

The Last Refugee

STORY 2 IN AN ONGOING SERIES

Threads of new life

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Second in a series of occasional articles on the Syrian refugee families resettling here, and the local people assisting them.

The tailor waiting in the lobby of the menswear factory — his eyes on the floor, his heart pounding in his chest — had already known the blackest depths of doubt and fear. Abdulkader Hayani was 29 years old, a refugee from Syria. He had escaped the war that had ground his country to dust, lost the career he'd spent a decade building, and somehow, despite the odds against it, steered himself, his wife and their four children to safety in the United States.

Yet the trial before him now felt like a test he could not pass: his first job interview in America — his first job interview ever. In a country where he had been for less than one month. In a language he could not speak or understand.

Abdulkader carried two long, tailored jackets, draped over one arm. He had made them by hand, while working in Jordan after fleeing Syria. They were elegant garments, beautifully cut, and he prayed that they would say what he could not: that he knew and loved this work; that he would do it well.

Abdulkader Hayani waited for his first job interview in the United States.

The lobby of the menswear company was busy. Other job candidates waited there, too, on sleek, black furniture by a coffee table stacked with fashion industry trade journals. This gleaming new facility in Haverhill housed Southwick Apparel, where 500 employees from 40 countries stitch Brooks Brothers suits. Abdulkader stood apart from the other applicants, clutching his jackets, half wishing he could disappear. He peered down a hallway, where a glass door revealed a vast factory floor bustling with workers. A steady, muted buzz and clatter drifted from within it.

The young tailor recognized the rhythms of the room, and the jolt of the familiar gave him sudden hope. He turned to Danny Woodward, the young American caseworker who had brought him to the interview. "I worked in a place like this," Abdulkader said in Arabic. "In Lebanon."

Danny was new in his job assisting several families of Syrian refugees who had recently been brought to the Boston area. Tall and reserved, with a degree in Arabic studies, he had been hired by the Framingham agency resettling the Syrians because he was fluent in their language. The rest of the job he was learning as he went.

Settling Syrian refugees here was an experiment the State Department and its partners had been reluctant to approve. The area's high cost of living was considered risky for people already facing obstacles. Nevertheless, a small army of volunteers and community leaders was determined to try and make it work. They helped with most everything in the families' lives — guiding their search for work, paying much of their rent. It meant the Hayani family could stay afloat for now. But the aid would

eventually end, and when it did, Abdulkader knew he could not afford the house their benefactors had rented and furnished for them, at \$2,200 a month. It was the looming problem he could not stop thinking about.

Abdulkader set up his new professional-grade sewing machine as his daughter Ameeneh played in the box it arrived in. The machine was purchased with donations from families at the Islamic Center of Boston, Wayland.

A woman came into the lobby and led the job applicants to a large room, where she asked each one to introduce himself. When she came to Abdulkader, he answered the best way he could: He held up his jackets for everyone to see.

Lay them out here on the table, the woman told him. She called in a supervisor to look. Did you do all this, they asked, pointing to the stitching.

Yes, he told them. Yes, I did it all.

Abdulkader didn't need to understand the words they spoke. He could hear it in their voices: There was hope for him.

They brought him to the sprawling factory floor he had glimpsed from the lobby, and sat him down at a machine to watch him sew. The young Syrian looked around the room in awe. He had never seen a plant so impressive. Then he turned his focus to the task before him.

The tailor was totally absorbed, any trace of nervousness now indiscernible.

When it was over, they took Abdulkader to a room overlooking the manufacturing floor. Across a long table, a manager offered him a job and laid out the details: \$11 an hour, minimum wage, while he trained, then a likely raise to \$15. She offered help with moving expenses if he wanted to relocate his family nearby; there was an Arabic-speaking community here, she assured him, and grocery stores with familiar food.

On the drive home, Abdulkader felt triumphant: He had found a job in America. It might not pay enough for them to stay in the house where they now lived, but it was a leap toward possibility, a future. For the first time in weeks, he felt like he could breathe.

Beside him in the driver's seat, Danny struggled to find the right tone. He knew how much this first taste of success meant, and he worried it would lead to disappointment; the job was far from Abdulkader's home.

"You should be happy," he told Abdulkader. "We just have to think about it."

On one of her first days in this country, Asmaa Hayani shopped at a halal food market in Norwood with the help of an Arabic-speaking volunteer, Stephanie Juma.

Abdulkader's wife could see how much he wanted the job. She tried to find some way she could embrace it, but the idea filled Asmaa with trepidation.

The company that wanted to hire her husband was 60 miles away from the small, cream-colored house where they lived with their four young children. Abdulkader had no car and no driver's license. He might find another commuter to ride with, but it was unlikely. He could look for a cheap room to rent in

Haverhill, but that would leave his wife and children — two boys and two girls, all under age 10 — completely on their own during the workweek.

The thought of being so alone, in a place where she knew no one and could not speak the language, was more painful than Asmaa could bear. The prospect of leaving Framingham was almost as bad. It wasn't home yet, but it was the closest thing she had.

They had taken the children to the playground down the road, and begun to figure out how to walk to nearby stores. They had propped a few photographs on a shelf, and found a spot for Abdulkader's sewing machine. He had plans to make new curtains for the sunny living room. One day, another Syrian family had walked over from their home to visit, bringing a housewarming gift, a mixer they had purchased on the way at Target. Their kids all played together as the parents chatted in Arabic.

Their schedules were surprisingly busy: hours of intensive English classes and appointments with doctors and dentists to catch up on years of missed health care. They relied heavily on help from Danny and other staff at Jewish Family Service of Metrowest, and on volunteers from Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, who provided rides and child care and daily guidance on life in America. Most important, there was a school nearby with an Arabic-speaking aide, who could help their children navigate the scary leap into their new classrooms and new country.

They both knew it was not a good time to relocate. But if it was his dream, Asmaa told him, then she would accept it.

"If you can find a place in Haverhill where we all can stay," she offered, "then OK."

"I would rather lose the job than lose the people we have here who help us," Abdulkader answered.

He tried to make it seem easy. But it was crushing.

Mustafa Hayani met guidance counselor Tim Hintz during his tour of his new school in Framingham.

As a tide of noisy children poured from the cafeteria into the school hallway, Abdulkader's two young sons, Ali and Mustafa, stepped back from the fray. Quiet and wide-eyed, the boys kept near their father as they and a cluster of others — a caseworker from the resettlement agency; a volunteer helping the family; another Syrian dad and his 5-year-old daughter — followed close behind a guidance counselor who was showing them around.

The children would be starting school here the next day. They were 7 and 9, heading into first and second grade. Abdulkader knew they were afraid; everything was strange and intimidating. They knew no one. They could not speak the language. The games and rules that mattered here were mysteries to them.

Seven-year-old Ali Hayani rode the bus on his first day of school.

He laid his hands on Mustafa's shoulders as they filed into the boy's new classroom. He thought of things he might tell his sons later, at home. Advice for making friends without a common language: Show your classmates who you are until you learn the words to tell them. Make your expressions, your eyes and hands, spell out your empathy and kindness.

All of this was new to Abdulkader, too — the school, even the idea of a tour for parents. There was no such practice in Syria. He had left school when he was 9 years old, to learn the tailor trade beside his older brother. He had never mastered reading and writing, and he knew his world was smaller for it. Everything this move demanded of him — learning English, finding a job — was so much harder because he had left school. His children would not suffer the same fate. For him and for Asmaa, that was most important. And that meant they had to find a school where their children could thrive.

Was this school such a place? The early signs were promising.

The guidance counselor leading them around stopped in a bright hallway by an indoor garden. Panels of sunlight glazed the beige tiled floor, streaming over basking racks of potted plants. Their tour guide gestured at the slender shoots in the smallest pots.

“These plants are new,” he told the Syrian children, as he did each time he welcomed new immigrant students, 40 or 50 each year. “Those big plants, last year, were like these small ones.”

The children listened intently as their caseworker repeated his words in Arabic.

“This is your school, and you will grow here and become big plants,” the counselor continued. “You will speak English, you will learn, but just like these plants, it will take time.”

The boys looked thoughtful, their faces lit by the sun, wondering if the promise was one they could believe in.

Ali, Mustafa, and another Syrian refugee toured the gymnasium at their new school. Ali peered into what will be his classroom at his new school.

It was March, six weeks after the job offer in Haverhill. Since then, there had been no solid progress. Abdulkader had met with tailors all over Framingham and beyond, but the conversations went in circles. Advice was plentiful, as was freelance work that would pay him by the piece. But no real jobs, with regular paychecks, took shape.

The resettlement team brainstormed and networked, calling old connections, consulting employment experts. Their goal for Abdulkader’s family, and all the families, was self-sufficiency within a year. That was when their financial support would be phased out, and they would be expected to pay their own bills. Bolstered by tens of thousands of dollars in private local fund-raising that supplemented the basic funding the government offered, it was a much more generous timeline than the 90 days most refugees around the country get. Just two months had passed since the Hayanis had arrived. There was still plenty of time, the Americans kept telling Abdulkader. But with each week that passed, he grew more anxious.

Every Monday, he shared an Uber ride with the other refugees to downtown Boston, where, in a Financial District high-rise, home to the nonprofit Jewish Vocational Service, he learned skills to help him find a job. Every week or two, it seemed, the students’ numbers dwindled, as another one among them started working. One had found a position in a grocery store. Another, who had been a shoemaker in Syria, got hooked up with a paid internship at Reebok. Two more were taking jobs at a hotel in Natick.

This time, at their weekly session, it was only Abdulkader and one other refugee in the classroom. Their instructor stood at the whiteboard, his black marker a blur as he scrawled important phrases for job interviews:

Why should I hire you?

I will be on time.

Abdulkader (right) and another Syrian refugee at a class on job interview skills.

Abdulkader, carefully and slowly, copied each one down on a sheet of paper.

If he tried hard enough, he told himself, maybe he would be next.

Their life was fretful and unsettled but radiant, too, with unexpected discovery.

These weeks since coming to America were the most time Abdulkader and Asmaa had ever spent together. They had been teenagers, strangers, when they married in Syria, in a transaction brokered by relatives. They had barely spoken before they became husband and wife. In the dozen years since, Abdulkader had worked day and night, sometimes far away from his family. "Will your children even know you?" one of his bosses had joked.

Now they had only each other, and it had brought them closer. "We got to know each other, and it turns out we like each other," Abdulkader said with a smile.

Asmaa made stuffed grape leaves with her husband in their kitchen. Abdulkader used bits of squash to practice his English letters, spelling out JFS, the acronym for his resettlement agency.

Sometimes after the children were in bed, he would sit down with Asmaa and try to soothe her worries. There were plenty of those. One concern was Mustafa, their older son, who sometimes said he wanted to leave school. Sensitive, and old enough to see his father's burden, the second-grader spoke of finding work to help the family. His parents coaxed him to focus on the future, a possible career in medicine or engineering.

When she saw her husband struggling, Asmaa tried to help him gain perspective: You have worked hard all your life, she said. It's OK if it takes a month or two to start again.

The tailor's shop sat on a busy corner, in a yellow brick building topped with an enormous sign. Inside, it was crammed with racks of formal dresses in a rainbow of colors, each awaiting custom alterations. Every few minutes, a customer carrying another ill-fitting garment came through the door. Two employees — a pregnant woman from Albania and a young Syrian man — labored on sewing machines in opposite corners, while the owner dealt with customers.

Abdulkader had met the owner of this shop at a mosque in Worcester where he and the other Syrian men had gone to pray. The owner was an older tailor, also from Syria, who had been in business here for 25 years. Come and try it out, the older man had urged him. So a volunteer had driven Abdulkader 30 miles west to see if a job might be had in Worcester.

The shop owner gave Abdulkader a pair of pants to hem. "I want to see his experience," the older tailor explained. "I have very expensive things here, and I have to be able to trust someone."

In March, Abdulkader had a few training sessions in a Worcester tailor shop, but it did not lead to a permanent job.

Abdulkader worked carefully, his expression solemn as he marked the fabric with white chalk. He laid down a ruler to ensure the hem was straight.

In Syria, where tailoring was an important and respected craft, it was Abdulkader who had been in charge. In Aleppo, before the war, he had owned his own business. There, he was the master dressmaker, overseeing six employees and 10 sewing machines. They made stylish, high-end dresses and abayas — robe-like garments often worn by Muslim women — from the designs of his older brother.

He'd had the shop for just a year when the war began. Overnight, the city he loved began to disappear, its homes, hospitals, and historic monuments devastated by bombs, fires, and looting, and he understood with dread that he and his family would have to leave. In another country, Jordan, he began again. For a time, before his family joined him, he was homeless, sleeping at night in the workshop where he labored. When he saved enough to send for Asmaa and the children, they moved into an old refugee camp, its stark, stone housing units cheap and rough and bare.

Now, five years later, in America, he was crouched over the starting line once more. In two days, Abdulkader would turn 30. How many times would he have to start from nothing?

Abdulkader took a break with a hot cup of tea after assembling his new sewing machine.

The shop owner leaned in to examine the hem he had sewed. "Good, good job," the older tailor murmured. He invited Abdulkader to come back a few days later.

Abdulkader left the shop with hope. He would return a few more times, for what the owner called training. But a job, with a regular schedule and paycheck, remained a mirage.

At night, when the world outside grew still, Abdulkader slipped out the front door to walk. It was the best way to clear his head — steady motion through the quiet, hilly maze of suburban streets.

He walked to the edge of the neighborhood and back, counseling himself silently as he went:

Patience. Remember to be patient. Everything will happen, God willing, in due time.

The dark felt comforting, a cloak that made him invisible, broken by the occasional orange glow of a street light.

Asmaa and two of her children greeted volunteers who come by their home almost daily.

At the house, the staff and volunteers who were enmeshed in the Hayanis' lives stopped by almost daily. There was Bonnie Rosenberg, the exuberant Newton grandmother who took Abdulkader shopping for fabric to make curtains, and Jessica Lasser, a lawyer and Kentucky native who comforted the wailing little girls, Ameeneh and Fatimah, when they got their first shots at a doctor's office. Lina Musayev had been a refugee herself, arriving in America at 9 years old from Azerbaijan, and now helped the Hayani boys with their homework. Stephanie Juma grew up in Jordan. She spoke Arabic and interpreted patiently for the others.

These Americans had come to care deeply for the family, and to treasure their deepening bond, the little girls running to greet them at the door. They could see the toll unemployment was taking on Abdulkader, and they shared his ratcheting impatience.

Some of them had tailoring work they needed done. In their longing to help, they hatched a plan: They could hire Abdulkader to sew for them. And all of them admired Asmaa's cooking. Whenever they visited, she served the volunteers steaming tea or strong dark coffee, and, often, plates of homemade food: stuffed grape leaves; kibbeh, a baked meat dish made with cracked wheat, almonds, and spices; heaping bowls of sweet rice pudding topped with pistachio nuts. Why not pay her to teach them cooking? But this, they knew, was complicated territory.

Making food and fixing clothes were ways this couple showed their gratitude. Would an offer of money take something from them, or even offend?

They decided to risk it. One of the American women asked Asmaa to try teaching a lesson. But the volunteer said nothing about the plan to pay her.

Asmaa held a cooking class for the volunteers who have been helping her family. At left, Stephanie Juma translated for the other volunteers, including Bonnie Rosenberg (center) and Lisa Weinstock (right) as Asmaa made rice pudding.

Asmaa squatted on the kitchen floor, a large metal pot on the white tiles in front of her. Above her, the American women stood in a circle and watched. The Syrian woman was showing them how she made lentil soup. Staying in her crouch, she poured the creamy liquid through a strainer, scraping away the mushy residue with a spoon.

Asmaa had never had a kitchen counter in Syria. The floor was where she'd learned to cook, and it was where she was most comfortable.

It was a Sunday afternoon in early April. Bonnie, the volunteer who had organized the trial lesson, was taking notes for a keepsake book of recipes shared by the refugee families. Jessica, another volunteer, was down on the floor, taking a turn straining the soup. Asmaa looked at ease in leggings and a sweater, her long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. With only women present, her head was uncovered. Before lowering the soup pot to the floor, she had simmered the lentils with ground garlic and mint, and dumped in a cup of lemon juice squeezed by Abdulkader.

He watched them happily from a distance. Near the end of the lesson, he called his mother in Turkey — conjuring a grainy video feed on his tablet — so she could see, from 5,000 miles away, the Americans learning the soup recipe. It was his mother's lentil soup they were studying; she had taught Asmaa to make it after the couple married and Asmaa moved in with his family.

They ate the soup together at the big kitchen table, the children seated at a smaller table beside them, and talked about the garden they would plant in the backyard. The Hayanis refused, as expected, to take any cash for the soup supplies. But when the volunteers insisted, they reluctantly gave in and accepted a Stop & Shop gift card.

Later, as they cleaned up the kitchen, Asmaa made what was, for her, an unprecedented request: She wanted the Americans to show her, 10 weeks after her arrival, how to use the dishwasher she had never touched.

The volunteers exchanged excited looks: This was a milestone. Together they filled the racks with brightly colored plates and showed her how to push the square start button.

Her soup was made the old Syrian way, on the floor. For the cleanup, though — modern convenience.

Abdulkader received a bike from Temple Beth Elohim volunteers, which he hopes to use to get to and from work when he gets a job.

Abdulkader had another interview soon after. At a clothing store that did in-house tailoring, he demonstrated, yet again, what he could do. The store was close to home, and they liked his skills. But they did not have a position open.

If a job comes up, they promised, we will call you.

When his employment coach suggested he apply for a dishwashing job at an Olive Garden restaurant, he agreed at once. “The important thing is that I work,” he said.

This time, he felt confident. It was April, a season for beginnings; the spring colors here, deeper and greener than in Syria, heightened his sense of optimism. His job coach from the Boston employment center, Aseel Sharif, was there beside him. But the first question the manager asked flattened their hopes: “How much English does he understand?”

Aseel launched into his pitch: Abdulkader lived nearby; he was a fast learner; he badly wanted to work. How much English did he need to wash dishes? But the interview was over in five minutes.

Back at home at his kitchen table, the unemployed tailor gave in to despair. If he could not even wash dishes, then what could he do? Darkness settled into his expression, a look in his eyes like a trapped animal’s.

Seeing him from across the room, his wife was startled. I have never seen his face like this, she realized.

He wondered again if they should have stayed in Jordan. He said it out loud: Perhaps we should go back.

Aseel, his employment coach, tried to reassure him. There were jobs in other kitchens; they would find one.

Abdulkader’s gaze was stony.

When? his eyes asked. When?

Two weeks later, Abdulkader’s phone rang. It was Danny, the caseworker from Jewish Family Service who had helped him with his job search since his first interview in Haverhill. “I have good news,” Danny began.

“I haven’t heard good news in a while,” said Abdulkader, his voice cautious.

The clothing store where he had interviewed — where they liked his skills but had no openings — had called Danny back. Now it looked like they would need someone in May.

The job was Abdulkader’s if he wanted it.

“You are kidding,” Abdulkader said.

No, Danny assured him. I am not.

Shokran, shokran, Abdulkader told him. Thank you. Then he didn't know what else to say, or how to say it.

The struggle that had brought him to this moment was behind him.

This is where it starts, he told himself. My life in America begins right now.

Abdulkader left a job interview at a clothing store in April. There was no immediate opening for him there, but the connection eventually led to his placement in a full-time position a few weeks later.

[See photos from *Through the closing door*](#)

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Syrian refugee resettlement partners

Lead agency

- Jewish Family Service of Metrowest

Synagogue partners committed to sponsoring refugee families

- Temple Beth Am, Framingham
- Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley
- Temple Beth Shalom, Framingham
- Temple Emanuel, Newton
- Temple Israel, Boston
- Temple Israel, Natick
- Temple Shalom, Newton
- Congregation Kehillath Israel, Brookline
- Temple Sinai, Brookline
- Temple Beth Shalom, Needham

Other key partners

- Combined Jewish Philanthropies
- Framingham Adult ESL Plus
- Framingham State University
- HIAS (formerly Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society)

- Jewish Vocational Service, Boston
- MetroWest Medical Center
- William James College, Newton
- American Arab Benevolent Association
- Islamic Center of Boston, Wayland
- Masjid-E-Basheer (Islamic Society of Framingham)