

## [Doctor's death saddens new friends in South Jersey](#)



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Photo courtesy of University of Pennsylvania Health System

Dr. John P. Pryor has his picture taken during his first deployment to Iraq in the spring of 2006. Pryor, who was head of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania trauma team and a major in the U.S. Army Reserve, was killed on Christmas Day in Iraq. He had recently befriended a local Iraqi family through the Camden Diocese's Refugee Resettlement Program of the Catholic Charities.



Mourners from across the region filled the Cathedral Basilica of SS. Peter and Paul in Philadelphia on Monday, Jan. 5, to remember Dr. John P. Pryor of Moorestown, N.J.

Pryor, 42, who was head of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania trauma team and a major in the U.S. Army Reserve, was killed on Christmas Day in Iraq. The Pentagon statement reported that Maj. John P. Pryor died when a mortar round hit near his living quarters in Mosul. He was serving with a forward surgical team with the Army's 1st Medical Detachment, based in Fort Totten, N.Y.

Since the news of Pryor's death, comments published in newspapers and posted on websites have revealed a passionate and compassionate man who couldn't stand idly by when others needed help.

These accounts tell of Pryor's early commitment to his calling. As a young teen growing up near Albany N.Y., he became certified in CPR and joined the Clifton Park-Halfmoon Ambulance Corps. He became a N.Y. State Emergency Medical Technician at 18.

In 1999, Pryor came to the University of Pennsylvania for a Fellowship in Trauma and Critical Care Surgery. 9-11 took him to Ground Zero. Pryor documented this experience in a sobering account, one of several writings and interviews that reverberate with the surgeon's exasperation with the violence that continues to ravish communities in Iraq and elsewhere. Yet Pryor returned to Iraq for a second tour of duty.

A few months before his second tour, Pryor learned about the Iraqis who were brought to southern New Jersey through the Refugee Resettlement Program of the Catholic Charities, Diocese of Camden. He contacted Catholic Charities and was steered to program director John Marcantuono.

"Here was a very busy man, reaching out to help," Marcantuono said. "We were fortunate and blessed to walk with him for even this short period of time."

When Marcantuono told Pryor about an Iraqi family that had recently arrived from Jordan, Pryor

wanted to meet them

“The husband was a trauma surgeon, as was Dr. Pryor,” he said. A meeting was arranged and the two doctors met. “Dr. Pryor gave us his personal cell phone number and his promises to help the Iraqi family,” Marcantuono said.

As Thanksgiving neared, Pryor was preparing for his second tour of Iraq. He contacted the Refugee Resettlement Office again. With the help of May Arzoumanian, coordinator for the office's Individual Development Account Program (IDA), another meeting was scheduled.

Arzoumanian, who was born in Kuwait and speaks Arabic, explained that the meeting evolved into an opportunity for a cross-cultural exchange when Dr. Mohammed Ahmed and his wife Zainab Abduljabar invited the Pryor family to their home in Voorhees for dinner.

This was what Dr. Pryor had hoped for, Arzoumanian related. “Dr. Pryor wanted to learn more about the people and culture of Iraq,” she said, adding that they'd had several conversations in which she'd answered his questions about her experiences growing up in Iraq. “Dr. Pryor wanted to know more about the people who came to him for help and support while he served in Iraq,” she said.

Arzoumanian and her husband were invited to join the Pryors for dinner.

“Dr. Pryor shared stories about his first tour in Iraq,” said Arzoumanian.

On one occasion there was an explosion in the streets and Pryor attended to the American soldiers who were injured. “As soon as they were stable, he went to help some of the local children who had also been hurt,” she said, retelling his story. “He told us how he tried to help the children forget their pain with stories, funny faces and actions that would make them smile for a few minutes.”

“That was a very nice evening,” said Zainab Abduljabar. Her children, Hasan and Faisal, who also speak English, spent time getting to know the Pryor children, Danielle, Francis and John, Jr.

“Dr. John wanted to meet an Iraqi family,” she said. “He wanted to learn about some of our customs. He wanted to learn more words and phrases that would help him communicate better when he returned.”

As they enjoyed the Iraqi meal that Abduljabar prepared, they also talked about the procedures that her husband would follow to become licensed to practice medicine in the United States.

Dr. Mohammed Ahmed had practiced medicine in Iraq for 22 years. Zainab Abduljabar is a college graduate with a background in computer science. Their home in Iraq was situated in one of the regions where doctors and other professionals were targets for kidnapping or murder, and schools were targets for heavy artillery.

“One of my son's friends went to a school that was bombed,” Abduljabar said in a recent interview. They fled to Jordan, where for three years they tried to find a way to carve out a life. After exhausting their finances, Abduljabar explained that they applied for asylum under a United Nations program. Six months ago, they arrived in the United States.

“With the help of Catholic Charities' resettlement program, we started to begin our life here,” Abduljabar said. But with the dire economic situation, neither she nor her husband have found jobs. At

the moment, they are depending on the kindness of others. And in Dr. John Pryor, they felt they had a new friend — and a thread of hope.

“Dr. John was so eager to help us,” said Abduljabar.

He'd brought a list of websites that might lead to jobs for them. He provided information to help her husband start the long process, including an exam and another medical residency, required to retrain for his medical license. “Back to the beginning,” Abduljabar said with a heavy voice. Still, she expressed gratitude for “Dr. John's willingness to help, as soon as he returned from this tour,” she said with sadness.

“We enjoyed our evening with Dr. John and his family,” said Abduljabar, recalling fond first impressions of a good man who was quick to laugh and quick to lend a hand.

Abduljabar, her husband and a brother-in-law attended the funeral. “We want to show our sympathy to his wife and family,” she said. “I wish we could do something....”

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