

BY JOE HANNA / WITH MAX ADLER

GIVING GOLF TO THE TROOPS

SHARING THE GAME I LOVE HELPED ME FIND FULFILLMENT

I'M THE ONLY SON of Lebanese immigrants. My parents came to Buffalo in 1972, three years before the start of the Lebanese Civil War that lasted 15 years. My father's brother came to America first, to open a deli, so my father started there but spent most of his life in a factory assembling windshield wipers. He worked very hard to give my three sisters and me every opportunity.

When I was 6, I announced my intention to become president of the United States. Thinking that a nation's leader made its laws, it got stuck in my head to become a lawyer first. I was not the most gifted in class, but I studied like my father worked.

When I was 13, while riding my bike delivering newspapers, I came across a set of golf clubs next to a trash bin. It was an awkward pedal home, but the clubs and I made it, and I later convinced my mom to take me to the driving range. Now I'm 32 and still trying to figure this game out.

I rarely play better than bogey-golf,

but after a stressful day there's nothing I like more than ripping through a large bucket. I'm one of the youngest partners at Goldberg Segalla LLP in Buffalo. I've learned, as many lawyers have, that if you dedicate yourself, read and stay on top of paperwork, good grades turn into good salaries.

Success is a funny thing. Suddenly I had a nice apartment, a new car, all the material trappings that would have made my father proud had he lived to see it, yet I looked around and saw I wasn't fulfilled.

I specialize in entertainment law. My clients are mostly athletes and performers, and I get satisfaction from helping them maximize (or minimize) their situations. Their gratitude is genuine, and I like living on the road tethered to my phone. Still, something was missing.

On a hotel bed one evening in 2008, contemplating modern malaise, I watched a news story about the living conditions of American soldiers in Iraq. Worse than the sand and heat, it was the isolation and boredom that made their outpost feel like jail. My insignificant preoccupations were

quickly checked. Men and women my age were sacrificing their lives so that I could practice law.

I had an idea, and like ideas that have the best chance of succeeding, it was simple: I would collect clubs and balls

and send them to Iraq so soldiers could relax after a day in the zone, same as me.

I gathered about 50 old clubs and 300 balls, but it wasn't as simple as going to the post office. You can't mail something to a base without a soldier's name on it, and there's a specific way to handle the addresses and customs forms. To get names, I contacted a local school to find children whose parents were in the military. It turned into a big drive where the students collected balls, packed them and wrote cards to soldiers. Thus Bunkers in Baghdad (bunkersinbaghdad.com) was born.

It's amazing how an idea can snowball. Soldiers talked to other soldiers, and I started getting tons of email requests. I contacted more schools and asked some of my wealthier clients to donate money for shipping. I had to set up a bookkeeping system, because charities need clean books to grow and qualify for more opportunities. I set up a storage unit and even asked Lowe's to donate turf mats. If lawyers are good at one thing, it's handling a lot of moving parts in an orderly way. To date we've had more than 150 schools involved, shipped four million golf balls and 75,000 clubs to bases in 21 countries.

I still do the bulk of the packing, and when a tape gun jams it's easy to get frustrated at the mundaneness. That's when I remember the difference each shipment will make to a soldier who has only a punching bag or a romance novel, or maybe nothing at all, to keep sane.

In many ways my charity has made me a better lawyer. Judges aren't as intimidating when you've addressed top generals. I'm still working harder than ever and feeling great when I win for my clients. But the difference is I now have an outlet, something bigger than myself.

The other day I got an email from a base describing how the Afghan police officers they work with were having fun hitting balls together. Even if I never become president, I can go to bed thinking about that. ♣

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