

March 15, 2021

Cristy: Can you talk about how and why you left Syria. And describe the differences or similarities between where you are living now and Syria.

Zein: So, I left Syria in 2012 because of the war. I first moved to Lebanon and then I moved to the U.S. for college. I'd say the hardest part about leaving the Middle East wasn't so much related to the cultural shift nor was it a language difficulty; I went to an English speaking school in Syria and in Lebanon as well. The hardest part was mostly living alone cause I had to leave my family in order to move to the U.S. and just adjust to the change of living by myself, away from my parents, having to grow up at such a young age and depend on myself almost fully. I feel like that's definitely something that a lot of people who left Syria because of the war had to learn how to do, to become self reliant and independent. They didn't really have the privilege of living a childhood; they just had to adapt. It wasn't really a choice.

Cristy: What do you miss the most about Syria?

Zein: What I miss the most about Syria is being surrounded by family. Every friday we would spend it at either my aunt's house or my grandma's house. We'd have a gathering where all of my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, everyone was there and now each one of us is in a different country, living in a different country around the world. Some of them I haven't seen in over 7 years. So just going from being surrounded by familiar faces, by family and friends and having to create a new life with new people who weren't necessarily related to you, I think that's something I miss the most because I know that that's probably the one thing I can't get back where as everything else you can regain through shared experience, through learning how to adapt, but you can't get family back, you can't get people back.

Cristy: Do you think people you know in the U.S. have an accurate image of Syria? Why or why not?

Zein: I can't really generalize and say that all people don't know about Syria, all people don't know what the right image of Syria is but for the most part when I google "Syria" I get war-torn images of broken down buildings and Syria has been there, Syria is one of the oldest countries in the world, and to have 10 years, 10 very prominent years, define what it means to be Syrian or define the cultural or historical aspect of Syria is very unfair. Even as an unbiased, non syrian, if I had known what Syria is like and how rich it is in history and in culture and the

people, how generous and kind the people are, it would definitely, definitely been at the top of my list to travel to.

Cristy: Have you been treated differently because you said you were Syrian or spoke arabic? If so, how?

Zein: I'd like to think that any comment that was said about me being Syrian or Arab was not of malicious intent. But I think some of them stem out of ignorance where there's the assumption that you can't be Syrian and American at the same time. That being Syrian holds you back from integrating into the U.S. culture and that's one of the things I had to encounter, and I don't think that that's because anyone was trying to be so blatantly rude but it stems from a place of lack of knowledge. And I think that's fair because not everyone has visited Syria and everything on the news and everything online, there isn't the right information available so I can't really expect everyone to know what it's like to be Syrian or to understand what I'm capable of. But I definitely think that some of the things that were said such as assuming that I can't speak English properly or hearing my accent and asking where I'm from. Like the first response to telling people I'm Syrian, for the most part, be "I'm sorry." And in my head it's usually like why are you sorry, I'm very proud of my heritage, I'm very proud to be Syrian. So just associating the words "Syrian" and "Syria" with negative connotations is usually what I tend to face.

Cristy: What would you like the world to know about Syrians?

Zein: What I would like people to know about Syrians is something we've only come to see after Syrians were dispersed around the world, how hard working they are and how every country they've been to; I've worked at refugee camps in Lebanon and in Turkey and just seeing how survival mode works when parents have 7 children and they're doing everything they can, working every single day, taking every opportunity they can, rather than just expecting people to just give them the resources that they need. That's one of the things that I know. Again, whether it's at refugee camps or in the most prestigious colleges around the world, it's one of the most common traits that I've seen in Syrians regardless of their age, or their social status or whatever it is. It's how they never settle for anything less and they're always willing to work for what they get.