

# Ahmed Al Mokhtar Zouhir thanks the Little Baby Face Foundation

On behalf of myself, my family, friends, and all those who played a role in making the miracle of giving me a new life possible, I would like to thank the Board, management and staff of the LBFF. I would especially like to thank Drs. Thomas Romo and Deborah Pilla for successfully reconstructing both of my ears, and my mouth.

I never thought I would feel as confident as I do today after years of emotional suffering and loneliness. Now, I am very proud to confirm that the surgery was very successful. Because of that I now look forward to starting a new life boosted with high self-esteem.

I am twenty-one years old, and was born in Rabat, Morocco. I was born with one ear, my left, that was essentially closed and missing its lobe. I could not hear very well out of that ear and it was, obviously, embarrassing to me. The condition was so obvious that I heard people making jokes about me for all of my life.

When I was young, I did not let these cruel jokes bother me. It was almost as though I didn't hear what was being said about me.

It was only when I entered my teens that I began to realize that there was something strange about me. And then at about the age of fifteen, the words of the other people began to register more clearly with me. Worse, girls would say that they couldn't spend time with me. I'd hear them gossip among themselves about me. This was particularly painful.

At about this time, I started staring at my image in the mirror each morning. I would ask myself: who is this funny-looking person—this odd-looking man—in the mirror. It was a painful way to start each day.

I remember as a child asking my mother to buy me ear muffs so that I could hide my deformity.

I became obsessed with my condition. Teachers would talk and I wouldn't hear them. I couldn't concentrate in the classroom. It seemed as though people always were talking about me, or I imagined they were.

Not surprisingly, I started to take up some bad habits. I felt as though I had no future, so I started to hang out with dangerous people. I did everything I could to try to forget what had happened to me at birth.

When I was about twelve years old, in the year 2000, I was told by my mother that there was a place in New York City—the Little Baby Face Foundation—that might be able to fix my ear. I didn't believe her: New York is for rich people. I didn't have money. She didn't have money. We had nothing.

I applied for a visa in 2001 to come to the United States to meet with Foundation staff and doctors. But the terrible events of 9/11 prevented me from doing so. My visa was denied year after year after year. It was not until 2007 that I was able to come to the States. It had been eight years since I last had seen my mother, and my dream of having my ear repaired was about to come true. I was very happy.



And I was very nervous. I wasn't a baby any longer; I didn't have a little baby face. I was an eighteen year old man.

But Diane Romo and the staff at LBFF were very encouraging. They were not going to abandon me just because I encountered visa problems due to events outside my control.

And then came some very, very bad news. Even though I had a so-called Green Card that established me as a permanent resident, the insurance policy that I had in Massachusetts where I then lived with my mother, did not reimburse for out-of-state hospital and anesthesia costs. While the LBFF was going to cover doctor expenses, my family and I wanted to reimburse them for the hospital-related costs.

Later, in the midst of the two-part surgery that was required to give me a normal-looking and functioning ear (and to correct other problems, especially my teeth, which had not developed properly), Massachusetts denied insurance coverage for legal immigrants who were not yet citizens. My mother was a citizen but I was not. Had I been able to come to the States in 2001 I would have been a citizen by 2009 when the surgeries were to take place.

The Foundation made me as happy as I had been, and then insurance issues made me as scared as I'd been. I felt as though I was on an emotional roller-coaster.

With the help of family friend, Michael Segal, and an attorney, Lorianne Sainsbury-Wong of Health Law Advocates of Boston, Massachusetts, I was able to obtain a waiver to permit the surgery in New York City, and then, on appeal, insurance to cover the second surgery.

The surgeries are done. I have a new ear, one that looks like a normal ear. And the dental work that I also required has begun. The physical pain that I lived with every day because of my bad teeth, and the emotional pain that I lived with because of my bad ear, are behind me. I now face the future with optimism.

I will remain forever grateful to the many kind people of my new country who made this possible. I know that the brighter future I now have could only have been made possible in the United States of America. I look forward to the day, three years from now, when I can call myself a citizen of this great country.

