

Elmont resident Nafiah Ikram had the first surgery on her face in June and will need many more.

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SHARING STORY OF STRENGTH

After horrific attack, Elmont woman resolute in her ongoing recovery

BY KELDY ORTIZ

keldy.ortiz@newsday.com

An Elmont woman is on a 16-month journey she never wanted — of learning to cope with constant pain while undergoing one medical surgery and procedure after another.

Nafiah Ikram, 23, had acid thrown in her face by an unknown assailant last year, leaving the Hofstra University student unable to see in one eye and facing an unknown number of surgeries, after her first one in June, to rebuild burned parts of her face. The trauma, at times, brought on suicidal thoughts, she said.

“I think the worst part of going through what I’m going through now is that every single time I’m going to get comfortable in my own skin again, it’s going to be another surgery and then rinse and repeat,” Ikram said in an interview with Newsday.

Nassau police remain tight-lipped about a case they call “complex.” The department has yet to make an arrest, sparking frustration from Ikram’s family about the pace of the investigation, which also involves the FBI.

In June, Ikram underwent the first of what will be several facial-reconstruction surgeries.

“When I think about my progress, overall,” she said, “I

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really am proud of how long I’ve been able to deal with this and how far I’ve come.”

Ikram wants to share her life-altering story — of frustration and learning to overcome — with others and hopefully “help people with mental health, and how to deal with emotional trauma and PTSD.”

Chronicling her journey

Since the March 17, 2021, attack, Ikram has taken to writing in a journal her thoughts about what she has endured. The writings, she said, might one day even

be turned into a book. She sees a therapist for treatment of PTSD.

On the night her life, as she knew it, changed forever, Ikram was walking up the driveway of her Arlington Avenue home returning from her job at CVS Pharmacy when the attacker threw what she initially thought was warm juice on her face and arms. The pain Ikram soon felt as the liquid burned her skin told her it was something else.

At the time, Nassau Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder described the suspect as male, 6-foot-2 with a “skinny build.” He wore a hooded black sweatshirt and gloves, Ryder said.

An image of a red 2013 to

2015 Nissan Altima with yellow New York license plates, heading east on Arlington Avenue afterward and possibly connected to the attacker, was captured by a surveillance camera, he said. The attack also was captured on a surveillance camera.

Ikram said the attack left her needing, among other things, eye surgery for a cornea infection. Because the acid burned her throat, she also needed procedures to dilate her esophagus, she said. After the attack, she was put on a liquid diet but is now able to eat solid foods.

As Ikram’s 23rd birthday approached June 11, she planned to celebrate with family and



A family picture shows Ikram before the March 2021 attack.

I really am proud of how long I've been able to deal with this and how far I've come.'

— Nafiah Ikram

friends but struggled with anxiety over her first facial surgery 10 days later.

"For the second time over this entire year and a half of torment that I've been dealing with, I've had a mental breakdown and I like definitely had suicidal thoughts," Ikram said recently in an interview in the backyard of her home. "That was really, really hard for me."

The June 21 surgery consisted of removing scarring on the right side of her face and replacing it with skin from her right shoulder. The surgery, which took four hours, will happen again, she said. The next time, the skin will come from her left shoulder.

Ikram's recovery meant keeping her surgically repaired skin dry. "I wasn't allowed to shower," she said. "I was literally taking medication for pain every four hours. My head hurts when I think about it."

Her doctors were not available for comment but a plastic surgeon who has done hundreds of reconstruction surgeries on victims of acid attacks said a patient can require an average of five to 20 surgeries over a three- to five-year period.

Acid attacks on the face usually require surgeries on the upper ends of those ranges, said the plastic surgeon, Dr. David Alessi, of Beverly Hills, California, who belongs to a charity called Face Forward International, which helps vic-

tims of such attacks.

First, the burns need to be covered to avoid the wounds weeping, becoming infected, and the patient potentially dying, Alessi said. Further reconstruction is aimed at aesthetics and function, and there are also cosmetic procedures on scars and burns. Sometimes scars return and require further surgeries, he said.

"It'll be very, very unlikely for just a few surgeries to take care of it," Alessi said.

Sharing her story

Ikram's ability to endure the long road to recovery has gotten the attention of others. In December, Assemb. Michaelle Solages (D-Elmont) virtually held her eighth annual Women of Distinction ceremony, where she presented Ikram with the honor. The event is "dedicated to recognizing women in our community who continue to uplift and empower others," says a message on Solages' Assembly Facebook page.

Another recipient that day, Desiray Boyd, a theater arts teacher at the Academy Charter School in Hempstead, was so impressed that she asked Ikram to tell her story to students.

"It's just not about educating [students] academically," Boyd said. "I wanted them to be able to walk away with life skills. I think as a speaker, she would be able to teach them things you don't get every day in a classroom."

Solages, who also recognized Ikram's mother during the ceremony, said that while the pair faced "trials and tribulations," they took "a negative situation and turned it into a positive."

"We honor Nafiah. Although she was attacked, and her attacker is still walking around free, she is still a strong advocate and a voice for the community," Solages said. "She's still

going out there and telling people there's still light after dark, providing strength for people."

Ikram, a premed student, has returned to Hofstra classes part time. Her mother, Sherina Mohamed, said that while her daughter has tried to stay busy, her attacker still being on the loose remains top of mind. Mohamed also called the trips to the doctor to care for her daughter "never-ending."

"My daughter is suffering more and more, and the thought that was affecting us a lot, at least 50% of our stress, is that these people are still out there free," Mohamed said.

Nassau Police Deputy Insp. Matt Schiller, the detective in charge of the case until June when he was promoted, said investigators keep in contact with Ikram to check her progress and update her on theirs.

The investigation is a "complex case," Schiller said, as it is not "open and shut . . . where you have a known subject, known to the victim."

Schiller declined to discuss other aspects of the investigation, including where the suspect could be or a possible motive for the attack.

Nassau police and the FBI, which did not respond to requests for comment, are offering a \$40,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

"It's an assault case, [and] there's a lot of interviews involved, there's a lot of background information . . .," said Schiller, who has been with the department for 19 years.

"There's a lot of things that need to be done to try and identify the subject," he said.

If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached by dialing 988 or 800-273-8255.

With Matthew Chayes



Ikram says she had considered suicide but fought back the urge.

2 key cities in Ukraine under attack

The Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces began an assault Saturday on two key cities in the eastern Donetsk region and kept up rocket and shelling attacks on other Ukrainian cities, including one close to Europe's largest nuclear power plant, Ukraine's military and local officials said.

Both Bakhmut and Avdiivka have been considered key targets of Russia's ongoing offensive across Ukraine's east, with analysts saying Moscow needs to take Bakhmut if it is to advance on the regional hubs of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.

"In the Donetsk direction, the enemy is conducting an offensive operation, concentrating its main efforts on the Bakhmut and Avdiivka directions. It uses ground attack and army aviation," the Ukrainian General Staff said on Facebook.

The last Russian strike on Sloviansk was July 30, but Ukrainian forces are fortifying their positions around the city in expectation of new fighting.

"I think it won't be calm for long. Eventually, there will be an assault," Col. Yuri Bereza, head of the volunteer national guard regiment, told The Associated Press.

Russian shelling killed five civilians and injured 14 others in the Donetsk region in the last day, Donetsk governor Pavlo Kyrylenko wrote Saturday on Telegram, saying two people were killed in Poprosny, and one each in Avdiivka, Soledar and Pervomaiskiy.

The governor of the eastern Dnipropetrovsk region said three civilians were injured after Russian rockets fell on a residential neighborhood in Nikopol, a city across the Dnieper River from the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power station. The nuclear plant has been under Russian control since Moscow's troops seized

it early in the war.

"After midnight, the Russian army struck the Nikopol area with (Soviet-era) Grad rockets, and the Kryvyi Rih area from barrel artillery," Valentyn Reznichenko wrote on Telegram.

Another Russian missile attack overnight damaged unspecified infrastructure in the regional capital of Zaporizhzhia. On Thursday, Russia fired 60 rockets at Nikopol, damaging 50 residential buildings in the city of 107,000 and leaving residents without electricity.

Rafael Grossi, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, warned this week that the situation was becoming more perilous day by day at the Zaporizhzhia plant.

"Every principle of nuclear safety has been violated" at the plant, he said. "What is at stake is extremely serious."

He expressed concern about the way the plant is being operated and the danger posed by the fighting going on around it. Experts at the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War said Russia is shelling the area intentionally, "putting Ukraine in a difficult position."

The Ukrainian company operating the nuclear power station said Saturday that Russian troops are using the plant's basement to hide from Ukrainian shelling and have barred its Ukrainian staff from going there.

"Ukrainian personnel do not yet have access to these premises, so in the event of new shelling, people have no shelter and are in danger," Enerhoatom, a Ukrainian state enterprise, said on its Telegram channel.

Enerhoatom said Friday that Russian rockets had damaged the plant's facilities, including a nitrogen-oxygen unit and a high-voltage power line. Local Russian-appointed officials acknowledged the damage, but blamed it on the Ukrainians.