

PRESS & ARGUS

Volume 160 Number 224

Monday, September 19, 2005

FRONT PAGE

Hamburg Township's Yusif Barakat spends some of his free time exercising neighborhood dogs Remington, Ziggy, Toast and Casey. Barakat works as a clinical program manager at W.J. Maxey Boys Training School.



Photo by GILLIS BENEDICT/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

Jogger, ex-refugee helps boys overcome hurdles

By Lon Medd
DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

It was something no 12-year-old boy should have to experience.

In 1948, Yusif Barakat and millions of other Palestinians were forced out of their homes after Israel was established as a country in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust.

Barakat, now 70, was put on a ship

and sent to the United States, where he landed on Ellis Island with the Statue of Liberty and the New York skyline in clear view.

"I was displaced from my home and became a refugee. For a 12-year-old shepherd boy who couldn't speak English, it was very traumatizing and scary," he said. "My life was shattered. I recalled at that

OUR
Neighbors

Continued on page 4

Jogger, ex-refugee helps boys overcome hurdles

Continued from page 1

moment that when I grew up, I was going to help people."

For the past eight years, Barakat has served as a clinical program manager at W.J. Maxey Boys Training School, dedicating his life to helping out boys who have been sentenced to the juvenile justice system for crimes they've committed. Along with 13 staff members, Barakat handles the treatment and rehabilitation of 20 boys at the Green Oak Township facility.

"We take them away from criminal activity and get them to contribute to their community," he said. "It's very challenging, but the end product is very rewarding."

Barakat said most of what he does is re-establish trust with the boys and build relationships with them. He takes them out in the community to help at animal shelters and food banks.

"It helps them gain self-esteem," he said. "They are giving back to the community and making amends for what they have done."

Before coming to Maxey, Barakat spent three years with Children's Protective Services, and for 20 years he was in private practice as a psychotherapist.

Barakat said that he has had "a yo-yo" career, which began at a very young age.

When Barakat was 16, his father died, leaving him to take care of his mother and three sisters.

In order to support his family, he lied about his age and found work on the assembly line at Ford Motor Co. He was missing a lot of school. After two weeks of missing school, one of his teachers came by his Highland Park home to find out why he wasn't coming to class.

"She said, 'You're a young man, and you need your education,' but I told her that I have to support my family," he said.

He was able to switch from days to the third shift. For more than three years, he worked late at night at Ford and during the day he attended school.

Barakat's career took many turns after he graduated.

He spent three years in the Air Force, owned his own credit counseling company, and was elected to

ABOUT YUSIF BARAKAT

- **Residence:** Hamburg Township
- **Family:** Children, Flori and Ron; five grandchildren
- **Occupation:** Clinical program manager at W.J. Maxey Boys Training School in Green Oak Township

the Oakland County Board of Commissioners. He lived in Highland Park for 24 years and Royal Oak for 28 years.

"I've been there, done that," he said.

After making an unsuccessful run at Congress, Barakat felt politics were not the way to change the world. He would have to be on the front lines either helping children or being an activist for peace.

Barakat believes "dissent is patriotic." He believes that it's dangerous to have blind patriotism because the government can take advantage of that.

As an American and a native Palestinian, Barakat is appalled when he thinks about the billions of U.S. tax dollars that have gone to Israelis while they occupy his homeland. In 1993, he ran 18 miles to raise money for Palestinian refugees. Several years ago he took a two-week trip to Israel and visited many of the places he remembers from the childhood he described as "peaceful," before the occupation.

"They occupied that area for 50 some years with billions (of dollars) of support from United States tax money," he said. "It's unconscionable that Americans know so little about the genocide."

Barakat said the injustice in Palestine has served as part of the foundation for terrorism, and he believes the occupation of Palestine and the war in Iraq is only creating more terrorists.

"War is the violence of the rich, and terrorism is the violence of the

poor," he said. "God makes life, and we should not take life."

Outside of all his more serious causes, is Barakat's love of exercise. During the summer he swims across Hamburg Township's Cordley Lake as often as he can. He regularly plays racquetball with a guy half his age. He jogs three miles a day, often with many of the dogs in his neighborhood. It doesn't matter if it's raining or snowing.

"They are all so excited to see me," he said. "They are jumping around like they never do for anyone else."

Barakat said the neighbors call him "the dog whisperer." These aren't small dogs, either.

"Those dogs communicate with me," he said. "Owners have a hard time walking with one of them. They accuse me of not running but getting pulled."

He prefers to run with dogs, because when he runs by himself, he said it's boring.

"I love working out," he said. "To me it's a pleasure."