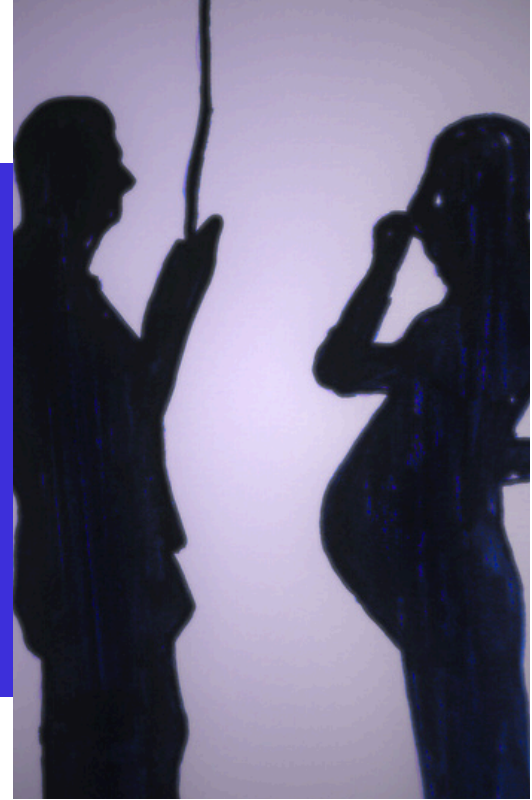




# MAHER & YASMIN

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*Şawt: An Oral History of Resettlement Campuses* was funded by an Emerson Collective Fellowship.



## ARRIVAL

[We brought] pictures. Pictures of my kids so they remember how we lived in Syria, the house. When we left the country, that is when the war started. So, we can’t go back again, and the most important thing was the pictures because it has the memories. So, when the kids grow up, for example, they can see our house. . . back home.

This is the thing that we can pass down to our kids. The only thing we can tell them, considering that I [Maher] had a boy outside Syria, and he doesn’t know about Syria. So, the pictures are the only thing that we were able to bring from our original country, to bring him part of our past so in the future if we return to Syria, they will know things without feeling strange.

We talk [with the children] about how the circumstances have changed a lot. . . about our memories and how we used to live, how we got here. They didn’t see their grandparent’s house, my family back home, their uncles. Through those pictures they can recall those memories and how things used to be. . . because this is the only memory left for us.



Hosted by:

**OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY**



Interviewed in Arabic by:

**NOOR GHAZI**

With the informed consent of participants, interview transcripts have been adapted here in narrative form for clarity and efficiency with a commitment to retaining the intended meaning.

[everycampusarefuge.org](http://everycampusarefuge.org)

When we arrived . . . [we] got out of the airport and for a minute we were in disbelief. We didn't believe that we really arrived, as if it was a dream. We stayed for a while in disbelief – are we here or not? When we looked at the American flag, it was a strange feeling – that we are actually here, and we arrived. This is for the first couple of days. Up to this day, when we see the American flag, we feel a strange feeling. You know it has its weight as a flag.

*ECAR placed a family photo in the house. . . an old picture of us. I [Maher] didn't know how they were able to obtain it from our relatives, and they put it in a frame, and they put it in the middle of the house. So, when we entered the house, we were surprised; it was beautiful. They even placed a prayer rug for us and many other things that were so beautiful.*

You come to a country where you don't know anyone, and you don't know the language. . . it was a fear for us . . . a little fear before we came because we don't know what the situation is. . . but at that moment we forgot something called fear and the differences between us or the fear of the other country where you don't know anyone. . . all of those things disappeared in that moment [when they entered the ECAR house].

When we came and saw this [the family picture, the prayer rug, etc]. . . [we realized] it was our perception that was wrong. We found the opposite of what we thought. *We found that they have acceptance here; they accept you are from a different religion, different language, different culture.* The minute you arrive you find this; it created a big difference for us. We didn't feel that they were from a different culture, or speak a different language or a different world; we felt that they were part of us. We felt as if we had known them a long time ago, and that was because of the way they treated us. . . they welcomed us from the first time we arrived; they greeted us like they knew us for a long time. It felt like they knew a lot about us; they asked about us before our arrival. *It felt as if they knew us for a long time, not that we were meeting for the first time.*

We left as refugees and left our countries to an unknown place; we didn't even know how the weather would be – cold or hot. But when you get here and see all this, this is a great surprise. . . you feel for real that they took in consideration everything and put actual thoughts into all the details.

We felt them as a family, yes as a family.

Image of Old Dominion University campus.



## SUPPORT ON CAMPUS

When we first came to the US, they [ECAR Team] gave us our time to relax but then they brought two volunteers who speak Arabic . . . college students [who were] Sudanese. Each of them spoke some Arabic so we communicated faster. Even though we could use the [Google] translator, [using the volunteers] made us feel that they wanted to communicate with us in Arabic directly.

We had three people who are Jenny and Kathy and another one named Jennifer. They were responsible for us, to schedule our appointments with the dentist and even with our paperwork, when we needed our passports and papers that were still in Egypt. They worked to bring it all the way from Egypt. They divided the work, and especially when one of them is not available the other one would take over.

They paid a lot of attention to us. . . they [would] call us to ask if we needed anything. I [Yasmin] didn't expect this. I wouldn't expect someone to ask about us when we came here. . . *the campus group did everything in their power to provide us with our needs.*

They took us around the university, to the soccer field, to the library, to the learning language center, to the restaurants and they introduced us to the different sections around the campus – to the gym, the swimming pool, almost everything around campus they took us there. They toured us around all of campus and introduced us to the different sections and explained to us that “you will be a part of this campus, you will stay here as it will be a new beginning to you.”

They made us university ID cards; they enrolled us as university students and showed us to the classes where we were practicing the language. They were also trying to ask us to learn some Arabic words so that they could communicate more than just teaching us the language. They [showed] us the library, the gym, the cafeteria. *They told us that we can access any one of them since we have the university ID, and we can go around campus just like any other student. It was a beautiful experience since we didn't study back home at university and now, we felt that we are students on campus.*

[We used] some of those resources [on campus]. . . the library, books that we needed, we were able to check them out from the library and bring them back [home]. There was also a place on campus that provided us food in case we needed it. You can just go and get food, once or twice a week just like any other student. You go in and use the card just like any other student on campus and you can eat anything you want. Sometimes this resource was excellent honestly because it made things easier on us.



Image of Old Dominion University library.



I [Yasmin] attended the university classes and I loved this feeling. The teachers were very good, and I used to enjoy those classes when I attended. I learned English, not much, but I started to learn. First, I learned how to write my name, the letters, little by little. It was very beautiful for me because I didn't expect that since I don't know anything in English; I didn't even know the letters. I started to know things and understand them, and I think this was a very beautiful experience. I never thought I would know how to write my name in English, because I didn't study in school back in Syria until 6th grade and left, so I didn't have a good foundation, and then we left the country.

They were truly beautiful days that we didn't get to experience in Syria or any other country. When we got there, we became students, and we had books, notebooks and pencils. And a teacher explaining things to us. We wished that we furthered our education in Syria to this level. But thank God, here we lived it.

When I [Yasmin] go to the university everyday and attend classes and return home, I felt very happy. I used to walk back and forth. On my way, I would see students and they would not react to seeing me or feel strange. No one said anything to me or commented. So I felt comfortable because the campus was my first experience since [I arrived]. I felt safe. Initially, they would come with me until I memorized the way, so then I would go by myself, to drop off my son and come back and go to class. Then we got more involved with society and our home got farther from the campus at this time. But the basis was there.

They [also] took us to the university and tried to bring other students and put them with us to [allow] us communicate with other societies. The students at the university, for example, [were] from many nationalities. . . foreigners. They [ECAR team] tried to make some connection between us [and] to participate with them through questions and answers that they used to teach us during sessions. They encouraged each of us to speak about the culture of our countries, about the food, such as the food in Syria and the different types. There were also people from different nationalities, such as the Philippines and Afghanistan. These are beautiful things to consider while getting to know other cultures, other countries. While we took language classes, they used to teach us about those things as well, which was very beautiful.

*[They also took] us outside the university to show us the reality of the world, and to do things to learn.* For example, they were teaching us about money and how to use the US [currency]. And then we tested that. They took us to the mall and took us to different places to practice.

The two English teachers were excellent. They would always try their best with us, even when it comes to things outside the school. Once they took us to the zoo and once they took us to clothing shops and housewares [shop]. They would take us to such places, so we learn how purchasing and selling works, and not just teaching us the language, but to take us and show us things in reality and practically.

When my [Yasmin] kids used to go to the field and play, they enjoyed it. They would enjoy playing soccer. There was also a gym. I was even able to go to the gym and exercise. We were very happy that at least I was able to go to the gym.

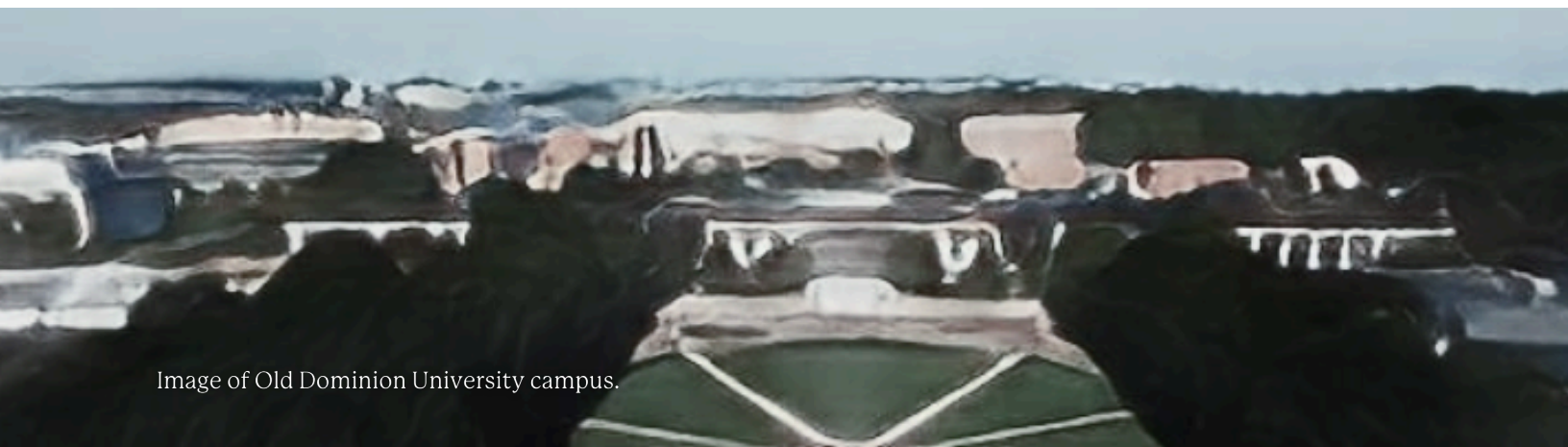


Image of Old Dominion University campus.

They showed us that the way to [the kids'] school is safe. . . My [Maher] wife covers up [wears the hijab], but no one would ask her why she is covered in this way. For a long time they walked with us back and forth. [Our] small boy needed to go to school [so] they took us to show us. They helped us get to know the teachers at the school. They introduced us as his parents so we can pick him up at the school. . . we didn't know all this information at the beginning.

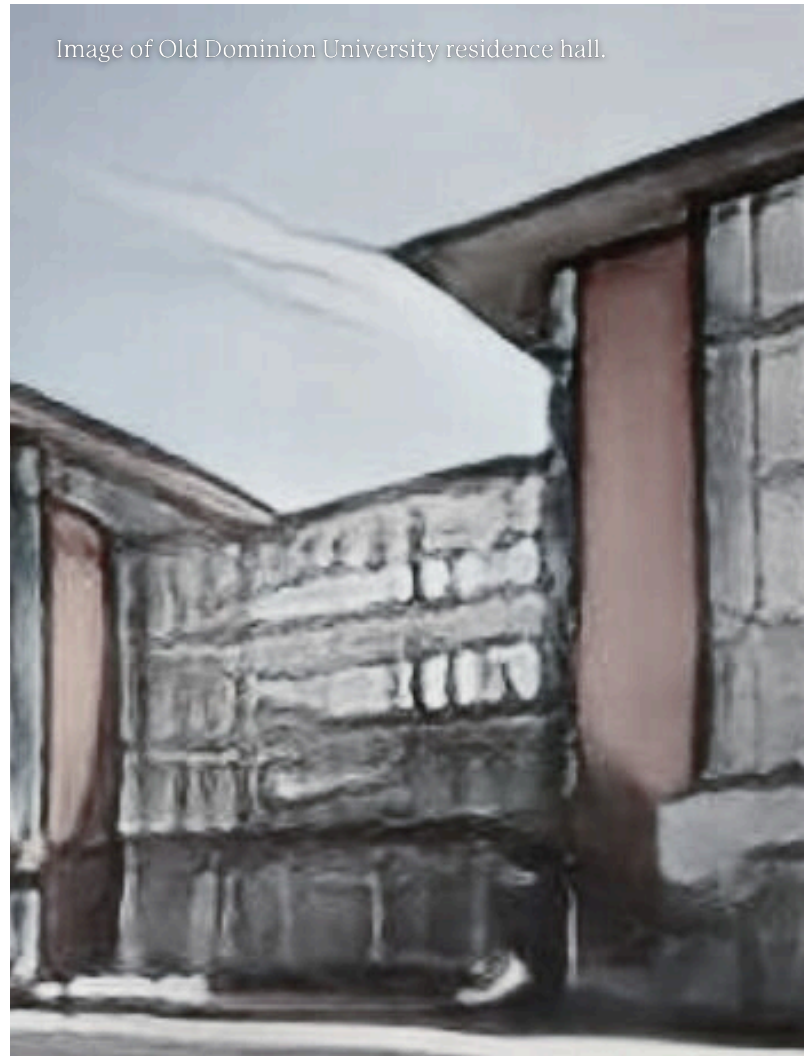
And they took the other kids, and they enrolled them in schools. They followed up with them with the teachers there, considering that they were having difficulties with the language at the beginning. For my [Maher] son, the teachers who taught us language applied for him for the university, and they showed him what the needed paperwork was. They also took his degree, the one he brought with us and translated it. They submitted the paperwork for him – all of this help so that he can attend school faster. Because if he goes to another university, he would have stayed for two years studying the language or three years. But here, they helped him with a shortcut to study for six months only. They helped him take those basic classes to study English. . . then, they helped him little by little until he was able to apply for the university. They explained to him how the system works, what the qualifications are, the scholarships. Also, they helped him because of his age, and he didn't want to waste years before continuing his study. So, they played a big role in helping him and providing him with intensive language training for only six months so he can directly start his first year at the university. He is now studying computer science at ODU.

Sometimes we didn't know what our needs are and what we can ask them for. So, they would usually initiate and ask. Sometimes unless it is very urgent, we wouldn't ask or pressure them. We never asked them where they failed to deliver. They never said no, or this is not within our expertise or limits. So, anything we asked, they would write it down and try their best to bring it.

Sometimes they would celebrate us, such as a celebration because we have been with them for a month. *They will make a celebration, even a symbolic one, because they are happy that we are with them for a month. Every milestone, they made into a celebration. They were celebrating us each stage by stage.*

[After moving off campus] They rented the house for us. At the beginning, I [Maher] learned that no one would rent a place for us until we found someone to cosign it for us, which they did. At the same time, they brought people and a car and volunteers. They even brought some furniture and basic home stuff because the first house was on campus with furniture already there that had to stay there. So, when we moved to the new house, they all came with their partners even though they are old, not young, but they were picking up stuff and were very happy. I felt that they were working and they were happy. This was something to remember when a person and his wife come to help us out and pick up our stuff; it was very beautiful.

Image of Old Dominion University residence hall.



## NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES

This was the [biggest] challenge, that I [Yasmin] wanted to learn the language, but it was difficult. I wanted to understand them and wanted them to understand me. So, this was the difficulty for me.

I [Maher] honestly suffered at the beginning until I found a job. They tried to make my resume and list the jobs that I have done in the past in Syria and Egypt. It was like a file for me so when I apply at any place, I have a resume that lists all my previous jobs and experiences.

## CREATING A LASTING COMMUNITY

We were out of the [ECAR] program, and my son was in university, and they requested books from my son at the university, and we didn't know how to get them. So we called them to ask about how we can get the books. We just asked them to show us how to get the book, but they sent us the book to our house. We thought that since the program was over, they wouldn't help, and it is not their business anymore, that they would just guide us on what to do.

These are friends. I [Maher] mean even your relatives might not be connected to you in this way, and this is what actually happened with us, and this is how they helped us. Like this story we just shared. This is something that happened recently and not long ago. We are almost into the two years now in the US and as a program they should be done now with us which is only 3 or 6 months, I am not sure how long exactly the program was. Despite that, up to this hour, when we ask for something, they would try to help us. It is not like they were just helping within the university context, but they consider us as their friends as well. When we moved to the new house after that, when we rented by ourselves, they would help us. They were very happy to be part of this level that we got to. We now had a house that we rented by ourselves. And we live in a house now alone without anyone's help. They were so happy at the level we go to, they felt they were part of this level that we got to.

To this day, there is communication. Even if we don't need something, they are still people that we can talk to, and they respond to us if we need something in this country. Since we are still new here and have not reached our full capacity, I [Maher] still can call them if something happens and I need help; they will help me and tell me you should do this and that, and they stand with us.

Image of Old Dominion University English Language Center.





This is a big society, and it differs from our society in all honesty, so we felt the difference but not to the level that we thought we would before we arrived here. Not similar to what we used to hear about in the movies or from people who didn't live here. As you know, our Middle Eastern community is very different from the community here, but we didn't feel these great differences they talked about, such as racism or if they see you as different from them. Frankly, no one here crosses the line with anyone; people mind their own business. They all work and won't ask you about your own personal life and why you dress that way. They all accept you even when you don't speak the language; they won't just stop talking to you because you don't speak the language. No, they work with you, and you can use the translator and they would accept this method as well. In all, they try their best to accept you as part of the community. Honestly, up to this day, I [Maher] didn't find these difficulties in the community.

When I [Yasmin] walk in the street, I am not afraid of anything. Not my hijab or going out. I go out by myself; I feel safe. I also go to the mall by myself. All of those things I used to be very afraid of. I questioned how I would go out by myself. Our area doesn't have any Arab as well, so I was very concerned. But after all, I didn't feel any of those things here, on the contrary it was safe.

Anything you dream about, you can achieve it here [USA]. . . you can make progress even if you don't know the language.



Image of Norfolk, Virginia.