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STARTING OVER AFTER ESCAPING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Just a few months ago, Mayada and her family had never heard of Chicago. Today, they call the city home.

On January 13, 2015, RefugeeOne welcomed Mayada and her family at O'Hare. They were among the first Syrian refugee families to be resettled in the U.S. Mayada and her children, along with her brother and his wife, lived in Syria in 2011 when the government brutally cracked down on the non-violent civilian uprising. Violence became an everyday occurrence. Mayada's husband was killed on his way home from work, and to this day, the family does not know why. Many of her relatives and friends were put in prison, tortured, or killed. In 2013, when the family fled Syria, they left with only the clothes they were wearing because their neighborhood was being bombed. Two of Mayada's daughters still have pieces of shrapnel in their bodies from that day.

Since Syria's bloody civil war began four

years ago, 220,000 people have died. Nearly half of all Syrians have abandoned their homes and fled for their lives. The United Nations predicts the number of Syrian refugees could reach four million this year – making this the worst refugee crisis since the Rwandan genocide twenty years ago.

Along with thousands of others, Mayada and her family fled to Lebanon. But even in Lebanon, they were not safe. When refugee centers were attacked by Hezbollah, the extended family of nine rented a one-bedroom apartment to stay safe. While they waited for news of a permanent place to call home, Mayada's children could not regularly attend school, and it was difficult for the adults to find jobs.

When the family found out they would be resettled in the United

States, they were excited and relieved to go to a safer country, but were nervous about cultural differences and language barriers. The family

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Mayada (center, in blue scarf) sits with her family and RefugeeOne mentor, Suzanne (holding child).

DID YOU KNOW? SYRIAN REFUGEES

- By the end of 2014, the UN estimated that the conflict in Syria has displaced nearly 9.5 million people, more than 40% of the country's pre-war population.
- Nearly 80% are women and children.
- Syrian refugees now make up 20% of Lebanon's population.
- Only about 15% of the Syrian refugees live in refugee camps. The rest live outside camps, in cities, towns, and rural areas, often in locations not easily reached by humanitarian aid organizations.
- The United States resettled 359 Syrian refugees in 2013 and 2014, but is preparing for thousands in each of the next few years.
- The United States takes 18 to 24 months on average to carefully vet each applicant to make sure he or she poses no security risk.
- Some well-known Syrian-Americans include Steve Jobs, Jerry Seinfeld, Ralph Nader, Paula Abdul, and Danny Thomas (the founder of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital).
- Damascus, Syria's capital, is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.



Thousands of Syrians fled to Iraqi Kurdistan for safety.

Starting Over – from page 1...

speaks Arabic but didn't speak a word of English.

RefugeeOne welcomed the family to their new home by greeting them at the airport, providing them with a furnished apartment, enrolling the adults in daily English classes at RefugeeOne, and registering the children for school. The agency also connected the family with an important friend and advocate – Suzanne



Suzanne takes a selfie with Mayada's 4-year-old daughter, Shayma.

Akhras Sahloul. Suzanne, who emigrated from Syria to the U.S. with her family when she was ten, knows what it's like to start a new life in the United States. She recently founded the Syrian Community Network, a mutual aid organization, to help make resettlement of Syrian refugees and immigrants as supportive as possible.

HOW CAN YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES?

- **Donate today.** Every single contribution helps us provide mental health care, English language training, and job search support to refugee families. refugeeone.org/donate
- **Sign up to mentor.** RefugeeOne matches refugees with Americans who can help them navigate their new community through weekly home visits. Sign up at refugeeone.org/get-involved
- **Start a campaign or collection.** You can engage your family and friends by setting up a personal fundraising page on our website or collecting household items to help Syrians fleeing the war. Email ksnoddy@refugeeone.org.

Suzanne met Mayada and her family in January at RefugeeOne. "Their faces felt familiar to me," she says. "I took an instant liking to them."

Suzanne now meets with the family in their home every week as their RefugeeOne mentor. She says it has been extremely rewarding to get to know them, help them adjust to new cultural norms, and connect them with the Syrian-American community. They remind her of special Syrian cultural traits – the warm affection between family members, the strong work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit, the pride in a well-kept home.

"Syrians are resilient and hardworking," she says. "When given opportunity, they will succeed."

"I believe in serving with my heart and will serve in any way I can to help them. If I can make their lives easier, I have achieved something."

As the U.S. State Department accelerates efforts to resettle Syrian refugees, RefugeeOne will welcome many more Syrians like Mayada and her family in the next year.

Today, Chicago is no longer a far-away, unknown city for Mayada and her family; it is their new home. Here, the family feels a sense of safety and is excited by the many new opportunities available to them.

ONE MENTOR, MANY CHANGED LIVES

Laura Coplan, a North Shore resident, is a world-class volunteer. Since she started volunteering at RefugeeOne in 2011, she has mentored seven women from Somalia, Iraq, Ethiopia, and beyond. With each new friendship, Laura's knowledge of other cultures and experiences has expanded.

As a mentor, Laura visits with her refugee partner each week to help with various aspects of resettlement, practice conversational English, provide guidance in an unfamiliar culture, and just enjoy each other's company. She's found herself to be just as much of a friend as a teacher.

Laura has learned that being a mentor requires patience. Communication is often difficult at first. As great as Google translate is, there's still no Amharic or Oromo (two languages commonly spoken in Ethiopia). One time, a miscommunication had Laura outside of her refugee partner's apartment and unable to get in. She had brought flowers from her garden to share and left them by the front gate. The next week, Laura discovered that her refugee partner had been trying to let her in the back door instead of the front. "She told me when she saw the flowers, she cried," says Laura. "She was so touched and I was too."

Each week, Laura goes with a lesson or activity in mind, especially for refugees who are less inclined to make excursions outside their home. One week may be a lesson on nouns like colors and numbers, the next on money, and a third on clothing or furniture, before she begins verbs. Each week, she doubles back and moves forward to make sure her partner retained the previous week's words.

For refugees excited to explore the city, Laura has been on many adventures. Once, when she took a young woman out for lunch, Laura discovered the woman didn't know how to wear a seatbelt or use the vending machine. "It's these little things that make such a difference," says Laura.

Even though she was inclined to bring a small gift each time – a bag of potatoes or a blanket – she realized it made her refugee partner feel burdened to reciprocate. "Remember to respect people's dignity," she advises. "Don't bring hand-me-downs until you get to know the woman and her sense of pride. You could accidentally offend her with a well-intentioned gift."

One of the hardest parts of being a mentor is that sometimes it's hard to know if you're doing a good job or having an impact week to week. "It's sort of like parenting," says this mother of three young adults with a smile. "Your goal is to help each refugee become independent and celebrate their accomplishments." After about six or eight months, Laura naturally senses the mentorship is ready to end, and she reflects on just how much her refugee partner has advanced.

Laura knows that making a weekly commitment can be hard. She suggests "job sharing" could be a great solution. Two friends can take turns visiting every week, update one another after each visit, and occasionally go together. It could be a meaningful way to expand a refugee's community and make mentoring more viable for busy people.

Laura believes that a mentor is equal parts teacher and friend. "It's challenging, but the rewards far outweigh that," Laura says.



Mentoring is sort of like parenting," says Laura Coplan, shown here (center) with a young mother she mentored. "Your goal is to help each refugee become independent and celebrate their accomplishments."

MITZVAH DAY AT THE TEMPLE

On March 22, more than 100 adults and children gathered at Oak Park Temple to participate in a Mitzvah Day project for RefugeeOne. Families made key chains as a way to welcome refugees to their new homes. For refugees, their first home in America is a place where they can feel safe and begin to reach their full potential. Thank you, Oak Park Temple, for this thoughtful gesture.



SPRING CLEANING

This May, you (and your congregation, school, book group, coworkers, or block club!) can help RefugeeOne by collecting cleaning supplies for refugees moving to Chicago:

1. Brooms with dust pans
2. Mops and buckets
3. All-purpose spray cleaners with bleach
4. Cleanser
5. Scouring pads and sponges
6. Toilet brushes
7. Laundry soap
8. Dishwashing soap
9. Dish drying racks with trays



Please bring *new* items to RefugeeOne (4753 N. Broadway, Suite 401, Chicago, IL 60640) during the month of May, Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

From the Executive Director, Melineh Kano

Dear friends, Sometimes the news hits home. Literally.

Although Syria's civil war is in the headlines almost daily, the crisis feels far from home... until a refugee family lands at O'Hare and we begin to hear their horrific stories firsthand.

As the U.S. ramps up its response to the Syrian refugee crisis, RefugeeOne has begun resettling Syrians who have witnessed and survived terrible violence and loss. Mayada, a Syrian refugee, is featured in this newsletter, along with her RefugeeOne mentor, Suzanne Akhras Sahloul. Suzanne knows personally what it's like to move to the U.S. from Syria (although under very different circumstances), and her friendship with Mayada's family is a life-changing gift for everyone.

The U.S. is prioritizing Syrians who are in the most dire need. Each applicant will be screened by the Department of Homeland Security in a long series of processing steps that

include rigorous background checks.

These refugees, recovering from very recent trauma, will undoubtedly need mental health care. We are proud that RefugeeOne offers culturally-appropriate mental health therapy in 35 languages – and we're one of the only agencies in the nation that does. Join us as we prepare to offer a permanent home to these vulnerable survivors.

Thanks for your support. We hope to see you at our fundraiser on April 18th, at our next mentor orientation, or dropping off supplies for our May "spring cleaning" drive.



RefugeeOne
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MANY VOICES.
ONE VISION. GALA

APRIL 18, 2015
6 PM TILL MIDNIGHT

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