Alumni Profile

By Heather Under Plant

A 33-year-old Hope alum is working to eliminate polio, a disease he witnessed growing up.

Jalaa’ Abdelwahab ‘97, a 1997 Hope College alumnus, is working to eliminate polio on a large scale. He is pictured with a child in Merka, Somalia, during a national immunization-day round in 2006.

Abdelwahab works in polio eradication and measles elimination through the Centers for Disease Control. In March he began a new assignment in New York City, where he serves as a Health Specialist on immunizations at UNICEF headquarters, providing technical support to priority countries, including Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. From 2004 until relocating to New York, he had been a technical officer and epidemiologist with the City of Houston. He is part of a team whose task is to eradicate polio in the region’s countries, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia. It’s an enormous undertaking—the disease is highly infectious and primarily affects children under five, often leaving those disabled by it ignored and abandoned and some dead.

While serving in the field, Abdelwahab traveled extensively to help plan and conduct national house-to-house polio immunization programs and to find new cases through surveillance. In some of the nations in his region, he provided support for existing vaccination programs. However, many other countries face poverty and political instability and, therefore, don’t have strong infrastructure for routine vaccinations. In these places, the WHO’s teams recruit laypeople at the local level to administer the vaccine in their own communities, often working alongside them.

“Hope College helped me develop a comprehensive package for life. It helped me develop very strong academic discipline, but it also gave me room to build and express social and artistic skills.” — Jalaa’ Abdelwahab ‘97

“The best feeling is when you reach a child who hasn’t been vaccinated,” Abdelwahab said. “You know that this beautiful human being in front of you deserves this protection just as much as any other child in the world. That’s really the concept behind global health initiatives: Every life counts; every child just as much as any other child in the world.”

On a different course.

Jalaa’ Abdelwahab ‘97 went along with his family each year to help harvest olives in his family’s backyard. “It was my first introduction to the field of public health,” said Stewart, who is now an epidemiologist with the City of Houston. “I still wasn’t completely sure after hearing him speak, that I wanted to get into public health, but he presented a different path for me to consider.”

Abdelwahab entered Hope intending to go to medical school after graduation. At Ramallah Friends School, his high school in Palestine, he had focused on the sciences but had enjoyed poetry writing as well. His upbringing under Israeli occupation and the school’s emphasis on service to community had also instilled in him a deep desire to promote equality in society. “As soon as I met him, I could tell Jalaa’ wanted to change the world,” recalled Dr. Winnett-Murray, who taught Abdelwahab in his senior year, he saw an opportunity to continue to cultivate all of his passions with a liberal arts education. “If we take away the layers of hostility and difference, and go back to the basics of humanity, we realize we all deserve the same thing—a better future for all children,” he said.

Abdelwahab worked as the Polio and Measles Elimination Coordinator for the World Health Organization’s Polio Eradication Unit. Based in Cairo, Egypt, with the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office, he was part of a team whose task is to eliminate polio in the region’s countries, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia. It’s an enormous undertaking—the disease is highly infectious and primarily affects children under five, often leaving those disabled by it ignored and abandoned and some dead.

Instead of improving the health of one patient or a single country, he works to improve the health of millions at a time. “That message is one Abdelwahab has also instilled in me,” said Winnett-Murray, who taught Abdelwahab in his senior year, he visited his school during his senior year, he saw an opportunity to continue to cultivate all of his passions with a liberal arts education. “As soon as I met him, I could tell Jalaa’ wanted to change the world,” recalled Dr. Winnett-Murray, who taught Abdelwahab in his senior year, he saw an opportunity to continue to cultivate all of his passions with a liberal arts education. “If we take away the layers of hostility and difference, and go back to the basics of humanity, we realize we all deserve the same thing—a better future for all children,” he said.

After graduating, Abdelwahab earned his Master of Public Health in epidemiology from the University of Michigan School of Public Health. Soon after, he was selected for a fellowship program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Under the program, he became involved in the global polio eradication initiative, working in the WHO’s African Regional Office in Harare, Zimbabwe. He also worked for two years with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on epidemiological investigations of tuberculosis in the city before moving to Cairo.

Abdelwahab is encouraged by the strides being made in polio eradication. In the past 20 years, the number of cases has fallen by more than 99 percent. In 2008, only four countries in the world remained polio-endemic, compared with 125 in 1988. He is especially inspired by the local volunteers in polio-stricken countries who often risk their lives to volunteer with vaccination programs.

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Jalaa’ Abdelwahab ‘97 was drawn to a career in global public health because of the opportunity that it provided to make a difference on a larger scale as well as an individual level. He is pictured with a child in Merka, Somalia, during a national immunization-day round in 2006.

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