

May 11, 2021

Cristy:
myself

Hi! Thank you so much for agreeing to interview with me. So I'll introduce a bit, my name is Cristy, I'm originally from Syria, we moved to Lebanon but now we are in the U.S. I am a high school senior in MA and so for my senior project, we have to do a year long project about something that interests you and coming from a Syrian/Middle Eastern background, I thought it would be interesting for me and others to do something about Syrian culture and community especially because there are so many stereotypes that I wanted to offer another perspective, maybe one that is not as well know. If you want to start by saying a little bit about NaTakallam and your role.

Dina:

First thank you for reaching out! So about me, my name is Dina and I am the executive assistant to the CEO of NaTakallam, Aline Sara. Aline is the co-founder and CEO of NaTakallam and she herself is originally Lebanese but her parents immigrated to NYC because of the Lebanese Civil War. She mostly spoke English and French at home and she had worked in Beirut as a journalist. While she was there, she wanted to practice her Arabic with someone who spoke local, colloquial Arabic. She had an idea where she thought to herself that she wanted to learn how to speak colloquial Arabic but not modern standard Arabic as that is not used in everyday life but rather in reading or writing something formal. She had the idea when she was in Lebanon and there were millions of refugees coming from Syria to Lebanon and she realized that there are people who have skills who are unable to work in Lebanon. So she thought how can she combine these two things? That's what started the idea behind *NaTakallam*. We set up programs that connect people worldwide with the Syrian refugees who would teach them Arabic. It was a good source of income for the refugees while doing something they already know. From a very small project it became a full social enterprise. Since 2015, we now work with refugees and displaced people all over the world, we have added more languages spoken by refugees and have more departments.

Through *NaTakallam*, the people that we work with can access 3 different streams of income. Those are either by being a language tutor, translator or interpreter, or being a cultural guest speaker. We have a program that's called "Refugee Voices," and we have a lot of partnerships with K-12 and universities and perhaps your school might be interested in hosting too. We have partnered with Yale, Duke, Colombia where interested students are tuning in and hearing their stories. There are so many conferences about and for refugees but seldomly you'll find an actual refugee on the panel, so we want them to be heard and be paid for it of course.

Cristy: How do you reach interested refugees, especially in the Middle East?

Dina: The way we recruit refugees and displaced people we do through our extensive network and partnerships with NGOs on the ground. So we have partnerships with UNHCR and other aid agencies who are working with the vulnerable displaced people. People have also spontaneously filled an application and we would contact them after. We don't ask for people to be fluent in English but just need to be able to exchange a couple emails and any issues that might come up. Some former refugee tutors became staff on *NaTakallam*.

Cristy: Do you know the age range of these refugees or displaced people?

Dina: The age varies but we have teachers who are in their early twenties all the way into their sixties. So it's a variety of people with different backgrounds and cultural backgrounds.

Cristy: Do you guys provide any other aid or support to the language tutors, translators or guest speakers?

Dina: As NaTakallam we don't provide any other aid but we do have a community where we try to improve the digital skills with the people we are working with so that after they leave NaTakallam, they are better equipped. NaTakallam is all online so everyone had to learn the online platforms and for us it might be easy but we take it for granted cause it might not be for others. And we have people from different backgrounds, from doctors to people in their early twenties. We have also helped, through local partnerships and organizations, secure food boxed with the help of the refugees who were in Beirut, after the blast last August.

Cristy: Is there a specific syllabus that the tutors need to follow for the conversation sessions ?

Dina: We have 2 offers, one is conversation sessions for all our languages and then the other is a curriculum option for Arabic. Conversation sessions are made to be flexible and based on the needs of the student. Our youngest student is 4 and our oldest is 82. So it really varies and it is tailored based on what the student wants. For those who are looking for more structured lessons, we have partnered with Cornell University's Arabic department, technically the head of the department, who created the integrated Arabic curriculum.

Cristy: How do you think the world perceives refugees and displaced people and how does NaTakallam differ from that?

Dina: There is a cultural understanding. Because you are not just learning a language but you're also getting to know the person and if they are willing to share their stories and experiences too. COVID was a time of isolation but for most of these people, being in a camp can also be isolating. For them, they were able to travel the world by talking to their students. People see refugees as passive recipients of aid with no agency over their own future. When we were first pitching NaTakallam and saying we will hire refugees to teach languages, nobody could wrap their heads around it. They would say "oh, you mean we are teaching refugees English?" and Aline would explain that they would be teaching others. So this idea of refugees being passive recipients of aid is from the global community. And it needs to change. NaTakallam basically dismantles this idea because get to speak with someone who is actually from that part of the world that you hear so much about but yet have never spoken to someone from there. When we have our refugee speakers talk to middle schoolers especially, we've seen that there is a cultural understanding even more. Students have written that they would have lived their lives hating people who they've never seen but all it takes is a conversation to understand that people are all the same.

Cristy: You already talked about this a little bit, but what would you like the world to know about refugees?

Dina: Like we said, that they are not simply passive recipients of aid and society has nothing to lose from including educated people who are displaced into their economies. All displaced people should be included and for there to be programs that allow such economic inclusivity. They need access to a livelihood, that's where you begin to own your own life again. And also, not all people like to be called refugees, as some were former refugees, and most don't like that label as it has a negative connotation as we mentioned. Displacement is not going away anytime soon, even if all wars end, because of climate change, displacement will continue. So we have to have a better way of dealing with such a situation than having people in a camp for 40 years.