

# For the Children

Throwing out the speeches, formal dinners and rounds of applause at every year's Universal Children's Day, one outfit working with orphans puts on a fun outdoor event that anyone can replicate, any time of the year

By Marwa Helal

**I**N THE GREEN grass of a garden-turned-playground, with his smiling face painted brightly, a paper cone full of popcorn in one hand and a bush of white cotton candy in the other, seven-year-old Abdallah doesn't appear to be missing anything, let alone a family. Abdallah and 59 fellow orphans are gathered in a Maadi garden, fully equipped with a trampoline, an art corner, and every kind of toy a kid could dream of making trouble with. It is a unique celebration: Universal Children's Day.

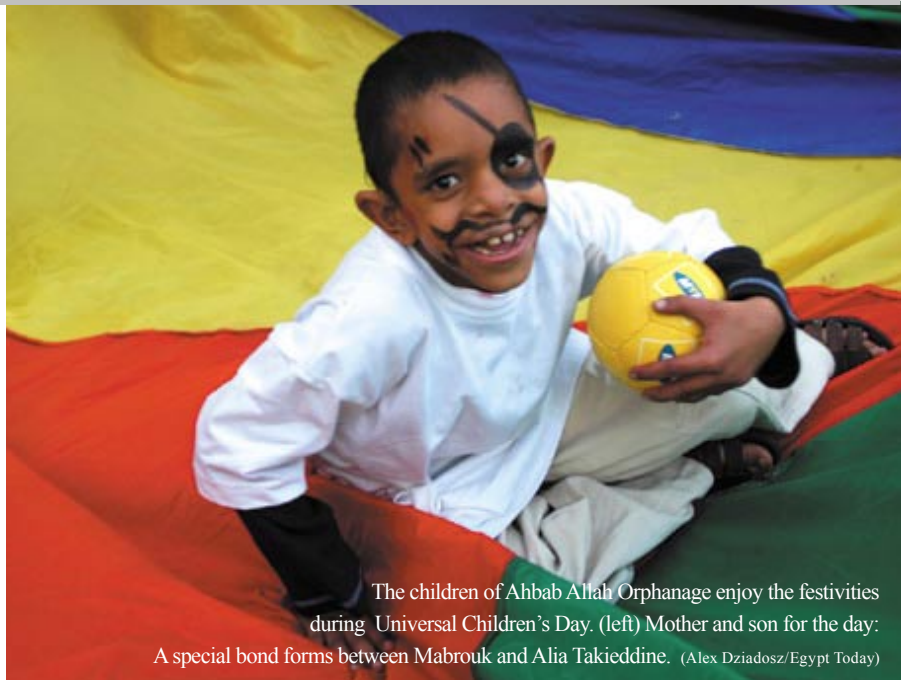
The organizer of the event, 4 Our Kidz, led by Mohamed El Koossy, wanted to do something different for orphaned children. "Usually, we recognize Universal Children's Day by talking about the problem we have with orphans, but without actually involving the children living with the problem. That doesn't make sense. Recognition of children should involve the children," he says.

The solution seems obvious to El Koossy, who is clearly frustrated that people aren't doing more to help children like those from the Ahbab Allah Orphanage. However, he does recognize why they have reservations about volunteering with orphans. "Some people say, 'Oh no, they will get too attached,' or 'Ya haram! I can't take it, it just breaks my heart. But it doesn't have to be like that. You don't have to go to an orphanage and sit in a room with a look of depression on your face. Look around: we're outside; they're happy, active and we're here to interact with them.'"

El Koossy's outfit is not just another NGO. "It is an institute of public consciousness. This is where the business world meets the rest of the world by integrating their work with the community and trying to influence



Mohammed El Koossy, founder of 4 Our Kidz, and his son. (Khaled Habib/Egypt Today)



The children of Ahab Allah Orphanage enjoy the festivities during Universal Children's Day. (left) Mother and son for the day: A special bond forms between Mabrouk and Alia Takieddine. (Alex Dziadosz/Egypt Today)

their habits, changing trends and minds. My public relations agency, ActivePR, began getting involved in the community service field mostly by helping children."

His mission is to bring smiles to children's faces. "Last year we celebrated Universal Children's Day by setting out to break a Guinness world record, creating a banner with the largest number of children's hand prints, which we achieved with over 5,000 prints, but then China came along and beat us out of the competition. The idea is that if we can help these children now, we can then help them in the future [...] And it's well known that in order to change the future, you have to start with children. And how can we do it in this country? Not by giving money to street children, because [that just] encourages begging. It also encourages whoever is taking the money from them to continue to send those children out to collect," El Koossy says.

Volunteer-father Aiman Kaissouni agrees. "It's nice to play and interact with these young kids. Helping other kids that are not as fortunate as we were and raising awareness about them is why I showed up. If one more person becomes aware of their special needs, they can help — even if it's just once a month. It was amazing to see their eyes light up when they walked into the garden. Their eyes seemed to say, 'We're going to have a lot of fun today,' and it makes me think 'I wish it wasn't just once a year that we did this'."

One of the younger parents at the day's festivities, 22-year-old Miral Mohamed Ahmed of the Egyptian Junior Business Association, took a break from a game of tag to talk to Egypt Today. "I love that it feels like we really are one family today," she says, patting a boy on the head when he runs up and asks her to come back to their game of tag.

"This event is great because it's a chance to come out instead of going into the orphanages," says Renee Giar, a teacher. "It's excellent for kids because they get to experience something new and see different people. They might not realize its value now, but when they grow up, they will remember an opportunity like this."

And what do the stars of the event think? You don't have to ask to find out. The kids are all laughing, jumping up and down on the trampoline or opening a pack of watercolors.

"I am having a lot of fun. I am so happy," screams 10-year-old Nabila.

Twelve-year-old May rattles off a list of all she's done today, "I played on the trampoline, the ball and painted..."

A more reserved 11-year-old Gamal quietly tells me he likes drawing the most.

Mamdouh, an 11-year-old who's playing with a yo-yo, stands on tiptoe to see what I'm writing. His nose and eyes peer over my notebook. "What are you doing? Are you writing in English?" he asks, beaming.

The 60-odd orphans, ranging in age from

five to 12, all don matching white t-shirts that bear the 4 Our Kidz logo "to reinforce the feeling of family and equality," El Koossy says. Three hours into the gathering, many of the white shirts are soaked from the ensuing water gun fights. The parents and kids are roughhousing, faces are being painted, mini-football matches intersect with children forming a line for the trampoline or their second and third helpings of popcorn and cotton candy.

In one corner it is obvious a special bond has formed between a particular child, Mabrouk, and one of the day's parents, Alia Taki El Deen. When asked the same question put forward to all the other kids, "What's your favorite thing about today?" Mabrouk's answer makes one feel like smiling and crying at the same time: "Alia."

Catching up with El Koossy as the event draws to a close, you would think he would be worn out with all of these kids wreaking havoc around him, but the man is exhilarated, wide-eyed and grinning from ear to ear. "This is so great," he exclaims. "I have made up my mind: we will do this on a bi-monthly basis. These kids need and want more than food: they want to participate, to be engaged. Not just during Ramadan and not just on Orphan's Day. They are not part-time orphans. They are around all year." et

For more information on how to contribute year-round, visit [4ourkidz.org](http://4ourkidz.org)