



LEAVING THE VIOLENCE IN IRAQ  
FOR A PENN DENTAL MEDICINE EDUCATION

# STARTING OVER

TWO COUPLES' LONG JOURNEY TO THE SCHOOL'S PROGRAM  
FOR ADVANCED STANDING STUDENTS

**ZAID AL-ANBAKI** knew it was time to leave his home and dental practice in war-torn Bagdad after he was the victim of a suicide car bomb attack in 2006, from which he suffered deep wounds in his shoulder. It wasn't easy, however, to get out of Iraq. Finally, he volunteered with a French agency to provide dental care for children in Jordan, and when his three-day visa expired, he simply didn't go home.

His wife, dentist Dali Al-Saud, was at the end of a two-month visit with her brother in Jordan when Dr. Al-Anbaki arrived on his medical mission. The sectarian violence following the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime was getting worse and she implored him not to go back. Fearing for her safety as well as his own if they returned, he agreed to stay in Jordan and plan for a life outside of Iraq.

In March 2003, Deena Alani was in the first year of an orthodontics program when she and her sister managed to get the last plane out of Bagdad before the airport closed as the city fell into chaos at the start of the U.S. war in Iraq. She was helped by the fact that she is a U.S. citizen and her Iraqi parents were living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She returned briefly several months later after the fall of Saddam Hussein to finish her school year, but left again at her parents' insistence when she became the target of kidnap threats.

Her fiancé Wesam Alani, an instructor at the University of Bagdad Dental School, wasn't so lucky. Despite her efforts, he was stuck in Bagdad throughout the initial fighting. As communications from Iraq dried up, for a time she didn't know whether he was alive or dead. Finally, her mother, a doctor, implored two dentists she knew who had a clinic in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, to sponsor him, and he was able to leave Iraq. He was heartbroken, however, to leave the rest of his family behind and in danger, although they were later able to immigrate to Jordan.

Two married couples. Four dentists. All seeking refuge from a country at war. And, now, all four are third-year students at Penn Dental Medicine, recently enrolled in the Program for Advanced Standing Students (PASS) for foreign-trained dentists who want to practice in the U.S.



### A SELECT GROUP OF FOREIGN DENTISTS

Drs. Al-Anbaki and Al-Saud and Drs. Deena and Wesam Alani are among the 35 foreign dentists who entered this year's PASS class, joining third-year dental students to become part of the Class of 2013. The PASS students started in March with an 11-week preparatory program, which encompasses language and cultural skills as well as dental education review, before integrating with the rest of their classmates. This PASS class, like previous ones, is an impressive group of students, culled from a pool of about 650 applicants, many with specialty training and master's degrees in addition to their dental educations.

"It is a very select group, determined and motivated," says Dr. Uri Hangorsky, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Director of PASS. "Many are separated from families in their home countries, some are refugees seeking asylum, their children may be sent to live with family members. It's not easy for many of them, and they've made great sacrifices," he says.

To practice in most U.S. states, dentists must graduate from an accredited U.S. dental school, Dr. Hangorsky explains. PASS students do this by completing the third and fourth years at Penn Dental Medicine. While a number of dental schools offer programs for foreign-trained dentists, Dr. Hangorsky says Penn's program is unique in completely integrating PASS students into existing classes. As a result, each third-year class increases by about 30 to 35 students.

While the program offers foreign dentists the opportunity to pursue their careers in the U.S., Penn Dental Medicine also benefits from the PASS program, Dr. Hangorsky says. "We get highly trained dentists; it expands our international reach, and is a great education for our four-year students, who become exposed, directly and indirectly, to cultures and dentistry from all over the world. Many of the students strike up friendships."

Since the PASS program was established in 1986, 732 dentists from more than 75 countries have gone through the program. While scores of countries are represented, Dr. Hangorsky says applications do sometimes reflect political and social unrest in parts of the world, such as the Iraqis in this year's class and a period in the late 1970s and early

1980s when applications increased from South Africa, which was in turmoil as apartheid was ending.

What is highly unusual about this year's PASS class, though, is the presence of two married couples, both in the same year, and from the same country. "We have never had two married couples at the same time," says Dr. Hangorsky, although he notes that on occasion spouses have been in the program at different times.

Even after leaving Iraq, the path to Penn Dental Medicine for these two couples was not easy.



Drs. Dali Al-Saud (D'13) and Zaid Al-Anbaki (D'13).

Drs. Deena and Wesam Alani lived in Dubai for five years following their exit from Iraq. He worked as a dentist, but she was not able to do so and worked as an oral health educator and dental school administrator. Dr. Deena Alani was born in Jackson, Miss., where her ob-gyn mother taught at the University of Mississippi's medical school, although she grew up primarily in Riyadh. As she and Wesam married and started a life together in Dubai, her mother retired to Knoxville, Tennessee, and her

sister and brother also returned to the U.S., and this is where they wanted to settle and start a new life.

While waiting several years for Wesam's green card to be issued, Deena traveled to Knoxville in 2006 and gave birth to their daughter, Leya, now five, without her husband present. The family finally came to the U.S. for good in 2009, where they worked and raised their daughter while studying for the National Dental Boards Examination Part I and the TOEFL test of English proficiency in preparation for applying to U.S. dental schools. Wesam worked as an assistant to an orthodontist during this time, even though he had more than a decade of experience as a dentist himself.

### SEEKING REFUGE IN THE U.S.

Dr. Al-Anbaki and Dr. Al-Saud, also graduates of the University of Bagdad Dental School, remained in Jordan for two years after leaving Iraq, while applying for refugee asylum in the U.S. for those being persecuted in their home countries. In 2008, now with a four-month-old daughter, they were finally able to move to Ann Arbor, Mich., where Dr. Al-Anbaki

got a job selling sporting goods and hunting licenses at Wal-Mart. When the store manager balked at hiring him because he was overqualified, Dr. Al-Anbaki told him, "I don't want to be overqualified, I just want to pay my rent."

Although their paths barely crossed in Bagdad, the four are now friends in Philadelphia, sharing some of the challenges of returning to dental school, living in a new city and culture, and raising young daughters. And each is grateful to be in the PASS program with their spouses, sparing them difficult decisions to separate their families during two long years of dental school.

"To start over again in the U.S. was not easy," Dr. Al-Saud says. "We were in a new country, adjusting to a whole new life. But it is a huge achievement to be here together at Penn, and we feel so lucky we are able to do it."

Going through the PASS program together has other benefits, as well. "Wesam has extensive knowledge of the dental field from over 14 years of practicing, so he helps me study and understand a lot of things," Dr. Deena Alani says. "I have better language and research skills, and can help him understand material and perform literature reviews. We complement each other very nicely."

The Iraqi dentists say adjusting to American dental training has not been difficult, since it is not that different from what they learned in Iraq, although they do have access to newer materials and equipment. "It's the same principle, drilling, doing the cavity," Dr. Wesam Alani says. What is very different, however, is the way dentists communicate with patients, discussing treatments and options. "In Iraq or

Dubai, whatever you need to do, you go ahead and do it," he says. "Here we have to ask the patient, give them information, and let them choose what they want for their health."

Another thing they weren't used to: the paperwork, insurance and otherwise, that comes with practicing in the U.S.

Dr. Deena Alani says it is also challenging to deal with the demands of being a mother while in school this time. Her daughter often asks to be picked up from preschool earlier than her parents are able to do so, and family time is limited because of schoolwork and studying. But, because of her parents' experience, she knows the sacrifices will be worth it in the long run.

"My mom finished medical school and came to practice in the U.S.," she says. "I witnessed what a degree from the U.S. would bring. This is what you do to get where you want to be."

Dr. Al-Anbaki agrees. "I want to go on with my life," he says, reflecting on the difficulties of leaving his home country and starting over. His daughter Nye, now 3, only knows life in America. "It's a blessing to live here and the Penn program is

an opportunity to fulfill what we want to do in life."

As for now, both couples are focusing on completing their studies at Penn Dental Medicine and starting their professional careers in the U.S. Returning to Iraq is not an option, they say. "After all we have been through, I don't think at any point in time I will be able to go back home," Dr. Al-Saud says. "I would rather keep the good memories and forget the bad ones." **PDJ**

—Debbie Goldberg



Drs. Deena Alani (D'13) and Wesam Alani (D'13).

## PASS PROGRAM FAST FACTS

YEAR ESTABLISHED: 1986 | TOTAL NUMBER OF PASS STUDENTS TO DATE: 732

NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN EACH PASS CLASS: 30 TO 35 | STUDENTS IN PASS CLASS OF 2013: 35

TOTAL COUNTRIES REPRESENTED SINCE 1986: MORE THAN 75 COUNTRIES FROM SIX CONTINENTS (ALL EXCEPT ANTARCTICA)

COUNTRIES REPRESENTED IN THE CLASS OF 2013: BAHRAIN, CANADA, COLUMBIA, EGYPT, INDIA, IRAQ, MOLDOVA, NAMIBIA, PERU, RUSSIA, SYRIA, UNITED KINGDOM