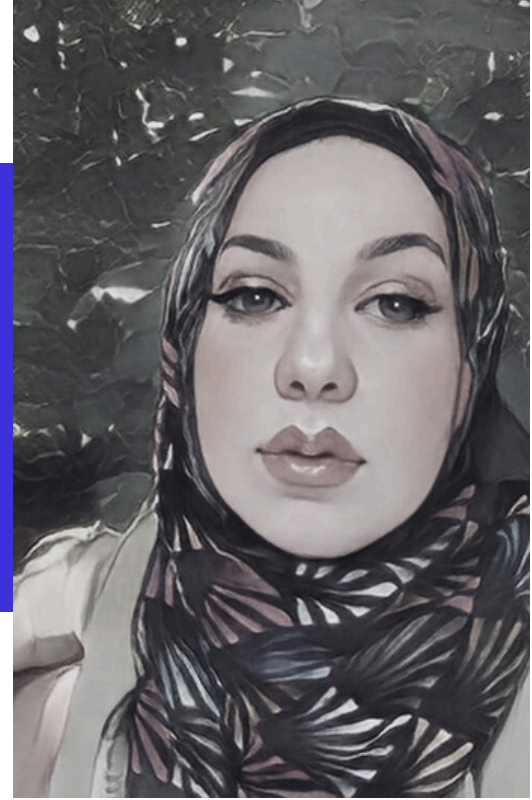


MARWA

“ I believe this stage [ECAR] is very important because it combines the family’s kindness, the sense of home, and warmth.

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



ARRIVAL

When I said goodbye to my family, my brother made a bracelet. We are only two sisters and one brother. And we have never been apart. So, [the bracelet] has my name, my sister’s name and his name, and he made three of them. One for me, one for my sister, one for him. We were careful not to take it off. I don’t honestly remember how I lost it. My brother and sister still have theirs. My mother gifted me a gold necklace with my name on it [the letter M]. I am always afraid that I will lose it when I take it off. Even when I go to sleep, I hold the letter. I became obsessed or linked to my relationship with these people with this object or this thing.

[When we arrived] our friend said “Wow, they brought you to this place!!” We didn’t understand what he was talking about. “Wow, this is the nicest area. The most expensive area, and this is Walmart.” Of course we thought “What is walmart!?” The children were young, so they entered the rooms with games -- *mashaAllah*, so much!! They forgot their fatigue and fear. This friend was the one who stood up and asked Walid and Diya [ECAR team members]: “Who are you?” Because this is not the norm.

Sometimes, I would go out and I would be emotionally tired. I would take the children around and go to cry somewhere. But then I would accidentally see a volunteer; we would chat a bit about topics, then my crying intentions would go away, and I would return home. In this way, the hardest time passed. Because the first period of time is the hardest.



Hosted by:

**GUILFORD
COLLEGE**



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.

SUPPORT ON CAMPUS

You live in your homeland among your family. My entire life, I was part of a big family. Then I got married, so my family is there and my husband's family is there, which made our circle even bigger. You feel the safety. [You know] the language and the law of the country that you are a citizen of; you know your rights. So just like a baby who is at home with his family, his mom, nothing is required, no rules – you want to eat, you can eat, you want to sleep, you can sleep. You can't take that baby to school right away where there are rules upon rules upon rules. *I believe this stage [ECAR] is very important because it combines the family's kindness, the sense of home, and warmth. Then little by little, learning the rules and slowly integrating in life.* Same thing with ECAR. I always say, if it wasn't for them, maybe we would have also returned.

They were very kind, whether volunteers or campus employees. Sometimes a volunteer girl comes with another volunteer male. She alerts me to wear the scarf saying there is a male with her.

The farm – I used to take Yousif [her youngest son at the time] and bring fresh stuff, maybe eggs. It depends on the produce of the day. And sometimes they would bring it to our doorsteps . . . every Tuesday.

My kids, when we were in Iraq, I wouldn't allow them to go out on the street. . . or a place where they would go without me and [me still] feeling safe. But on campus, it was fine for me. Sometimes their father [goes out with them], sometimes Diya and I, and sometimes by themselves. Yousif learned to ride a bike there.

So, the first Ramadan was a disaster because we have a big family and we do gather [back home], and all of a sudden, nothing. Then Walid came over, brought some sweets and toys for the kids. He took the kids out and told me to go with them, but I was tired and couldn't even eat. So, he took them out. I won't forget this experience. We had *Eid* at that time; he made the *Eid* despite the simplicity of the situation.

Last Ramadan, Kate [one of the volunteers], there was a group who were holding an Iftar at the Church and she suggested that we go. We went with the kids and had Iftar there and sat on one table, and they started talking about Ramadan and why we fast and the spiritual connection. Then it was prayer time, and we broke our fast at the same time. . . complete respect and acceptance. *I think we add to one another instead of taking away from others.*

Kate played a big role with all the family in teaching English. She started with me and all of us. The simple methods that we started with, because this person doesn't speak the language that you speak, is "this is a chair, let's put a sticker there and label it as a chair." This is how it started. Or a picture in the magazine, and we point out something that attracts us and we put the name on it. We had an album. It was first me, then Ahmed, and now Yousif. She would also communicate with their teachers to see where the weaknesses that they have are.

Hali was the program director during that period of time. She was able to get a scholarship for Yousif at the school [preschool/daycare], and she was the one who would drop him off.

Image of refugee children at Guilford College campus farm.



Ree Ree and Salah [ECAR volunteers] helped Ali mostly to look for a job. They applied for many jobs. If the job required certain clothes, they would go to get them. [Salah] would point him out to the place where he can get the clothes at a good price. They helped me with my Green Card.

Iraqi students on campus would stop by to say hi and ask us what we need and give us their phone numbers telling us if we need anything [we can call them]. Not in an official way, but sometimes they just get new ideas all of a sudden [to help]. I always say that they are creative. They suggest things to us that we don't even think about, and we welcome the idea.

We have seen many families who were scammed in many things, but thank god, we didn't face any of those things. Because ECAR will guide you to get your ID card, your paperwork, to find a job, the license for my husband, the school for my kids, medical appointments, all of those things they were helping us with at the beginning.

I used to go out with the volunteers. They would tell me something with confidence, like "you can do it."

NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES

We were on campus. It was Ramadan. We sat at the dining table with the kids breaking our fast. Ali was working at a restaurant. His work shift had started already that night. We heard a noise. I was praying that it would not be the thing in my mind. I thought it was a squirrel because I haven't seen a mouse here. The noise was very clear, maybe because the floor was wood, I am not sure. We looked and saw a mouse. The kids and I all sat on the dining table. The dining table, I swear – and I am not exaggerating – it was shaking because we all were shaking from fear. I called Ali and he said that his shift just started, and we are busy, and it is impossible. I called Walid and he said I am at work. I will send you the security at the campus.

Image of Marwa and her children .



Thank god the phone was close to me. Every time we moved a bit, the mouse would move as well. We enter, and she hides. What came to my mind is the room . . . by the stairs. So, I told them let's go in there and use the coffee table as a shield. I sat and told Abboudi [her oldest son] how to say things in English to our neighbor – she is still one of the collaborative people in the program and got to know the refugee families – Kristy. “Abboudi, do you know how to tell Kristy that we have a mouse?” I was reviewing the topic with him, and I was relieved to know that he can communicate the idea. So she came, and I can't imagine [what she thought] when she saw the scene where we are all sitting behind the table. She brought a mouse trap and tried to lessen our stress and started to ask us how to say “mouse” in Arabic, and we would answer because in fact we were shivering. Then we heard the big boom [of the trap]. She said “Okay, my role has ended here” because she also was scared. She went and called her husband, and he came and picked [the mouse] up. Then the security guard came, but I wanted to act before he came. The next day Walid told me “I wasn't at work, but I also am scared of the mouse.” And after that, of course, the whole team came and discovered that more than one mouse had entered, so they discovered the place, and they solved the problem.

CREATING LASTING COMMUNITY

For 8 years, except Covid time, every Monday, Kate is here at our place. She will come up with ideas, depending on the person that she is helping. For example, “why don't I take Ahmed or Yousif to the library if there is an event?” Even to the parents' conference at school, I take her with me. This year, in the first quarter, we both were crying when the teacher was praising Yousif.

We went to [Kate's] son's funeral, unfortunately, and her mom's. So even the family – Jim, her brother, was Guilford's president for some time; he was one of the volunteers who would bring the bikes [and other] stuff since he had a truck. It might start like that when they help me with something, and we stay in touch after that.

I think in our country we don't have the idea of humanitarian work and volunteering. Not to this level. When we first came, I didn't know about this idea or hear about it, honestly. So that you go out and help people for free; this is a great idea. I get this feeling and try to implement it with my kids. I don't want to force them to do anything, but I feel this [idea] was strengthened in me. There is a picture from when they went to welcome the family [to be hosted by ECAR]; I asked them, “what did you guys feel?” Maybe many of the volunteers were refugees at some point, not all of them, but some. That is why they felt the importance of this work. *I really appreciate this, and it also helped me in the way I raise my kids. . . those people are also busy and don't have a lot of free time and they have priorities, so, it is beautiful to think that with all of that you still put in the time to help a family.*

When we met with Syrian and Iraqi refugees who were resettled sometime before us, [one of them] told me that the first place they came to here and lived in, after 3 years, that she doesn't even like to pass by it in the car because she will have [bad] memories. A week ago, I visited the new family [hosted by ECAR on campus]. I didn't enter, but I had a great feeling. I felt that she [the mother in the newly hosted family] is close in age to when I first arrived. But I remember her [the friend's] sentence when she said, “she doesn't even like to pass by in her car” to the place they first resettled.

ECAR and Guilford College, all of them are there when I need them.



Image Marwa's children at the airport welcoming another refugee family to be hosted on Guilford's campus.