

# Coming to America

## A REFUGEE'S JOURNEY TO CHICAGO

by Dawn Reiss

Asmaa Aeash remembers the first time she met her husband in Syria.

They sat outside and drank coffee in the garden of her parents' home. Someone in his family had mentioned he should visit her. So he did.

Mohammad Obidat laughs. Through an Iraqi interpreter named Dima Suliman, he says he liked Aeash the moment he saw her. And Aeash says she liked him, because she knew he was a good man.

"They didn't get married quickly," Suliman says. "They waited three months." They wore each other's rings during that time, the interpreter says, so they could get to know each other's likes and dislikes. Like many American couples, she liked to go shopping for clothes and he liked eating and spending time on the Internet surfing websites, like Facebook.

But that was ten years ago, back when they had a house and a computer, when she was 21 and he was 26. It was a lifetime ago, he says, when life in Syria was good.

They landed at O'Hare Airport at the end of July.

They arrived as refugees from Jordan, co-sponsored by Lutheran Church of the Ascension in Northfield, Ill., and RefugeeOne, a nonprofit organization in the Uptown neighborhood that helps refugees resettle in Chicago. It finds sponsors, housing, and tutoring while administering English classes, job training, and counseling, coupled with after-school care and tutoring for children.

It was a 14-hour flight to Chicago and their first time on a plane.

Their daughter Retaj, 9, and son Akram, 6, played liked nothing was wrong. In the airport, Aeash cried and hugged her children. She missed her family she'd left behind and her 22 year-old brother who had been killed in the war. Obidat put his arm around her and told her, "Don't cry, you have to be strong."

Two months later, Aeash still isn't quite sure what to do here in Chicago. She still has nightmares. "Every day, every minute," she says. "It's not something you forget."

When her son was two, the bombs in Syria started. He would crouch down and shake on the

floor from the noises, like a turtle trying to crawl back into its shell. As a family, they'd hide in the basement, afraid to sleep upstairs in their beds. At the same time, Obidat, who had worked as an accountant for an electricity company, started traveling back and forth between Jordan and Syria, hoping for a cure.

Years earlier he'd noticed a lump, a mole on his left thumb. For more than a decade, the doctors would do an operation each year. "Open his finger and get it out," the interpreter says. Each year, the doctors would tell Obidat, "It's nothing." Until he found out in 2010, it was bone cancer. A



year later, when Syrian doctors said they wanted to cut off Obidat's entire left hand nearly up to his elbow, he decided to go to Jordan for a second opinion. That's when he learned the cancer had spread to his lungs.

After two years of traveling back and forth, living in a country ravaged by war with constant bombings, homes being destroyed and people dying all around them, they decided to flee permanently to Jordan in January 2013 with nothing but the clothes on their backs and their two children. The doctors were better there Obidat

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## BY THE NUMBERS

Over the next two years, the U.S. will increase the number of worldwide refugees it accepts each year. Here's a look at the breakdown:

**70,000** The annual capped number of global refugees the U.S. will resettle in 2015.

**85,000** The annual capped number of global refugees the U.S. will resettle in 2016.

**100,000** The annual capped number of global refugees the U.S. will resettle in 2017.

**14<sup>th</sup>** The U.S.'s worldwide rank in the number of refugees it hosted in 2014 (267,174), according to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which represents less than 1 percent of the nation's population.





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says, but after a while they were told they had to leave Jordan. Someone told them they could go to America as refugees the interpreter says. "For the children it's better," Aeash says. "For him it's better."

They now live in a one bedroom apartment in Albany Park.

Aeash is going to English classes at RefugeeOne, cooking and cleaning at home, taking her kids to school, and helping them with their homework, while assisting her husband. "In Jordan, they told [Obidat] it will be very good here," the interpreter says. "They are telling [Aeash] to work. But she dresses him, she helps him, and he can't do anything alone."

Aeash says she doesn't know how she'd have time to work and take care of everything else. For now, they are living off food stamps. Things are expensive here, she says. She misses her family, the private bedroom she once had, and is scared of all the dogs that are here. Obidat says he's going to see doctors at Swedish Covenant Hospital, and that his prognosis is "half good, half bad," but his doctor is going to another hospital for additional advice.

"They've heard that some people will tell refugees to go away from here, to leave the country," Suliman says. But so far, they haven't personally experienced that, the interpreter says. Everybody has been friendly and smiling.

When they have free time, Aeash says she likes taking the kids to Montrose Beach where they can walk in the water, or take a trip to Millennium Park. And their son loves riding the El. "Yesterday, he told them he has to ride the train downtown," the interpreter says, mimicking the boy's fist pounding on a conference table at RefugeeOne. "Her daughter also likes the train, but not like him."

The couple laughs at Suliman's re-enactment. Even though things have been difficult, they both hope for a good future here. Sometimes, Aeash says, "you just have to wait and get used to the new thing." *fw*

## WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

RefugeeOne is the largest refugee resettlement organization in the Midwest. The nonprofit says more than 70 percent of refugees are women and more than half are from the Middle East. **Sara Spoonheim Amit**, director of development for RefugeeOne says 489 new refugees came through their organization between July 2014 and 2015. This year we'll likely welcome more than 600, which is a significant increase of more than 20 percent, she says, a fraction of the approximately 2,500 refugees and immigrants that annually access the non-profit's various services. Here's Amit's suggestions on how to get involved with RefugeeOne.

- **Co-sponsor a family.** Provide financial support and friendship to help a refugee family resettle in the U.S., while ensuring their first three months of rent is paid, along with food and basic living expenses. Cost is typically \$4,000 to \$8,000, depending on the size of the family.
- **Volunteer for the youth after-school program** in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood, tutor a child (ages 6-17) one-on-one in Chicago, Skokie, and Evanston or mentor adult refugees so they can acclimate to the new culture and climate from riding public transit to helping them practice their English.
- **Employment opportunities.** Help connect RefugeeOne with potential employers who might hire refugees.
- **Organize a drive** for everything from coats and bedding to cleaning supplies and blankets.