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Survivor Heroes Heal Lives and Landscapes Throughout the World

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Survivor Heroes Heal Lives and Landscapes Throughout the World

Landmine and traumatic-accident victims and their families face numerous recovery obstacles in any setting, but in a post-conflict setting resources may be scarce. Victims must deal with emotional and psychological trauma, often for years after the event. These challenges range from physical limitations and psychological aftermath to the economic impact on their livelihoods. Some victims take their traumatic experience—one in which the victim is terrified, afraid for him or herself as well as for others, temporarily helpless, humiliated, and isolated—and apply them to assisting other victims through activism and support.

by Ken Rutherford, Ph.D. [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

In war-ravaged countries and post-conflict regions, most landmine amputees struggle simply to survive. Victims often experience extended separations from family members, decreased employment opportunities and shifting demands. For someone missing arms or legs, tasks that were once easy to complete can become Herculean chores. This often leaves survivors and their families to face harrowing experiences and uncertain futures. Survivors may also experience psychological and cognitive damage following the accident, leaving them at risk for mental health problems, family difficulties and unemployment. Many can no longer find work and cannot afford to buy crutches, wheelchairs and/or artificial limbs. Survivors are often ostracized and are denied proper medical care. One thing is clear: most landmine survivors rarely return to normal lives.

Despite these discouraging obstacles, some victims have become survivor champions on their way to becoming leaders and productive community members by devoting their lives to helping other victims.¹ They are committed to expanding the solid foundations of peer support by helping others build resilience and understanding through conversation and problem-solving.² They provide practical instruction with care and compassion to thousands of survivors of landmines, trauma and war-related violence. Survivors' peer skills are in many cases essential in helping other survivors recover. In addition to counseling, outreach workers help survivors obtain training, benefits and healthcare through local service providers. In the most extensive study of landmine/unexploded-ordnance survivors ever conducted, survivors in six countries reported significantly improved perceptions of their own mental and physical health following 12 months of peer support provided by trained outreach workers.³

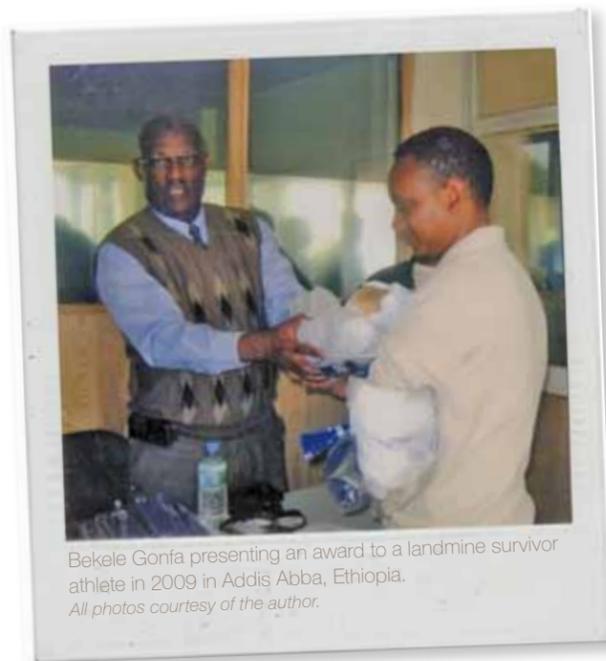
As a token of appreciation for their leadership, I would like to highlight four of these unique and special survivor heroes—Adnan Al Aboudi (Jordan), Bekele Gonfa (Ethiopia), Jesús Martínez (El Salvador) and Nguyen Thi Kim Hoa (Vietnam). I have particularly selected them from among the hundreds of survivors I have met over the last two decades of victim-assistance work in many countries. Their leadership and capability in providing survivors with the direction to achieve their personal goals have helped—and continue to help—other victims and survivors develop their own personal strengths. Let me introduce them to you.

Bekele Gonfa, Ethiopia

Born the second son of a farming family in rural Ethiopia, Bekele Gonfa distinguished himself in school and at the Harar Military Academy. While serving in the Ethiopian Armed Forces, he fell victim to a landmine explosion in the town of Qore in central Ethiopia. His left leg required amputation and his painful rehabilitation took 11 months.

Gonfa enrolled in Addis Ababa University when he was released from the hospital. Access to facilities was difficult for Gonfa, who was still adjusting to life as a landmine survivor when he began attending the university. Besides getting into the library and other buildings, he had difficulty traveling between classes within the allotted time. Despite the added obstacles, he obtained a Bachelor of Science in statistics.

Gonfa became Director of Landmine Survivors Network (later renamed Survivor Corps) in Ethiopia in 2003, a position he held until 2009, when Survivor Corps closed. He tirelessly worked to assist the rehabilitation of survivors, families and entire communities throughout Ethiopia. He developed an extensive network of partnerships and collaborations that



Bekele Gonfa presenting an award to a landmine survivor athlete in 2009 in Addis Abba, Ethiopia.
All photos courtesy of the author.

spanned across civil society, the private sector and government agencies. His frequent and positive contact with this network made him a powerful force for advocacy and human rights for persons with disabilities. More than 2,000 survivors were rehabilitated and empowered during his tenure, and many thousands more became the beneficiaries of the work LSN/SC undertook in Ethiopia.

Not limiting himself to landmine advocacy, Gonfa has been deeply involved in development activities for many years. He founded the indigenous nongovernmental organization Katar Development Association in 2003, where he serves as Vice Chairman. Additionally, he served on the board of the Ethiopian Disability Action Network and on the executive committee of the Ethiopian National Paralympics Committee.

Recently, Gonfa has turned his attention to promoting best practices for other practitioners. His research for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Handicap International and the *Landmine Monitor/Cluster Munitions Report* are the latest example of his advocacy. Gonfa uses his expertise to promote sustainable survivor-assistance programs.

Adnan Al Aboudi, Jordan

Adnan Al Aboudi is an example of how the post-conflict community benefits from the energies and perspectives of all types of trauma survivors. A double-leg amputee following a car accident in 1989, Aboudi has worked for the Jordanian Ministry of Youth and on the board of the Al-Mustaqbel Club for PWDs.

In 1999, he was appointed director of LSN-Jordan, where he worked with a team of social and outreach workers to handle a caseload of more than 1,500 amputees. Of this number, some 500 were landmine victims. Aboudi says that he worked to ensure that all survivors received “health care, social livelihoods and the economic care needed to regain and maintain their lives.”⁷⁴

Seeing recreational sports as a positive path to an integrated rehabilitation, Aboudi has promoted and participated in numerous inclusive sport activities. This personal passion is evident: Besides recreational water skiing, scuba diving, swimming, discus and table tennis, he has been a national representative at regional and international competitions. Aboudi participated in the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta, Georgia (U.S.) and the 1998 British World Championship.

Aboudi has been active in global advocacy for PWDs rights since discussions took place to negotiate the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. He was the only Arab PWD at the Ad Hoc Committee Meeting for the CRPD. Adnan was elected as an NGO representative from West Asia to the convention drafting meeting. He has consistently pushed for increased awareness and participation across the Middle East, most recently in May 2011 at the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery’s “Pathways to Resilience” program for nearly 30 Arab PWDs and their providers in Hammana, Lebanon.



Adnan observing His Royal Highness Prince Raad, on behalf of Jordan, signing the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* at the United Nations on 1 April 2007.

Aboudi says, “My mandate has always been ‘Nothing about us without us.’”⁷⁴

Nguyen Thi Kim Hoa, Vietnam

Kim Hoa is a survivor of a different sort. Born to a close-knit family in Quang Tri province, Hoa grew up in the region most heavily contaminated by cluster munitions in Vietnam.

Suffering is tragically common in the area but especially in her family. Before Hoa was born, her eight-year-old brother was one of three local boys killed by a cluster bomb that they thought was a toy, a loss that continues to affect the family today.

Looking beyond her own family’s hardships, Hoa has devoted her professional life to alleviating the suffering of other conflict-affected families and communities. She joined LSN in 2005, a time she still calls her “day of destiny.” Based in Quang Binh province, LSN’s victim-assistance program continues as the Association for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities and is the province’s only opportunity for victim support and rehabilitation. Hoa serves as Monitoring and Evaluation Officer for peer-support activities, promoting access to quality healthcare, peer support, economic assistance and education services for survivors and their communities.

Hoa has provided a powerful voice in Vietnam for advocacy, promoting the recent *Cluster Munitions Convention*, the 1997 *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and their Destruction* (also known as the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or the APMBC), and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Working nationally, regionally and internationally, Hoa has organized or participated in working groups, meetings and conferences that further promote the inclusion of survivors and increased attention and resources for victim assistance and human rights.

Addressing the 16–17 November, 2009 Regional Conference on the Promotion and Universalization of the *Convention on Cluster Munitions* in Indonesia, Hoa said that global change requires “a clear and common goal shared across a range of actors...and a strong,



Kim Hoa participating in the Signing Conference of the *Convention on Cluster Munitions* in Oslo, Norway in December 2008.

active and coordinated civil society campaign.”⁷⁵ I am proud to say that Kim Hoa is a leading voice of compassion and advocacy in all these ways.

Jesús Martínez, El Salvador

By the age of 10, Jesús Martínez had moved from his rural home to the outskirts of San Salvador to study and search for work. Despite an ongoing civil war, Martínez, the second of seven children, needed to contribute economically to his extensive family. In 1989, at the age of 17, Martínez and a bus of commuters stopped at a guerrilla blockade. Leaving the bus and walking around the blockade, Martínez grew impatient in the single-file line. He stepped out of line and onto a landmine the guerrillas had emplaced around the blockade. The explosion tore off both of his legs, putting him in the hospital for five months.

The civil war had taken a large toll on the civilian population, and he met many fellow survivors during his rehabilitation. The conflict ended three years after his accident, and Martínez began organizing people with disabilities and

persons injured during the war. His frustration nurtured a determination to overcome physical barriers and discriminatory attitudes.

In 1994, he managed a business that produced hospital clothing and focused on integrating landmine survivors. Three years later, he applied his university studies in business administration to start his own business, manufacturing clothing with other landmine survivors. He also became active in sports, playing competitively at regional and international sporting events.

Martínez became Executive Director of LSN-El Salvador in 2000, formalizing his role as leader and activist for an entire network of victims and their communities. His work expanded beyond El Salvador to a regional and international network promoting physical and emotional well-being as well as economic development. Today, he is the Executive Director of the *Red de Sobrevivientes y Personas con Discapacidad* (Network of Survivors and Disabled Persons). The organization promotes the legacy of LSN in El Salvador.



Jesús Martínez speaking at the United Nations about victim assistance with regard to the APMBC.

Despite his continued success and fervent defense of PWDs, Martínez still recalls the words of the soldier who carried him from the minefield after his accident: “God brought you into the world with your legs, but now he has permitted you to lose them. You can still move forward.” Martínez now says, “My greatest satisfaction is knowing that I can help others.”⁶

Conclusion

Aboudi, Gonfa, Martínez, Hoa and other survivors have trained hundreds of social workers and outreach workers to provide peer-support visits and other therapeutic contacts to landmine survivors and their families. They have transformed themselves from victims to active citizens in their communities, and their work and inspiration has helped survivors make even greater strides in accessing services, rights and opportunities as they worked to reclaim their lives.

Survivors’ peer skills are in many cases essential in helping other survivors recover. In addition to counseling, outreach workers help survivors obtain training, benefits and health-care through local-service providers. Aboudi, Gonfa, Martínez and Hoa help start survivor support groups in their respective countries, thus allowing victim communities to take that first important step in helping survivors help themselves, and continuing to assist and lead them to go on to become independent organizations. Thankfully for the global community, their work’s impact continues to greatly benefit the lives of landmine, trauma and armed-violence survivors, as well as their families and communities. ↕

See endnotes page 80



Kenneth Rutherford, Ph.D., serves as Director of the Center for Stabilization and Recovery at James Madison University. CISR helps support survivor-assistance initiatives around the world and has led efforts to promote peer-to-peer support on four continents, include people with disabilities in landmine-/explosive remnants of war-risk programs, trained outreach workers to work with torture victims, and championed the rights of all survivors, persons with disabilities, women and children. The work of CISR, formerly the Mine Action Information Center, reinforces JMU’s post-conflict and stability operations. Rutherford is in a unique position to help advance several of these policy goals. In 2011, CISR’s ongoing programs and new projects will, for example, advocate disability rights as human rights in mine-action programming, promote peace and reconciliation through survivor-led collective action and address the longer-term humanitarian-assistance needs for survivors of landmines and cluster munitions.

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