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Safe 'at long last': Iraqi refugee family settles into Northampton home

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Northampton
refugee
Jasimiyah
Hussein fled
Iraq with her

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sons, Yousuf and Ayoob Al-Dulaimi, after more than a decade of waiting for things to get better. But they only got worse.

Her brother was shot in the head, dead, in the street. Her children's paternal uncle was kidnapped and murdered. The summer before their escape in September 2014, three of Yousuf Al-Dulaimi's colleagues at a downtown marketing firm were kidnapped without a trace, and Ayoob Al-Dulaimi had stopped attending high school after a series of nearby bombings that rocked the institution. Random violence grew to such prevalence, she said people stopped asking who was

behind each act. The Sunni family remains unsure whether they lost loved ones to ISIS, to sectarian gangs or to another murderous group.

"They keep happening and no one knows the source," she said in Arabic through an interpreter. "It's very random. It happens so much people don't look for causes anymore."

She said the source was less important than the realization it was time to take her sons and leave the country, launching a nearly three-year journey that led them to Northampton.

They arrived late last month as the city resettlement program's first refugee family, and the community — under the direction of Springfield's Catholic Charities — has rallied around them in an outpouring of donations and volunteerism.

Last week they moved into their new home for the next year: a freshly built apartment in Village Hill. Property owner and developer Jonathan Wright offered the home at a heavily discounted price.

The apartment was cold as the volunteer pre-arrival team readied it for habitation, and the appliances still wrapped in plastic. As the crew moved in the pieces of donated furniture, they looked to Yousuf for direction on placement. The hardwood floors glistened in the sunlight, and the team worked cautiously so as not to scratch them.

"I think the comforters were the only thing we had to purchase, actually," volunteer coordinator Keegan Pyle said. "And we used donated gift certificates to buy them."

The new mattresses came from Yankee Mattress as part of a fundraising campaign by the Montessori School of Northampton.



“Do you want the table this way or this way?” Pyle asked Yousuf, throwing her hands in a vertical, then diagonal line. The 26-year-old stood, thinking, and then helped roll an incoming carpet beneath the table.

“Nice,” he said, pushing in the chairs, drawing celebratory laughs at his sudden outburst of English.

The men moving the furniture had hoped to form a circle of care, but because they all have day jobs it didn't work out.

“So we were trying to figure out how we could help,” Mike Mansfield said, which is how they joined the pre-arrival team.

“The town is stepping up and that's really cool to see,” said Wade Wofford, another member of the team.

On the financial side, the United Way of Hampshire County launched a Welcome Northampton Fund to assist with the city's refugee resettlement effort. The fund started with a \$20,000 lead gift from Smith College, which helped launch the fundraising campaign.

The Welcome Home Northampton Steering Committee will decide how to distribute funds collected by United Way. Jim Ayres, executive director of the nonprofit, said the government funding will quickly run out.

"We need to look at what these new residents need in order to get fully on their feet and integrated into the community," he said in a statement. "They will need more support."

To donate, visit WelcomeHomeNorthampton.org or send a check to United Way, 71 King St. in Northampton with "Refugee Fund" in the memo line.

At home

On the average weekday morning, the family's new home is bustling with English tutors and volunteers. Visitors slip their shoes off before venturing onto the hardwood floors.

Inside, oranges and bananas sit in a dish on the counter beside of a vase of flowers.

Father Bill Pomerleau arrived Tuesday afternoon, after the family's English lessons, with a stack of paperwork fresh from the mailbox. He helped them open their latest checks, as well some utility bills.

Upon arrival, the State Department provided Catholic Charities with a one-time \$925 for each member of the family, which the agency is spending on food, household goods and rent. They also get food stamps, and \$428 a month per person from the Office for Refugees and Immigrants to cover utilities, bills and other needs. Those checks will continue to come for the family's first eight months in America.

Upon opening his freshly minted Massachusetts identification card, Yousuf Al-Dulaimi wanted to know: "can we use these to go to Canada?"

"No," Pomerleau answered through a translator, explaining that a state ID card instead comes in handy anytime its owner must prove their age or identity.

Mohammed Ibrahim, an Egyptian native, offers interpretation services to the family on a volunteer basis. He came to the U.S. for post-doctorate work in 2014 and now has a green card.

The family members took time this week to ask questions about paying their bills, which they are beginning to take over. And there's another item to add

to the list of things to which the family is getting acquainted: snow.

The white stuff, they say, is a “beautiful” new sight. Before leaving their native Baghdad, the family had only seen snow “once in 2005 for about five minutes.”

They say they’ve been busy settling and taking English classes, and so haven’t had much time to explore their new community. But they’ve seen enough to defy expectations. They’d heard anti-refugee sentiment was brewing in America, and so they were pleasantly surprised to find Northampton is “so kind and warm.”

Hussein wears gold rings on each middle finger — gifts from her two adult children who remain in Baghdad. She said she hopes they’ll join her here in America, but they have big families of their own now, and young children made it difficult for them to leave as quickly.

Still, she said the hardest part about leaving was “the unknown future” that lay ahead for the family. Just as they found out they were headed to America, Donald Trump ascended to the presidency. Given rhetoric surrounding Trump’s rise to power, she said they were very worried their reception would be hateful or angry.

“We’re so surprised it turned out to be the exact opposite,” she said, adding people come and shake her hand when they recognize her around town.

Picking up the pieces

When the family left Baghdad, Yousuf Al-Dulaimi had a year of college under his belt, and Ayoob Al-Dulaimi, now 20, hadn’t yet finished high school. They took refuge in Turkey for two years and seven months, but Jasimiyah Hussein says it felt like much longer.

The brothers took turns leaving their simple apartment in Turkey for odd jobs while the other stayed home with their mother. The country readily offered them refugee status, but beyond that they were on their own — there were no camps for them to take shelter in, and their refugee status made them ineligible for legal work. So they worked long hours under the table for half the pay.

Sometimes, the brothers recall, they worked 18 hours in a day to cover their rent. One job Ayoob held in a chemical lab left him permanently maimed. He pulled up his pant leg to reveal a grapefruit-sized sore where chemicals had eaten away at his flesh. The sores are mostly healed, he says, but this one is the worst.

“I had to go make a living,” he said. “There was no other option.”

The family now has Mass Health and have all visited doctors since their arrival.

Hussein has been wheelchair-bound for most of her life. She got polio at age 3, and because she was one of 12 siblings, it was too burdensome for the family to get her to school. The literacy she has, she said, was self-taught. Now, she will require more tutoring than her sons in order to catch up.

“What matters now is safety, which had been long lost,” she said.

Craving social interaction, the brothers are turning to their volunteer circle of care to help them find sports and activities that can get them out of the house. As the family settles in their new home, homemade Middle Eastern dishes offer a taste of the home they left behind. They offer kubba — fried ovals made from finely

ground meat wrapped in cracked wheat — to guests, as well as dolma, or stuffed grape leaves. Vegetables are bigger in America, they say.

As they cook, containers of Pringles and maple syrup sit beside the stove.

Next week, Catholic Charities Executive Director Kathryn Buckley-Brawner said the agency will help the brothers explore job opportunities. To start, they'll look at manual labor that doesn't require much English.

"We'll help them select a job that they want, that pays the best of all the things being offered, and still allows them to continue their English language learning," she said. "That's really an important aspect of all of this — if they cease to do their English language learning they'll be trapped in low-income level jobs."

As for their hopes and dreams, Ayoob said he'd first like to "repay the favor" Northampton has offered him with in-kind volunteer work. Yousuf would like to study political science. And Hussein said her dream was realized upon their arrival in Northampton.

"I'm very satisfied," she said. "The first dream has already come true. We've landed somewhere we feel safe and comfortable."

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