

From a Dark Past to a Bright Future
By Wassem Walled Nassar

My family originated in Palestine and was forced to leave in 1984. We settled in Baghdad, Iraq. My parents as well as myself were born in Iraq. My father was an accountant and we had a comfortable life in an apartment in a middle class part of the city. We did not own a car, but travel by taxi or bus was easy. We lived within walking distance of many shops. I went to school and graduated when I was 18. I loved to play soccer and spend time with my friends. At 18 I began attending college, studying administration with hopes of getting into inventory management. I was also working in a clothing store, earning enough money to pay for my tuition and to entertain myself.

Just before my 19th birthday, the invasion of Iraq began. It brought much chaos to the country. Iraqi citizens turned on one another. Minority groups, including Palestinians were targeted. Before it was over, more than 4 million people would be forced to leave Iraq. I was just one of those people. During 2006, my brother and I began receiving threats on the telephone. We did not know these people, but they told us that they would kill us if we didn't leave the country.

I was soon on a 14 hour bus trip to Damascus, leaving my parents behind in Baghdad. I got a job in a grocery store and rented a studio apartment. I had never been away from my family before, and I missed them very much. I also did not know how to cook, so I found it very hard. My Syrian boss was very nice to me and his wife often cooked for me. Two years later my family joined me and we lived together for six months in a larger apartment. We were all living illegally on fake Iraqi passports because Palestinians in Iraq had no citizenship. Because of this we felt uncomfortable and felt that we had no future in Syria.

I learned that UNHCR was operating a refugee camp (Al Tenif) between the Iraq and Syria border. It was located in a small valley between two sets of security walls, 15km long and 1km wide. My family and I moved there in 2008 and stayed there for two years. This was a tent camp within UN territory. During this time my tent was flooded two times during heavy rainstorms. The camp had been located right in the middle of **the temporary river's flow**. Once, there was a big fire in one of the tents, caused by a cooking fire which got out of control. Over ten tents were destroyed. There was panic in the camp. We were all very frightened. The extreme temperatures, sandstorm, and the lack of access to basic services caused me to get sick many times. I spent a lot of time helping my grandmother who was looking after my grandfather who was very sick. The stress of our situation was very hard on him. He died shortly after leaving Syria in 2010. We watched satellite TV a lot, talked with our new Palestinian friends and played soccer, basketball during the day and evening. I felt depressed and insecure while in the camp.

In 2010 UNHCR closed Al Tenif camp. We were moved to ALHOL camp in northeast Syria. We stayed there for 18 months. This camp had brand new houses built for Palestinian refugees. We felt safe there and the water was clean. Electricity was always available. As per the agreement between Syria and the UN, the refugees from Iraq were to be taken in by other countries. So people in the camp were being interviewed by the embassies of Canada, Sweden, Australia, Britain, USA, etc.

We were accepted by Canada and my whole family arrived in Vancouver on June 20, 2011. We were driven to our apartment in Barnaby. Our sponsor had prepared everything and there was furniture, dishes, towels, etc. We were all so happy, relieved and grateful. When we opened the door, we knew we had future here. All of us study English in the ELSA program. My brother and I study at VCC and we love it. I also have part time jobs at a convenience store, and I volunteer with the Red Cross.

My goals are to improve my English, join an administration management course, and get my Canadian citizenship.

My advice to all new immigrants is to focus on studying English. It's the most important thing.