

Sharon Hazard

# DEFYING EXPECTATIONS AND MOVING FORWARD



**Fahed Al-Shelaimi '96: Military Professional, Peacemaker, and Nurturing Parent**

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When he got the phone call, his world collapsed. In an instant, the world he had worked so hard to make safe and secure was changed forever. It was October 18, 2001, when Fahed Al-Shelaimi '96 received the kind of news that shakes one's faith.

**T**he hospital in Kuwait called to say that his wife of 17 years and his five year-old daughter had been in a car accident. "I rushed to the hospital, and I was struck by the hard reality of life and death. I was told they didn't make it. They had passed away," Al-Shelaimi recalled.

For a moment, the usually in-command Kuwaiti Army Officer was at a loss at how to proceed. A devout Muslim, Al-Shelaimi remembers, "I did not know what to do, but I had belief in one thing, the mercy of Allah-God!" Good memories of his wife and daughter came flooding back, giving him the strength to carry on for his six surviving children.

"I went home to my children, five girls and one boy, and held them tightly, telling them that their loving mother and sister did not exist anymore. I was holding them like a mother bird hugging her chicks," he said.

Al-Shelaimi was faced with two options: live in the past or move forward. He chose the latter, telling his children, "Let us move ahead and see that our life together becomes a bright one."

"My faith and reliance on Allah was steadfast," Al-Shelaimi said, despite the tragic turn of events for his family. His thoughts and hopes were with his children, especially his youngest—and now motherless—10-month-old daughter, Hussa.

"I stayed home more and spent more time with my kids," Al-Shelaimi said. "I just wanted to hold onto them and make up for their sadness and loss."

He knew he had to be the pillar of the shattered family. And, like the army commander and strategist he was, he issued them an outline of his future plans, one that included an education.

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In February 2002, just four months after the tragedy, Al-Shelaimi was transferred to Tampa, FL, where he was stationed as Kuwait Military Attaché with the United States Central Command.

"We were all eager to have a change in our lives," Al-Shelaimi said. His older daughters would be returning to America where there were memories of happier times. From 1992 to 1996, then-Company Commander, Fahed Al-Shelaimi was a student at Monmouth University. Thanks to a scholarship from the Kuwait Government, his family lived in Long Branch, and his older daughters had attended school there while he pursued his studies.

Once back in the United States, the children started school and Al-Shelaimi was forced to be both mother and father, a role he embraced. "Again they started school, and again I spent more time to support them in their studies," he said.

"Living away from Kuwait made my daughters more mature and gave them a sense of responsibility. The girls now had to adjust to their altered lifestyle. They had to help with the house work, cooking, cleaning and taking care of each other, their brother and me," Al-Shelaimi said. Along the



FAHED AL-SHELAIMI '96 MEETS WITH PRIME MINISTER OF KUWAIT, HIS HIGHNESS SHEIKH JABER AL-MUBARAK AL-HAMAD AL-SABAH, IN 2011



CHAIRMAN OF THE GULF FORUM FOR PEACE AND SECURITY FAHED AL-SHELAIMI ACCUSES IRAN OF STATE-SPONSORED TERRORISM IN A MARCH 2012 INTERVIEW

way, his children found new responsibilities in the household. Some were asked to be in charge of the cleaning, others the groceries and laundry.

"I was playing the tough father role and many times trying to imitate the sweet mother role of my late wife."

The military man, responsible for negotiating world peace and security in the Middle East and around the world, was thrust into the position of guiding three teenage daughters to maturity. "Men, marriage, clothes and fashion," were now on the list of topics for discussion in the household.

These personal conversations marked a divergence from Al-Shelaimi's professional responsibilities. As his young family matured under the guidance of a single father, Al-Shelaimi's work as chair of the United States Central Command Humanitarian Assistance Working Group required him to travel extensively.

Speaking at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. in 2003, he said of the situation in Afghanistan: "Many times we don't shoot bullets. We shoot medical supplies. We shoot school supplies. We shoot hope." Always the peacemaker with thoughts of the future, he said, "To fight terrorism is to build a nation."

Unlike the international strife Al-Shelaimi faced in his professional life, his family supported one another through difficult times. Sporting events and school activities were priorities. Even so, Al-Shelaimi recalls, "Sometimes I took my seven year-old son to work with me. In a family of almost all females, man-to-man time with my son was important," he said.

Today his two eldest daughters, Anwar and Dalal, have graduated from college, and one is married with a baby of her own. His fourth daughter, Heba, is a banker. His third daughter, Sara, is a college student. His son, Mohammed, is a now a high school senior.



FORMER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD H. RUMSFELD GREETES FAHED AL-SHELAIMI AT A 2003 MEETING. AT THE TIME AL-SHELAIMI WAS KUWAITI ARMY LIEUTENANT COLONEL AND CHAIR OF THE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE WORKING GROUP AT CENTCOM

“He wants to study in the United States, and I am steering him to Monmouth University,” Al-Shelaimi said. His youngest daughter, Hussa, is now in the eighth grade.

With his family’s path on more solid ground, Al-Shelaimi reflects genuinely and positively, “There is no better blessing than this.”

Since his retirement from military service in 2006 at the rank of colonel, Al-Shelaimi has been chairman of the Gulf Forum for Peace and Security in Kuwait and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Formed in 1981, it is a coalition of six states, including Kuwait, with a mission to effect coordination, integration and inter-communication among the member states in all fields in order to achieve unity in the Arab Nations while maintaining religious and cultural ties.

“I am involved in domestic public policy by writing articles and giving media interviews,” Al-Shelaimi explains. In an interview that aired on Alaan Television on March 12, 2012, Al-Shelaimi said, “I have spent a lot of time with foreigners and have lived abroad. Some view the Middle East as a den of terrorism.”

“The Gulf Countries will not stand idly by if Iran continues with their policy,” Al-Shelaimi recently stressed. In his role as security advisor he also warned, “The Gulf Countries have declared time and again that they don’t want to be involved

in the nuclear dispute between Iran and the International Community.”

How did Monmouth shape his path as an international peacemaker? Al-Shelaimi majored in systems management, but said, “I took so many political science courses; I could have had a double major.”

Dr. Saliba Sarsar, associate vice president for Global Initiatives at Monmouth, remembers Fahed Al-Shelaimi as someone who “showed a strong commitment to learning about Middle East affairs in particular and world affairs in general.”

“Fahed brought much knowledge about Arabic culture given his Kuwaiti background. He showed great sensibility and respect for others and their ideas,” Dr. Sarsar said.

Despite his academic, military, and diplomatic successes, Al-Shelaimi weighs his greatest achievements on a different scale, “I was very happy and proud, like a child getting a reward, when my five daughters and only son gave me a mug for Father’s Day that said, ‘Number One Best Dad,’” he recalled fondly.

“I felt happiness, though it was a lot of work, that my children appreciated me as both mother and father.” [MU](#)