

About Dr. Darwish

meeting our beloved pediatrician,
who shows us the true meaning of kindness

Health care is two separate words: health and care.

– The rules of grammar

Dr. Azza Darwish had a very busy pediatric practice. I first called her office when Aaron was three weeks old. The receptionist immediately booked us into a spot at noon the next day. When my husband and I arrived at the clinic, I realized that they were actually closed for lunch. I was grateful to sit in the quiet waiting room, and not be surrounded by seemingly typical babies. That would have been difficult in the fragile early days of Aaron's diagnosis. I was living under a heavy black veil of grief, where everything was very dark. I did not wish to have happy gurgling babies obstructing my view.

We were escorted back to Dr. Darwish's treatment room. Mike carried Aaron, who was asleep in his car seat bucket. The clinic room was full of photos of Dr. Darwish's patients – kids with facial differences, kids in wheelchairs, typical looking kids, and yes, I recognized the heart-shaped faces of children with Down syndrome. The display was a beautiful celebration of all the diverse children in her practice.

We perched anxiously in our chairs, not talking. I picked nervously at my fingers as Mike stared at the ceiling.

Soon after, Dr. Darwish knocked on the door, came in and introduced herself. The very first thing she did was scoop slumbering Aaron up out of his car seat and held him in her arms. Today, 10 years later, I still can close my eyes and recall this well-dressed physician cuddling my son. It was a powerful image.

“You have a beautiful baby boy,” she said, and a lovely smile spread across her face.

In the weeks after Aaron's diagnosis, we visited many health professionals. Not one of them held Aaron. Not one of them commented on how beautiful he was. And he was indeed beautiful – wee, soft, a bit floppy, with a mess of dark, punk-rock hair. Dr. Darwish was the first clinician to see Aaron as a baby first. She didn't immediately zero in on what was wrong with him. She first saw, and expressed, what was right.

She continued chatting with us, “It must have been quite a shock for you to find out about the Down syndrome.” This opened the door for us to talk about how we felt about Aaron's diagnosis. Again, not one other clinician had asked us how we were emotionally. They all talked about risks, statistics and data. Nobody focused on what was invisible to the eye.

Our appointment was close to an hour long. I knew that was almost unheard of in the world of specialists. Dr. Darwish asked us if we wanted to see some of Aaron's physical markers. We did. She gently pointed them out. She carefully opened Aaron's hands, as if to read his palm. She softly showed us his lower-set ears and the gap between his toes. She murmured to him as she completed her examination. He was not a lab specimen to her. She treated him with such dignity, as if he was her own child. Over a decade later, my eyes still well up recalling this kindness.

Dr. Darwish patiently explained all the services available to us, and suggested we get in touch with our local support group so we could meet other families. She said her office would look after all the medical referrals we needed – for an echocardiogram and ECG, for audiology and ophthalmology. She made an overwhelmingly difficult experience more manageable, and ultimately, more human.

When we left her clinic, the waiting room was starting to fill up with patients for their 1 p.m. appointments. When we passed by Dr. Darwish's office, I could see her sitting at her desk, unwrapping her bagged lunch. She had spent her entire lunch hour with us – and we were a family she didn't even know.

Azza Darwish passed away from cancer 14 years ago. She was 52 years old. She is sorely missed in our community because of her skill as a clinician, as she had many children with Down syndrome in her practice. But she is mostly missed because of her compassion as a human being. She was a beloved pediatrician.

I cannot overstate the importance for health professionals to give patients and families the gifts of compassion and hope. After that appointment with Dr. Darwish, my heavy black veil of grief began to lift, ever so slightly. From beneath that veil, I caught my first real glimpse of my little boy. He continues to shine his light brightly on us today. Thank you, Azza, for this gift.