



# SAADIYA

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## ARRIVAL

My husband, he's a mechanical engineer. He used to be [the] owner [of a] gas factory in Mosul [Iraq] with a partner. He used to work with [the] US army [at] that time. It was dangerous for him. For that reason, we left Iraq, because people want[ed] to kill him.

I was [the] first one in my family to travel. I never imagine[d] one day [that I would] travel or leave my family. I graduate[d], [got] married, [we were] building our life. . . . then something happened to my husband [which] force[d] us to leave. We left; we [went] to the Lebanon.

Six years [in] this “station.” I always call Lebanon [a] station. . . In this station, I los[t] five and a half years of my life. I don't know what will happen after. It was very hard. You are [at a] good level in your life, and then suddenly something happened and [you have to] start over from zero, and you don't know how you can build it [again].

March 2017. When we came . . . don't know even [that] we are coming to Atlanta. . . we apply for the travel [to] Michigan. We have a lot of friends there. We don't have anybody here in Georgia. So in Lebanon they give us a ticket; they say “Atlanta.” And we just look[ed] to each other: “Atlanta? Where is Atlanta? We don't know about it.” We came back home. We searched in Google to see where is Atlanta, where is Georgia?



Hosted by:

**AGNES SCOTT  
COLLEGE**



Interviewed in English 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)

First two days [in the US], it's like . . . you're losing your mind or you don't know what are you going to do. I'm just waiting [for] what they tell me [to do]. And then I go, follow people to do what they ask me to do. . . I don't have any decision.

Two days without internet. I didn't call my family. My family, they don't know anything about us. Just in the airport, I connect, I say: "I am arrived. I am in [the] United States." That's it. They don't know where I am.

When I came to the United States, I'm not speaking English, just my husband was speaking because he used to work with [the] US Army before. . . So he was talking and I'm just looking: what they are saying? I don't know what's happening around me. My son was crying all the time. He said, I don't want to stay here. I want to go back to my friend because he do[es]n't know any English. He was studying French and Arabic in Lebanon. So it was [a] hard time in the beginning.

[I brought] pictures for my wedding and some picture[s] with my family and pictures when I was a child . . . I took them to Lebanon because . . . ISIS c[a]me and then stole everything. And then I take them again to the United States.

I have the first picture of. . . when we came here. I am very tired. We came to the New York . . . We slept there in the hotel, and then in the morning we came here.

We had a big community in Iraq and in Lebanon. . . I had a lot of friends . . . but when I came here, I feel like I'm strange –*ghariba*.\*

## SUPPORT ON CAMPUS

When I came here, I didn't imagine where I'm going . . . where I will live?

So when they come to the airport, they take us, [and] we go directly to the home [on campus]. I cannot explain . . . this feeling [I had at] that time, because when you travel and you start over your life you don't know where are you going . . . I don't know what is waiting [for] me. So when I come to the house I see everything ready. . . The house was very beautiful.

I came. I sleep in my house. Next thing in the morning, the President of the Agnes College com[es] to my house, bring[s] us flowers, bears, and cards . . . to say welcome. And in the card she wrote that the house . . . is free, everything, even bills for power or gas or anything. I didn't pay [at] that time. Everything it was [paid by] Agnes Scott College.

[On campus], everything was green, and it was in spring; I came in spring. Flowers [were] starting to grow and people walking all the time. So the feeling, it was like everything was beautiful, because [it was] different weather, different environment. . . I cannot explain all the feeling[s] at that time, but everything, it was beautiful.

[When] I called my mom, she said: "Are you in the jail?" I say: "Why?" She's saying, "I don't know. People here, they say when they take you to the United States, they put you in the jail in the beginning and then they . . . put you in the house or something like that." And my mom was crying. She just want[ed] to hear from me any word [about] where I am. I say, "Mom, they give me a house." She said, "What? What do you say?" I say "Yes, they gave me a house. I will take a picture . . . and I will send you." I take a picture [of] the house. She said, "please post it [on] Facebook. People here, they are talking a lot." I posted it on Facebook. I say: "We are here in the United States."

\**Ghariba* means "stranger" in Arabic.

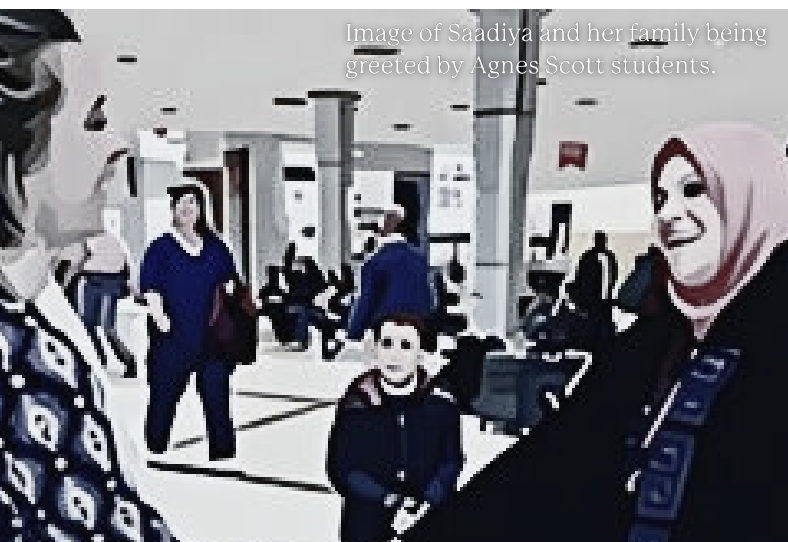


Image of Saadiya and her family being greeted by Agnes Scott students.

The six girls. It was Leila and Laurie and Jesse, and I cannot remember all the names. They were students in Agnes Scott College. So they are going to the college, and [during] the break, they come to my house. They drink coffee with me, tea, and then every day they have [a] schedule . . . every day two of them . . . come to ask me what I need. One girl or two girls come to help me . . . to grocery store, to do our paper[work], to register my kids in the school. Everything. They didn't leave me. They always come into my house; they take me, they teach me [to] drive. They take [me to get] my license. I cannot even leave the house. Maybe I [would not be able to] come back because I am new.

They were very good with me, the six girls . . . Maybe if bad people [had come] to help me, maybe they [would have] take[n] me to the bad way; but no, they are taking me to the good way. They teach me . . . how I can speak.

These six girls, and the lady, my neighbor the professor . . . each birthday, they came to make a party. [The] first one, it was my birthday. They do [a] surprise for me. They came all of them together. They talk with my husband. They go inside my kitchen. They put everything on the wall, and then they call me . . . I cried [at] that time.

And then, next one, it was my daughter's birthday. And then also they take us to the park, and I did the cake. They bring everything; all the girls came, so we didn't feel like we don't know or we don't have anyone here. It was like a small family. Until I start working and then, [I started] knowing other people.

People [were] always . . . helpful. If someone talk[s] Arabic wrong, maybe I will laugh. But here, they [are] never laughing. They're always holding my shoulder. I say, "Okay, okay, I understand you." And then they tell me what I need. And they tell me with moving or doing something in their hand to understand.

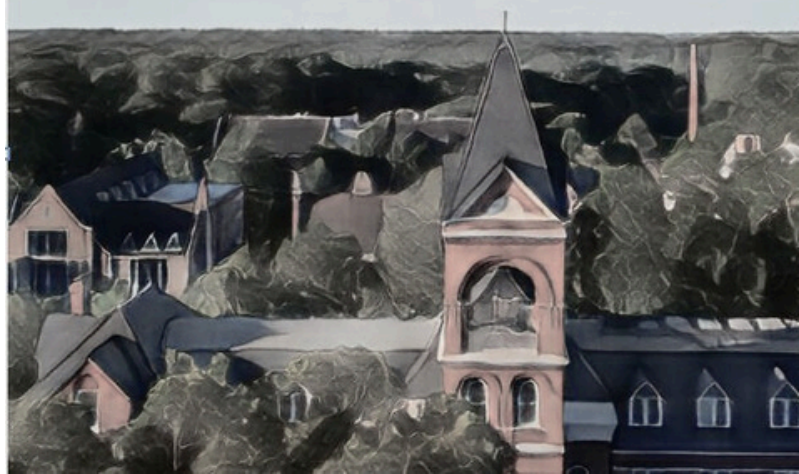
They registered me in the ESL class. It was very close to us in the library. And then [one of the students] took me also to the gym [at] Agnes Scott College. She said, "Okay, I have member[ship] here because I am [a] student." She took me with her . . . [The] gym, it's good for the refugee[s] when they come because I feel that in the beginning it was stress[ful]. So when you go to [the] gym, [it] reduce[s] your stress.

And also [the] library is very important for kids. My son used to go a lot [to the] library to read, to get books to read because he liked to develop that language. . . [His] school, it was very close to us [on] campus. It was a great school, elementary school . . . They don't have ESL students in this school. . . because the city is not for refugees . . . He was the only one taking ESL class. So I give him advice to read a book. So every time we go to [the] library, he takes a lot of books. If we give him money to save it or for pocket money or the allowance, he buys book[s]. We go to Walmart, he buys book[s]. When I moved, I ha[d] a big box of books for my son.

Then they have. . . events. Molly, the girl, she said "come with us, we have an event and maybe some people [will] support you." And she take[s] me there. And it was like a new environment, different college, different people, building is different than our country. It was amazing.

Anything I need, I say "we need to do this," and immediately or [the] next day, I see something like this thing I thought about – they bring it to us. I appreciate them when they find a daycare for my daughter. She was under three years [old], and I cannot work because she is young.

Image of Agnes Scott College.





Every day I'm cooking. Iraqi[s], we like the food. So when they come in the morning, we have to do a breakfast, and you know our breakfast is a big breakfast. They eat. They love my food . . . They say, you have to work in [a] restaurant or bakery or something like that. I say, I don't know how to work or how to apply. I cannot talk either. I don't have any language. Every day they are in my house, I start practicing with them. So even if I say something wrong. . . they say, "[it's] okay, say [it] wrong, it's fine. You will learn." With them, I learned my language in the beginning like the basic language. She applied for me. She comes, she said, "hey, you have [an] interview." I changed my clothes. She teach me how to talk. She teach me how to say, to act . . . everything. I go there. I speak exactly what she tells me to say. And then, [the] first job, they say, "okay, you can come after tomorrow to start your work." I say, "oh, I start work before my husband!" But he also was making interviews, so I start[ed] [on the] 20, [and] he started [on the] 22.

The work [was] three minute driving, 10 minute walking, so sometimes I go walking to work in the morning. They apply for me for work in [a] bakery, and then it was [a] success for me. I was the pastry chef in my department until COVID [when] they closed the bakery.

[One of the students] teach me how to drive. I [had an] accident in her car in the training. She didn't let me even call [the] police. She said, "no, because you are in the training. . . it's fine. I will talk to the man." Then I [was] scared. . . to drive again because [of the] accident in the training. She forced me to drive. She takes me again to the street. She said, "drive." She comes with me to get my license. [My score] was 100. I'm not forgetting her face because before the driving test in one week, I [had] the accident in her car. And then in the test . . . she see[s] "a hundred." A hundred times she says "How? How you got a hundred with a driving test?" So it was amazing!



Image of Agnes Scott College.

## NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES

My husband is in mechanical engineering, but when we came here [I hoped he would] have a good opportunity to work here in the United States, not like a worker like now in the company or hourly or something like that. I wish he had... more support for his job.

Me and my husband [were] working, but I got pregnant, and then I left my job [for] six months. . . . In the beginning, I used to work part-time because I cannot stand, and I have a lot of problem[s] with the pregnancy. My husband too left his job because I need someone always [to] take me to hospital, and he started working Uber. . . [in his] free time. . . We're struggling a lot. . . paying rent during my pregnancy, and after I left Agnes Scott College. And then after that, we moved again to [an]other apartment . . . we [are] both working, struggling to put my baby in daycare or someone to take care of her . . . 40% from my salary [went] to the babysitter or to the daycare. . . [and a] little money stay[s] with me to pay one or two bills to help my husband.

I ha[d] my own business. I create[d] my small business to sell Arabic food and pastry and our Iraqi food. Other organizations offer for me to study . . . a lot of customer[s] called me: "Hey, we want food," [but] I cannot . . . I don't have time. After I finish[ed] my study, I need to work, [but] all the customer[s] [are] gone. [At] that time, our goal [was] to open a small restaurant, but because I stopped my business . . . it's hard [for] us to do it again, but we keep this goal in the future.

## CREATING A LASTING COMMUNITY

My neighbor . . . every day I give her food. Whatever we cook, especially in Ramadan. [In] the other house, [there] was [a] Pakistani lady . . . working in Agnes Scott. She's professor and her husband, he was very, very helpful. Every day I give food for both of them. My neighbor . . . his job was buying [a] house, old house and do[ing] a renovation, and then rent it or sell it. He gave us a house for rent . . . he helped us with that, and we are friends till now.

And then Jesse and Laila. Jesse we keep talking with her after I mov[ed]. . . And Laila . . . she moved to Alabama, but we keep talking on Instagram, Facebook, everything.

I am not forgetting the people who support[ed] me when I came to the United States.

Image of Saadiya's children.

