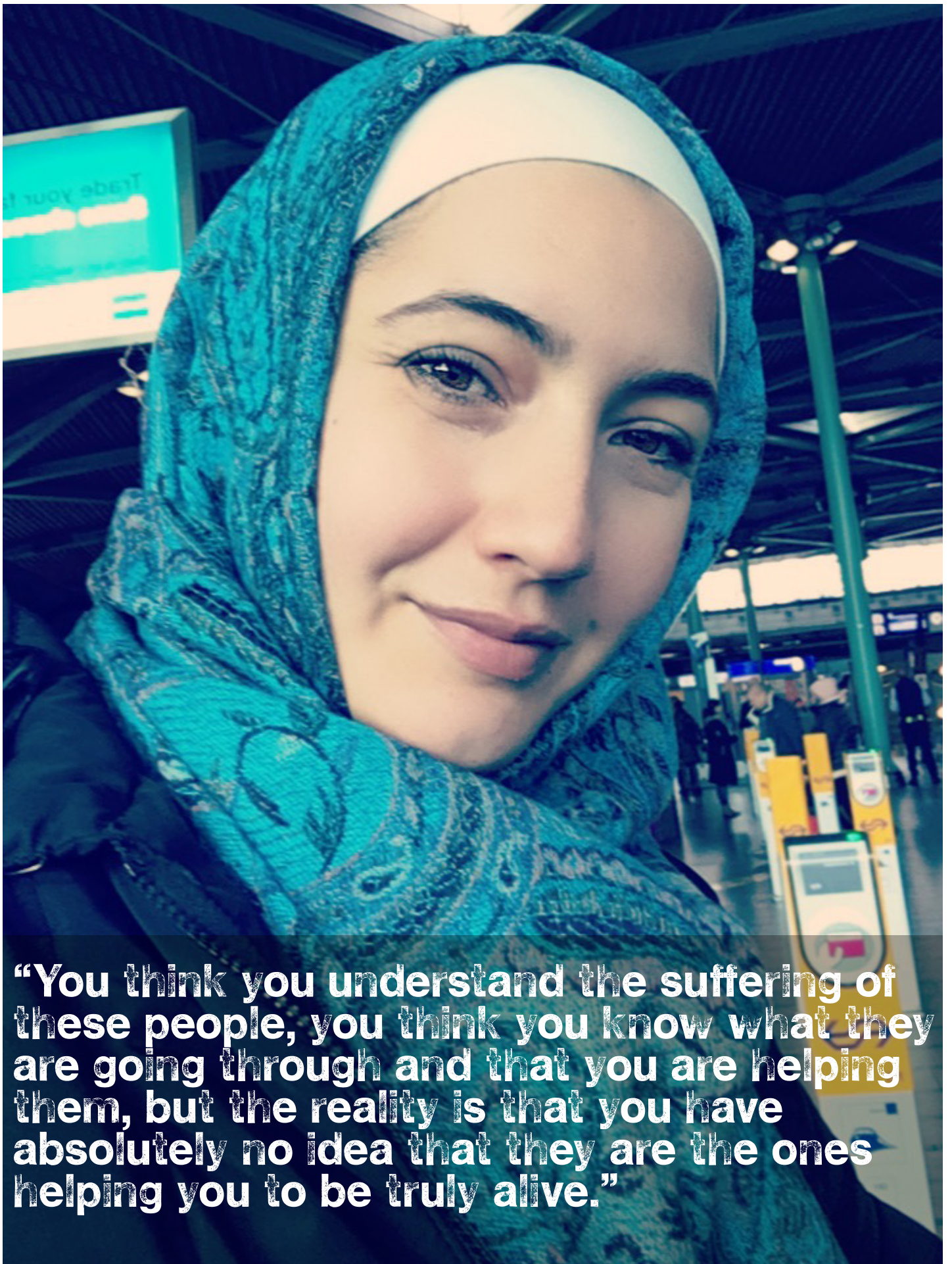
The Ramtha project made me see everything through different eyes, to appreciate and be thankful for every single little thing I have. I learned to be patient, less

materialistic and to see the good in people.

You think you understand the suffering of these people, you think you know what they are going through and that you are helping them, but the reality is that you have absolutely no idea that they are the ones helping you to be truly alive.

Nadine\* did not remember her exact age, she said it was either 20 or 23 or maybe even 18. She was 25-weeks pregnant and one day she was applying some make-up in front of a big mirror in her room. She had just finished putting a bright coloured lipstick on when her husband arrived. He came back from fighting with a gun in his hand, and he set it right in front of her. The two began to joke, and she said he wouldn't dare to shoot her. The last thing she remembers seeing was fumes coming out of her belly! Her husband had shot her by mistake. When she opened her eyes again, she found herself in Ramtha, and with a confused look on her face, she asked where she was and what had happened, and if her baby was ok. The bullet had pierced her abdomen, and reached her back but it miraculously missed her spine and uterus. Nadine and her baby were saved – her story of faith, hope, and strength will forever live with me.”

**\* Name changed to protect the privacy of the patient**



**“You think you understand the suffering of these people, you think you know what they are going through and that you are helping them, but the reality is that you have absolutely no idea that they are the ones helping you to be truly alive.”**

Images: MSF

# HADEEL AL-FAYYAD NURSE, 2014–2018

➤➤ “After the Ramtha project had been in operation for more than four years, our staff had grown to understand the injuries of our patients very well, as well as the best methods for timely intervention. This knowledge enhanced our ability to treat patients rapidly and effectively, and to avoid medical errors.

When I think of Ramtha, I think of a special woman – a 20-year-old patient, a double-amputee that was recently and happily-married. She was admitted to our facility soon after she was injured. She was eight-months pregnant despite the severity of her injury. She completed her treatment after many surgeries, many changes of dressing and cleaning of wounds, she was ready to be fitted for her prosthesis, when suddenly she began to feel the pains of labour. I still remember accompanying her to give birth, she squeezed my hand with all her strength,

the strength I thought she was saving for her delivery. She whispered: “pray for me Hadeel, I want to stay strong because I want to have a normal delivery and give birth to a beautiful baby girl who will compensate me for all I have lost”. I placed my other hand on hers to reassure her and give her comfort “We are all here with you, beside you, until you recover, rest assured”.

She gave birth to a beautiful girl just as she said. As she held her in her arms, her willpower, persistence and strength dazzled me. For a moment I thought: ‘how could she survive both the pain of her injuries and the pain of labour?’ I knew deep within that the strength of us all is derived from the power of such mothers.

It is from the womb of suffering that hope is born.

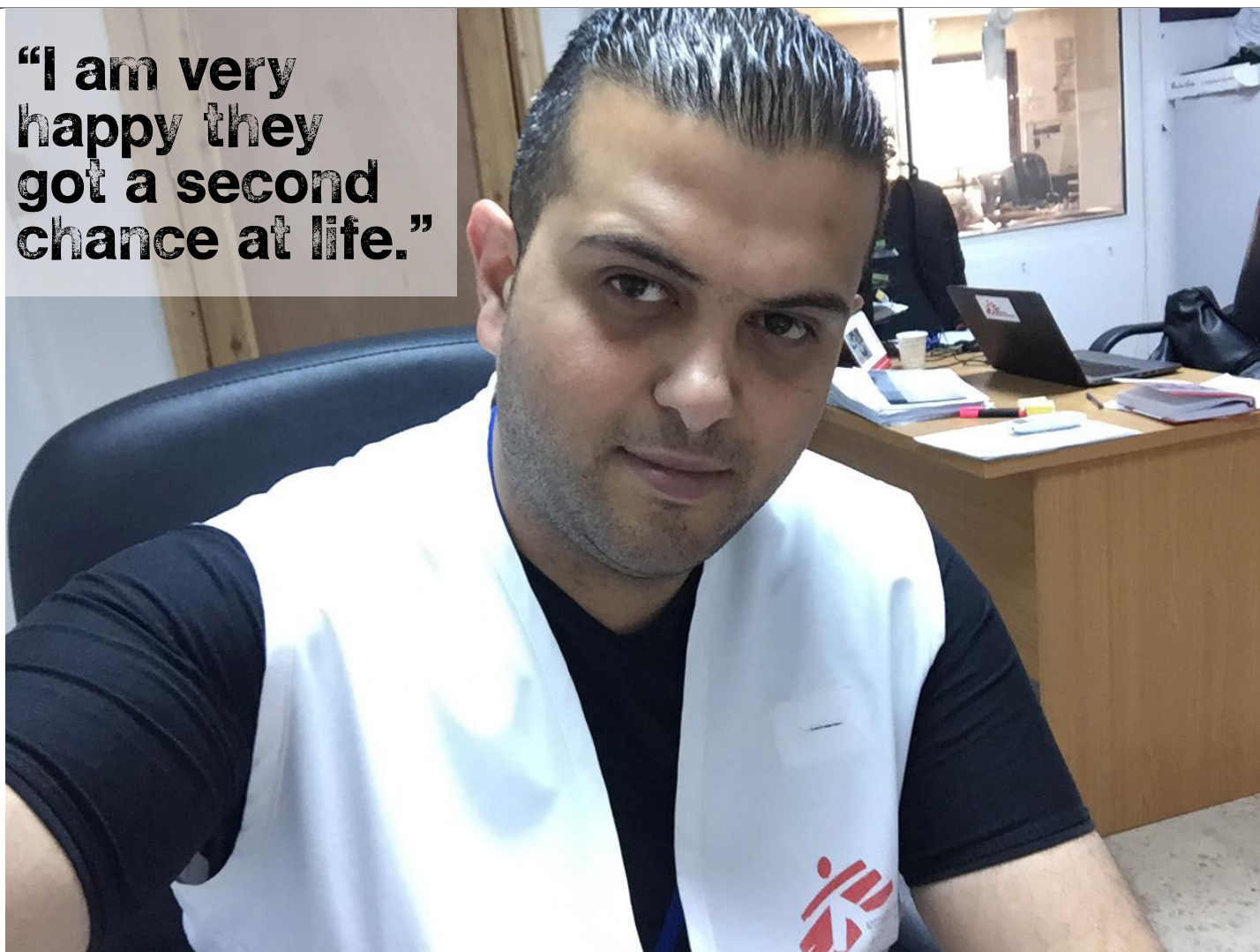
I'll never forget the time when we heard the sound of

an explosion in Syria, followed by powerful tremors, which shook the hospital. I was standing in the female ward at the time, when suddenly I felt two tiny arms clinging to my legs with all their power, they were the arms of a little child – barely four years old, whose father had been killed in a bombing and whose mother passed away just two years ago. He was screaming ‘Oh, God, what is this sound?’. I could not help but take the child into my arms. I still remember how he tightly he embraced me, with fear in his heart – the bombing brought back painful memories from home.

Eventually he returned to Syria with his grandmother. After that I always thought of him when I heard an explosion: ‘What is happening to him? How scared is he? Who is holding him at this moment? Was he hurt?’ I hope he found safety in the end, I tried to calm my fears.”



**“I am very happy they got a second chance at life.”**



## **MOHAMMAD HATAMLEH MEDICAL TEAM ASSISTANT (2013-2018)**



There were a lot of challenges on the way, the hardest was to ensure there was enough blood for the patients, enough blood to save lives.

This particular project changed my perception of humanity. It taught me to give my all, without expecting anything in return. What was unique about this project was the readiness and preparedness of the Ramtha project; receiving patients and

providing lifesaving operations without any hesitation to counter the spinning hands of the clock.

Today I live with the memory of hundreds of grateful faces – patients that were treated in Ramtha. I am very happy they got a second chance at life.

When I think of Ramtha, I immediately go remember that 29-year-old man – the same age as me. He had a shrapnel wound in his neck, this injury cost him his voice, and he experienced difficulty

in communicating, drinking and eating. But still, he was there in the ward, smiling every time you looked at him or when you tried to speak with him. He later underwent a tracheostomy which helped him to regain his voice slightly. His first words were "Thank you God, I can speak again." His eyes could no longer bear the weight of his tears, and they came rolling down to expose his happiness."

Images: MSF

# KHALID TAWAFSHEH CLEANER 2013–2018

**“I believe what contributed to the success of this project was that everyone was working with their heart and mind to bring about a change - to make a positive impact on the people who need us the most.”**



“Ramtha was a successful project because it was humanitarian and medical, working for the benefit of our Syrian brothers. When I am reminded of Ramtha, I immediately think of my hardworking colleagues – who worked continuously to ensure the effectiveness of this humanitarian project. I remember the people I came to know from across the globe – without Ramtha I would not have had the chance to meet such fascinating people and to learn about these different cultures.

This project has developed in me a greater understanding of humanitarian work, I grew more passionate about my work and I liked seeing my colleagues’ devotion and commitment to their jobs. My day used to begin with smiles from my colleagues every morning when they saw me, it gave me a positive energy to begin my day and to ensure I completed my tasks fully. I believe what contributed to the success of this project was that everyone was working with their heart and mind to bring about a change – to make a positive impact on the people who need us the most. I am very happy I got to witness and be part of the success of Ramtha.”



# MASSIMILIANO REBAUDENGO FIRST PROJECT COORDINATOR 2013-2014

**“I believe we did something important in Ramtha, and I’ll always be grateful to the team that made it possible.”**



“We envisioned, set-up, and opened the project in 2013. My time in Ramtha was tough. It took time to set-up and open the project, and we had to overcome many bumps along the way. However, I do know that we set up the project at the right time in the right place. I always had the feeling we were doing something important in Ramtha.

One memory in particular has stuck with me. I remember very clearly a conversation I had with one of the Syrian doctors we regularly met with during the assessment and set-up phase of the project. The doctor was telling me how, in the 90s, he went to the former Yugoslavia working as a volunteer during the conflict. There, he had the opportunity to see MSF’s intervention, though he was not working for MSF. He saw what MSF could do. Now, almost two decades later, he asked me why MSF was not doing the same for Syrians. Instead, he was the one doing it, with other Syrians, and without any concrete help from us. I remember I promised him that I would not leave Ramtha before as MSF project was up and running. This conversation helped me to make Ramtha work, and I am happy I was able to keep my promise.

Ramtha means a lot to me. It was the first time that I was able to start a project from scratch, in the sense that I was not only the project coordinator who opened it, but I was also part of the assessment team that proposed it. As I said, I do believe we did something important there, and I’ll always be grateful to the team that made it possible. I have talked about me a lot, but we should remember that the ones who really made this project effective were the staff members I had the privilege to work with.”



# MICHELLE MAYS PROJECT COORDINATOR 2014



“When I arrived in Ramtha, everything was moving very fast. The wards were extremely busy – both with newly-arrived patients and

patients who were still recovering. Most of the patients coming from southern Syria into Jordan went first to the Ramtha emergency room (ER), which meant that at any time, day or night, the ER could be full of patients. We weren't able to treat all types of injuries at Ramtha, but we collaborated with a dedicated group of Syrian doctors and activists who worked tirelessly to find other hospitals that could treat these patients. There was a lot of team work – it was never easy but everyone really pushed through, worked hard, and persevered.

Most of our patients were separated from their families and friends. Imagine being injured and having to go to another country to access medical care, while your loved ones are left in a war zone! On top of this, many of our patients had injuries which completely changed their lives. A patient who had a leg amputation would often need multiple surgeries, weeks of painful dressing changes, and months of rehabilitation and physical therapy to learn how to walk with a prosthesis. It never got old watching patients walk for the first time.

We, the staff and patients, became like a family. We saw each other every day, at our best and at our worst, but at the end of the day we were bonded together. We celebrated together. We mourned together.

I think our greatest achievement as a team was perseverance. Nothing about Ramtha was easy and even though we were often exhausted and frustrated, every day everyone showed up – leaving our daily worries and personal battles aside – and we fought a different battle every working day, all for our patients, for a better dignified life.

As MSF staff, we believe that everyone should have access to medical care. This is the battle we fought every day in Ramtha and our patients kept us going. Whether it was a six-year-old who had both of his legs blown off or a 25-year-old combatant with abdominal injuries, every patient deserved to be treated with dignity and the best medical care we could provide.”

**“...at the end of the day we were bonded together. We celebrated together. We mourned together.”**





# AHMAD DARDOUR PHYSIOTHERAPIST 2013–2017



**“It is enough for me to know that there are people in this world that I met in Ramtha, and that they care about me and pray for me when they go to sleep at night.”**



“When I began my work with MSF in Ramtha, the influx of patients started slowly. Later on, patients were arriving in unbelievably large numbers. Our staff, from all departments, exerted huge efforts to respond to the rising needs. Our main concern, despite the big influx of patients, was providing high quality medical care to the patients. Our humanitarian principles and medical ethics obliged us to do our best for them.

When I think of Ramtha, I immediately remember the pain, destruction, tears and sighs of those spouses, widows and children. MSF’s presence there at that moment and time was crucial, as it meant saving the lives of wounded patients one at a time – when they were in need of good medical care but could not afford it.

The relationship between the staff was special. We were one unit working in harmony for one cause – more like a family than co-workers. There was no difference between a project coordinator and any other staff member, because each person was doing their job to make a difference in the lives of the people we served. Each member of MSF staff in that project represented the organisation; each one was MSF.

When I remember those days, I am reminded of the happiness that MSF brought into the lives of the patients after days, nights or even weeks of sorrow. I am often reminded of one patient in particular: he cried tears of joy when he received his prosthesis, realising that his dreams were no longer crushed – going back home and being reunited with loved ones was finally possible. These different emotions overwhelmed me and filled my heart with joy. It is enough for me to know that there are people in this world that I met in Ramtha, and that they care about me and pray for me when they go to sleep at night. I have become a better person for having played a role in these people’s lives, and having been part of the Ramtha project.”

# PETER RINKER PROJECT COORDINATOR 2015, 2016–2017



**“Looking into the eyes of our patients, especially children, and talking to them about their next steps after discharge gave me a lot of energy to run this project.”**



“Even though I had already been working for eight years with MSF, it took me a while to get used to walking through our two wards of 40 beds in Ramtha. The high number of severely-injured patients, often with amputated limbs and severe eye and face injuries, was hard to see. The suffering was massive and our contribution was little, compared to the number of other war-wounded Syrians who needed us, but could not reach us.

Of course, for the patient who made it to our facility, the treatment was often life-saving. Looking into the eyes of our patients, especially children, and talking to them about their next steps after discharge gave me a lot of energy to run this project.

I remember clearly back when Jordan’s borders with Syria firmly closed in mid-2016. It was extremely difficult to be in Ramtha at the time. As the team and myself heard the raging sound of explosions, we were haunted by many questions; ‘Are there any wounded on the other side? If there are, did they manage to reach a hospital safely and quickly? Were they able to receive the medical care they needed? Would they be able to cross the border over to us if hospitals in Syria could not treat them?’ Most of these questions no one had answers to.”

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## VOICES OF RAMTHA

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**“All you can do really when the world has their eyes and ears closed is to make the difference, go above and beyond and make it happen!”**



# RENATE SINKE PROJECT COORDINATOR 2014–2015



"It was midday on Monday in Ramtha when my phone beeped urgently: 'One case to the ER. Next 15 minutes. One-month-old baby. Multiple shrapnel.'

'Oh God. More collateral damage from this horrible war, and its indiscriminate bombings and airstrikes,' I said to my colleague as we drove back to Ramtha, a town in northwestern Jordan along the Syrian border, where MSF had a clinic. Text messages like these were all too common during the heavy fighting of June 2015.

More than 75% of the injured we received in Ramtha arrived with terrible blast wounds. Head injuries were especially bad because CT scans weren't available. The others we treated as best we could. The wounds told stories, and I want to tell you one.

Almost five months earlier, an unconscious 18-year-old man I'll call Mohannad\* had arrived in our ER, with severe neurological trauma and in urgent need of an amputation to his upper leg. We weren't able to provide care for unconscious neurological patients, so the medics decided Mohannad should move to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for life support. However, our extraordinary orthopaedic surgeon still thought the amputation should go ahead, to give the young man some dignity when he died.

Six long weeks, Mohannad lay in an unconscious state. The medical team leader played music in his room, and we talked to comfort him on daily visits. Then something happened that I will never forget. Mohannad opened eyes with a blank stare. It took another week before he spoke. The nurse didn't want to translate them as he said it was 'bad language'. It didn't matter, he had talked.

Bit by bit, Mohannad recovered. He returned to surgery to shape his leg for prosthesis, and received psychological support. The trauma had left its mark, and being with Mohannad felt like being with a small child. Nevertheless I never met someone with more power and determination. Everyday he exercised, taking steps with a walker. To challenge him, I'd stand in front of him, being careful not to receive a head bump or punch in the stomach. His roommates warned him not to hit the 'mudira' (boss) and demanded he apologise. After that, we all had a good laugh.

Then came the difficult day when Mohannad really wanted to return to his home and family in Syria, against the advice of the MSF team. We put him on medication to help prevent daily seizures – medicine was extremely scant due to the then-4-year-long war.

After three months, we received a call that Mohannad's medication ran out, and he started having daily seizures. The conflict had worsened, and it wasn't possible for him to resupply. I won't tell you how we did it, but we did manage to get another 15 months of medication to him. He had proven that he had the strength and courage to survive against all odds!

This is just one of the hundreds of special stories I could have shared. But the most important thing is that I could have not done it alone. The team was extraordinary, they went above and beyond to make the difference. It was at my farewell party that I received a video confirmation that Mohannad had received the medication and I could not have been given a better goodbye present than that.

All you can do really when the world has their eyes and ears closed is to make the difference, go above and beyond and make it happen!"

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Images: MSF

**NATHEER BANI KHALAF  
TECHNICAL LOGISTICIAN  
ASSISTANT AND BIOMEDICAL  
2013–2016**





**“Ramtha meant challenges. There, I learnt that nothing is impossible if you are determined to achieve your goal.”**



“I worked as Techlog Assistant and Biomedical Officer at the same time. I was tasked with renovating the space that was allocated to MSF in the Ramtha Government Hospital so that it would be well prepared to receive patients. We were given three months as a timeline before the medical team would begin their actual duties in the project.

The work was tough, day and night we raced against time to overcome the obstacles and finish on schedule – we wanted to open as soon as possible so that we could alleviate some of the suffering of the injured who were caught in the crossfire. It was done at last – thank God.

Ramtha meant challenges. There, I learnt that nothing is impossible if you are determined to achieve your goal. I was in charge of all maintenance and engineering work in the hospital. Ramtha was a project full of team spirit. Ramtha was a place where you felt human and practiced your role as a humanitarian.

I have worked with a number of international organisations, but working with MSF in Ramtha was different to the rest. It was not a referral hospital, meaning that major surgeries took place in Ramtha, which required the presence of various and complex pieces of equipment that the medical staff needed to operate. This equipment needed a very high level of maintenance to ensure it would continue to function, and this was a great responsibility that I had to shoulder throughout my time there.”

# VOICES OF RAMTHA

Images: MSF

**“I was happy to be a reason to wipe the sorrow from their faces and draw a smile, especially the children.”**



## ZAKI BASHABSHEH WATCHMAN 2013–2018

“I began work in the Ramtha project on 18 October 2013. It's my hometown – this place that has embraced our Syrian brothers, fleeing their war-stricken country and seeking refuge in Jordan.



They were in search of safety, security and a dignified life after they had lost homes, family members and even limbs to that war.

Since Ramtha was very close to the Jordanian-Syrian border, it was decided that a project providing emergency healthcare and referrals should be established here.

Through my work, I met colleagues who became like a family, I can only describe

them as ‘wonderful people’. I learnt a lot from them, most importantly how to save a life and provide the best possible care. Through our daily interactions, I learnt how to be patient. I even developed my communication skills through talking to international staff and to the families and caregivers of patients. I came to realise that I had responsibility, and would play a role in these people’s lives, and I was happy to be a reason to wipe the sorrow from their faces and draw a smile, especially the children.

When talking to some of the patients and exchanging laughs and jokes, I tried to help them by communicating their needs to my colleagues

and the relevant people. Some of the injured trusted me enough to tell me their secrets and share anecdotes and personal memories. I was privileged to listen, and I guarded such details to respect their privacy the same way I guarded the front door to keep them safe. As security staff, we worked day and night to ensure the safety and security of these patients.

I am still in contact with many of the staff who worked in Ramtha. They are my good and beloved friends.

I wish MSF prosperity, God bless this organisation and bless those who give without asking for anything in return.”



## CAITLIN CHANDLER HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS OFFICER 2016

**“For as long as was possible, the Ramtha project delivered the highest quality medical care to Syrians injured by the conflict, regardless of their background or affiliation.”**



"It was incredible to witness the work of the MSF team in Ramtha. I'll never forget watching one of the surgeries - the skill and talent that went into repairing wounded bodies. It was devastating when the border closed in late June 2016 and we received the daily reports of patients who were unable to get through, despite our advocacy efforts. For as long as was possible, the Ramtha project delivered the highest quality medical care to Syrians injured by the conflict, regardless of their background or affiliation. Ramtha & the Ramtha team will always have a place in my heart."



## VOICES OF RAMTHA

**“we were all united for one purpose: to provide all possible assistance and medical aid to the war-wounded.”**



# TAREQ AL-NAHAR

## INFECTION CONTROL AND HEALTH SAFETY SUPERVISOR

### 2013–2018



“MSF’s Ramtha project was like my second home. We gathered there as a family every day, and from morning until evening we were united for one purpose: to provide all possible assistance and medical aid to the war-wounded.

Something that has remained with me to this day is the memory of two patients in particular. We first heard about them when we learned they were on their way to the hospital from the border. The first – named Ahmad – was suffering from injuries in both eyes and was blind; he also had a fracture in his right leg. While we were stabilising his condition he kept calling out: “my daughter, my wife, my children.” After he was admitted into surgery, the second patient arrived; she was a small girl, barely four years old, she was all alone and suffering from a fracture in her right hand and left leg. As she was treated, the girl kept screaming “Dad, dad”. A month of medical procedures and operations passed, and still no relative of the girl showed up to visit her in the hospital. Then, one day, while Ahmad was returning from the operation room to his room, the little girl was being rolled into the operating theatre. The girl was calling again “Dad, dad”, the sound was too familiar for Ahmad, he turned quickly to where the sound was and said “this is my daughter’s voice”, we were all standing there astonished. It was a remarkable moment, the girl stayed for a whole month in a hospital where her father was being treated and neither one of them knew the other was so close until that moment. We brought the girl to her father’s room and we enjoyed the most beautiful moment of an unexpected family reunion as the girl ran impatiently to her father’s arms.”

# WEJDAN NABEEL

## PSYCHOLOGIST

### 2013–2017

“Looking quickly back at the past four years as a psychologist and mental health counselor in MSF’s Ramtha project, I realise that this project has not only helped patients but also helped me personally.

I will never forget the time when my husband was involved in an extremely serious car accident that sent him straight to the hospital to undergo emergency surgery. I felt that life was extremely difficult, I felt doors had closed in my face, and anxiety occupied my heart and mind, until I went back to work. I was about to start a psychosocial support session for a patient with a back injury and a fracture in his leg. The patient was suffering from symptoms of depression. He was emotionally overwhelmed, far from his family and he was experiencing difficulty in accepting his injury. He received regular sessions until eventually he began to accept his situation and his depression symptoms subsided and eventually disappeared. When I started the session, the patient greeted me warmly; he wanted to know why I looked sad and preoccupied. When I told him, he sympathised with my husband’s situation and encouraged me, asking me to stay strong and to overcome this difficult time. I was astonished to see how this patient – despite all the hardships he had endured – stood on his feet and gave me his counsel and some hope. I remember he said “You always support all of us patients unconditionally. Today, we can support you, just as you have always supported us. You will get through this!”





**“Looking quickly back at the past four years as a psychologist and mental health counsellor in Ramtha project, this project has not only helped patients but also helped me personally.”**

# ESNATH DZAVAKWA PROJECT COORDINATOR 2017-2018



“When I arrived in Ramtha on 30 June, the situation in Dara’a in southern Syria was quite tense. From the house where we stayed in Ramtha we could hear the sound of bombings. The hospital was full and patients were still coming from Syria for urgent medical care.

Looking back, I feel that the MSF team we were part of played a significant role in providing the necessary medical care for wounded Syrians who could not get surgical care inside Syria. The reception from the Ramtha community towards MSF was amazing, they were in full support of our work treating wounded Syrians.

The Ramtha project is a memory that I will always cherish. It is one of the projects where I felt that I was part of the bigger picture in MSF – an organisation that tries its best to reach all who are in need of medical care, regardless of who they are or where they are.

I had a wonderful experience working with passionate and dedicated staff at all levels in Ramtha, who developed real connections with the patients and had their best interests at heart. What was unique about this project was its nature. Through advocacy, we created links with the authorities, which facilitated the movement of war-wounded from hospitals inside southern Syria to Jordan. I can imagine the processes that were involved to transport these severely-wounded Syrians.

To me, everything about the Ramtha project was great. The process of healing for the patients was amazing; at times, a patient would arrive with little hope of survival, but the surgeons, medical staff and the whole team I worked with in Ramtha were fantastic – they would fight for positive results. They would not give up on patients who had already given up on themselves.

I was the last project coordinator, and I worked on the closure of the project; I still have bittersweet memories. I still feel we could have stayed but at the same time we did a good job and we did it until the end.”



**“They would not give up on patients who had already given up on themselves.”**

