**Hometown Interview with Mohammad Jawad, Season 7, Episode 1**

Kendall Martin: Thank you so much for joining us today, Mohammad. We're so grateful for your time and your willingness to speak with us about your experience.

As you may know, the name of this podcast is “Hometown,” and that was born out of a conversation around what home means or represents, especially for individuals who've been forced from their home and find themselves making a home in a new land. So we'd love to hear about your hometown in Syria, what it was like for you growing up or what you remember and love from that time.

Mohammad Jawad: Of course, I would like to thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share my story. I really appreciate it. Let me first introduce myself. My name is Mohammad Jawad, originally from Syria. I grew up in the provenance of Dar’a in southern Syria. Our life was very simple.

We enjoyed every part of it. Because being a part of a large family with eight sisters and two brothers and my parents and myself, there was no dull moment. We played together, worked together around the house and went to school, not knowing where life would take us. We support each other. We love each other. And at the same time, I had many friends in my neighborhood. I played video games with them and we had fun and it was so good.

In general, we spoke Arabic which was the population language or the official language of my country.

I was diligent in my studies and I always achieved excellent grades. My dream was to become a software engineer -- my passion and love for technology grew when my father bought me my first computer around 2006. It was amazing. And since it was new, I filled it with video games until it became infected with viruses.

So, I remember a funny conversation I had with my mom about viruses. When I asked her for some money, she asked why. And I said I wanted to repair the computer. She asked why I wanted to fix something that was still new. And I replied that it had a virus. And she responded, “I'm afraid for you, my son. Go and throw it in the garbage so you don't catch the infection from the virus.” So, I was very impressed at that moment and I laughed a lot.

I also remember working with my father in building material -- because we had a factory for construction, like concrete blocks. So I was working with my dad and helped with bags like pouring concrete or making blocks. I just I tried to be helpful for my father.

And you know, my life was a beautiful mix of all these aspects.

I took the first step towards my dream by completing a high school and enrolling in the university to study computer science and programming. I was very happy with that achievement, but... Unfortunately, the joy didn't last long. It just left everything behind us and it was disappointed.

Janet Morford: We can imagine how disappointing, how heart-wrenching that was. What do you think is important for people to know or to understand about the conditions in which people like you and your family lived in Syria in the late 1990s and into the 2000s? You said life was good and life was simple. And then the war developed. So can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Mohammad: Sure. I believe it's important to know that living in Syria during that period of time since the [1990s and 2000s had its challenges, because there were times of stability, but also times of uncertainty, especially with the political tensions and economic struggles. So the adults in my life had concerns about providing for their families and ensuring our safety.

They hoped for a better future with opportunities for us as children, to thrive or to have a good education or to live without fear. As for me, I shared those hopes for a bright future and I wanted to pursue my passion, have a successful career and contribute positively to society. But as the situation in Syria became more difficult, those hopes seemed harder to achieve.

Janet: If you had been able to stay in Syria, do you think you would have gone to college and gotten a job? What were your hopes for the future if the war had not intervened?

Mohammad: I believe this war will not stop. And if I had just stayed in Syria, that's... All my dreams will be destroyed and maybe I will be dead right now, because there's no hope. There's no mercy there. Just killing. I don't know.

Kendall: Mohammad, when those events happen, it's complete crisis. People have to flee because there's no other option, and they're thrust into what ends up being a very lengthy process, if they're trying to apply for refugee status. And I'm curious from your experience, what exactly that path looked like? If you could speak to -- if you were first in a refugee camp before you moved on, or what was that process for you, of trying to figure out what the next step was going to be for you and your family?

Mohammad: Actually, we tried to stay in Syria by looking for a safer place inside Syria. But we could not find this place. Destruction engulfed the country. I began to feel like a stranger in my own land. We moved around a lot within Syria, searching for a safe haven, a safe place just to protect my family. But the war reached every inch of our land. We lost many friends and loved ones. Our victory was betrayed and all those big hopes and dreams shattered. Our main concerns become avoiding casualties or having the roof collapse on us due to artillery shells or wall blasts. Our only focus was to have a comfortable sleep and eat light meals. It was a war. Yes, it was a war. And there was no place for us amidst all that trouble. We had to leave eventually, clinging to our last breath. So, there's no place.

We had to make a decision. We decided to go to Jordan to find the safe place we could not find in my country. Our journey was very difficult. We were exposed to gunfire and faced many challenges until we finally reached the Syrian-Jordanian border.

Our suffering did not end there because the border crossing was closed to refugees. So we slept under the open sky, shivering from hunger and cold, hoping for a bright tomorrow, I don't know, hoping to find that bright tomorrow. After a month in this situation the border crossing opened at night as if it were a judgment day. People rushed to the crossing gates to board trucks for refugees, like a herd of cattle.

The journey wasn't long in those trucks. It only took about an hour. But in that hour, my feelings were in a tumult and memories squeezed my heart. I wondered where this life would take us. I carried heavy burdens. I was young, but it felt like I had lived a thousand years.

Finally, our last refuge would come to us at the Zaatari Refugee Camp for Syrian refugees. It was dark and we didn't know where we had arrived. We slept like the dead from execution, but when the dust cleared and morning came -- the shock that changed everything for me was seeing the gravel and sand.

Then looking at crowded tents, seeing people racing for the water tanks to fill some containers, and then looking at the shared bathrooms, I realized that everything was over and our hopes and dreams were shattered. It was a situation that sent shivers down my spine. Waking up in the morning and realizing that everything had changed and adapting to a new life routine: a tent, yes, a tent, it is my new home, but with the flavor of dust, gravel, barren desert, scattered dreams… So I say from this platform it was very difficult, but among the rocks, flowers bloom.

Kendall: Throughout that process, was there someone who helped you to apply with UNHCR to be formally recognized as refugees?

Mohammad: The UNHCR, they can't help us because there's a war and they can't reach this place [where we were in Syria]. Like on the border, they can't access it, because there's a lot of rockets, a lot of bombs. It's just coming in from the Syrian regime, Syrian army, and there's a lot of people killed there. So they can't do anything because they didn't have tools to do that. So the UNHCR [was] just inside the camps and inside the Jordan, not in the borders.

Janet: So, when you enter the camp, do you automatically have an interview with UNHCR representatives? We understand they couldn't be in Syria, but once you were admitted to Jordan and you and your family found your way to, I think it was Zataari refugee camp, then is there a UNHCR presence there in the camp?

Mohammad: Yes. Once we arrived in Jordan, we arrived in the Zataari refugee camp and we stayed about seven days without anything. Then, we just visited the UNHCR office to make our registration with them, and to have the interview after seven days. And they make the paperwork and they're giving us the food and everything. And a tent. That was the new home, a tent.

Janet: That sounds incredibly difficult… You and your family then remained in the refugee camp in Jordan for a very long time, like 10 years at least?

Mohammad: Yes. Yes, we spent 10 years in the Zataari refugee camp, as refugees.

Janet: Were you being told during that time how long you might have to wait or what the process was going to be?

Mohammad: So it was disappointed literally. Because there's a lot of hopes, a lot of dreams that came with us from Syria. And when we just saw the real life at Zataari, and the refugee camp in general, it was difficult because these dreams cannot be come true -- [due to] the situation there. Because there is no life, no resources, it’s like a war, no internet, no schools, no jobs. It was difficult. And during this period, we just tell ourselves, “We have to be patient, we have to be patient more, and tomorrow will be better than today,” and we not accepted this.

Janet: Yeah, that just demands incredible resilience. And from what we understood, you nonetheless achieved some important milestones in your life during the time while you were waiting to find out from the UNHCR if you would be resettled. You said that you qualified for a scholarship from the European Union and you began working on a bachelor's degree in computer science. Could you tell us more about how you did that and what that opportunity meant for you?

Mohammad: Sure. I'm a person who's mindful. I'm trying to reach the limits and push myself to move forward to get opportunities or learn myself. So I started just looking for a new opportunity to complete my studies, to find a job. So finally I got a scholarship from the European Union. It was a turning point for me. It was a whole process, but I was determined to pursue higher education despite [everything,] that opportunity meant everything to me. So I pursued a path of academic and professional growth, offering hope for a better future, studying computer science, to open doors to a field I was passionate about and [to equip me] with available skills for the future.

Janet: Could you just explain a little more: how were you able to study for this degree when internet access was so limited? Did you figure out a way?

Mohammad: Yes. I just was using some legal tools like VPNs, like software and basic antenna to get this internet. And maybe I just walked more than 2 km to get internet. Sometimes, yeah.

Janet: And so in that context, you also began using those skills in informational technology. You began to work with various organizations in Jordan, in particular, some who work with refugees. Could you tell us about some of those early work opportunities that you managed to find?

Mohammad: Actually, I worked with many organizations inside the camp that [were] working with refugees with many [areas], like IT, like social mobilization, like health. So I started with NRC, Norwegian Refugee Council, as a data entry. I was responsible for student registration and absences, something like that. Then I get a promotion with NRC to be IT technical support. I started providing technical support for staff and networking, I provided technical support for students.

And then I got another promotion there to be IT coordinator. So I was responsible for IT equipment like computers, everything related to IT, the infrastructure and I was responsible for providing reports, follow up with the staff, what they need and implementation.

Then I got another organization opportunity, a job opportunity with ACTED. They're working with refugees also. I got my opportunity to be a social mobilization officer with them. So that's merged between IT and social mobilization. I worked more than two years with them and I got another promotion to be MIS officer, which is management information systems officer, which was turning my life to better.

I worked also with Save the Children. They're working with health department beside the UNHCR. It was during the COVID -19 pandemic. I was responsible to follow up with the UNHCR and [record] how many doses and how many persons that already took the vaccine or vaccinated. Then I just [went] back to my previous job with a different position. It was social mobilization, as senior officer, and that was the last...

Kendall: You were very busy!

Mohammad: Yes. Yes.

Janet: And you told us also that during that, I think it was during that time that you fell in love and you started a family. Was this while you were still in Jordan?

Mohammad: Yes, actually, I fell in love at NRC, because my wife right now, she was working with me in NRC, which is Norwegian Refugee Council. She was working with a different department, but like a beautician course, something like that, makeup, and hair. I meet her there and we got married in 2015 in Jordan.

Janet: Wow! It's very interesting because although on the one hand, possibilities are so limited in a refugee camp, you really did so much! You got a scholarship and you earned degrees and you did all these jobs and you fell in love and married and started a family. This is really quite remarkable ! Is there anything else about this part of your journey that you think is important to understand?

Mohammad: I believe this part of my journey was tough, but it taught me resilience, and adaptability and the importance of seizing [opportunities]. As I said, it was tough and [taught me] the importance of seizing opportunities, no matter how difficult you will face or how many load on your back. Just keep going and try to make your dreams come true. With any reason, hard work, push yourself, and you will see your dreams will come true.

Kendall: That's beautiful, Mohammad. You've had quite the journey and I think it can be hard for people who don't fully understand resettlement, [to know] just how long it can take from originally when you've been forced to flee your home and then the process to hopefully one day be resettled. I'd love to hear from you about what it was like for you, once you received refugee status and you came to the U.S. in 2023 -- what that experience of arrival was like for you? What your first experiences or impressions of that were?

Mohammad: Actually, when I just get this opportunity to be resettled to USA, [I] was elated. So I almost died, literally. Because it's like a gate, a life gate, and you will start a new life. And when I say life, it's true life. It's a true life -- not like refugee camp life, not like other countries’ life – [true life] which is in the USA, the United States of America. And it was my dream. So I literally was elated and super excited.

Kendall: And do you remember when you first arrived to the US?

Mohammad: Yeah. I arrived in USA last April, 2023. And we spent two days for the flight. It was difficult, but we just arrived. And it was beautiful.

Janet: So we understand, Mohammad, that you came to live in Syracuse, New York, with support from a local nonprofit organization called RISE, which stands for “respect, inspiration, service, and empathy.” Did you request or choose to live in Syracuse or were you just assigned to Syracuse by chance?

Mohammad: Actually, I have my friend in Syracuse, living here in Syracuse. So when I complete my application to resettlement, they choose. They asked me to determine someone who will be a sponsor when I arrived in USA to help me just in the basic things like provide me with information about the country, about hospitals, about everything. Then I determined to [ask for] my friend as a sponsor, or “US Tie.” I just assigned my friend as a sponsor. So I chose Syracuse depending on my friend's location.

Janet: Okay. And how did you get connected with the organization called RISE? Were they known for resettling refugees?

Mohammad: Actually, I didn't have any idea about RISE because I didn't know about agencies that [were] located in Syracuse. So it's just my luck. They assigned me to this organization to help me with the first 90 days, which is three months, to working with me to preparing my documents like social [security], like insurance, health insurance and food stamps for 90 days and make some procedures.

Janet: When you think back to those first few weeks and months of living in Syracuse, what was most important for you and your family?

Mohammad: So the most important thing is that I don't [have to be] afraid of tomorrow. I don't afraid of my children’s future. We have a home and we have a good education. We don't have a tent. And we are safe.

Kendall: Mohammad, one of the things that we try to do at EMM is really to encourage communities and congregations to offer welcome. And I'm curious: for you, what your experience was, in being welcomed to both Syracuse and the US? And if there's anything that you wish more people in the US understood about how to genuinely make newcomers feel respected and truly welcomed in their communities?

Mohammad: Yes. So, from my point of view, I wish more people understood the challenges refugees face and the resilience they demonstrate in starting a new life in a foreign land. Refugees often arrive with like a huge emotional and bad experience from their countries, and [have] bad experience and faced significant barriers [in] rebuilding their lives in the new country. I believe for someone entering the US as a refugee, several next steps may include applying for finding the local community’s centers that help refugees. They’re providing services, they guide the new people, which is a new American, to starting their life.

Janet: So you've emphasized the importance of these organizations like RISE in helping people go through the procedures and just get their basic needs met during the first few months. Was there anything in that process that people did or didn't do that really made you feel welcome in the United States?

Mohammad: Yes, actually they provide us with information -- it's called cultural orientation. They give us information about how we can use the bus station, or using the services. They provide us with information about the government, phone numbers like hospital, emergency, and they provide us with gifts and a lot of foods. It feels like they care about us. So it was very, very cool.

Janet: So just the fact that people thought about all the things that you would need, all the different kinds of knowledge, and providing some material goods, food and clothes and the things that you needed, but a lot of it -- just explaining how things work in the US -- was really helpful.

We know that you entered the US with the status of refugee. Some people come in with another status. They might be SIV, they might be humanitarian parolee. But since you were a refugee, did that determine in any way the kind of support that you were eligible for, either from the government or from local organizations like RISE?

Mohammad: Actually, as a Syrian, our status is refugee, which is still waiting to the final decision of your application. So I arrived in U.S. as a refugee with my family and we're still waiting our green card application. We should apply next April because next April, we will be completing one year in USA, that will allow us to apply for green cards.

Janet: Right. So if someone comes into the US as a refugee, they have to wait a year, but then they can apply for a green card and become a legal permanent resident.

Mohammad: It's depending on the status. So some people coming like, as you mentioned before, SIV, which is -- once they arrived in the airport, they will obtain the green card, but it's depending on the case and from like the country that they come from and other things.

Janet: Right. Is there anything that you wish more people in the United States understood about what it means to come here as a refugee?

Mohammad: Yes. I need just to remind people that we are human beings. And it's so hard to be a refugee and all people looking at you like a refugee. So the refugee means you just leaving your country, your people, and all the things that you have, to just looking for a safe place and to avoid to [being] involved in this war or killing people or do[ing] something bad. So I just need to remind people that.

Kendall: Thank you for that. And as a reminder to our listeners, adults who enter the US with refugee status are able to work as soon as they have their social security and their work authorization documents. So Mohammad, could you tell us about your experience of coming to the US and looking for work using the skills and the education that you had obtained while you were in Jordan?

Mohammad: Yes, actually, depending on the status that I arrived in USA as a refugee, I obtained the necessary documents to work, which is work authorization and social security number. And I have already the passport that we're coming through.

Drawing on my IT background and experience, I actively sought employment. So I just tried to find a matching job in my experience and trying to sign into the platforms that connect with employees, which is LinkedIN, Indeed, and others. So I created my profiles and started to applying my CV. And I got a lot of interviews with many organizations here. So it was good to starting like, and connect yourself with employers and finding job opportunities.

Kendall: Yeah. And it's a lot of work, looking for work as well! Now you're an IT manager for InterFaith Works of Central New York, which is a large nonprofit providing multiple services, including refugee resettlement and support for new Americans. Could you tell us a little bit about what you do in your role?

Mohammad: So I do a lot. So actually, as the IT manager of InterFaith Works, I am responsible to all things related to IT. It's like technology, infrastructure and operations. This including developing technology strategies and organizational goals, managing IT infrastructures and implementation, software applications and everything. And I'm responsible to working with our partner, our IT service provider, and providing the technical support for staff.

Kendall: So you are very, very busy is what I'm hearing.

Mohammad: Yes.

Janet: Mohammed, you work for an organization that resettles hundreds of newcomers every year. So now that you're part of the staff of an organization that does this, has the experience of working for this organization helped you understand anything more about the process of resettlement, or the role of nonprofit organizations in being able to resettle refugees?

Mohammad: Yes. Working for a resettlement organization has enhanced my understanding of the resettlement process and critical role of non-profits. It's showing me firsthand the support and resources the newcomers require, and the importance of empathy and community involvement in their journey to rebuild their lives.

Janet: So you said you've become more aware of the importance of not only the support and the resources that people need, like you talked about earlier, but also the importance of empathy and community involvement. So besides the nonprofit organizations like RISE and Interfaith Works, are there other people or groups who are or should be involved in welcoming newcomers to their new communities?

Mohammad: Actually, I believe there's a lot of institutions that are working with newcomers, but I can mention resettlement agencies and the local community centers. And we have churches, and we have mosques, and a lot of people who are individually helping newcomers also.

Janet: So from what you've seen, the role that lots of different groups and organizations and individual people can play really matters. It really adds up.

Mohammad: Yeah.

Janet: I wanted to ask a couple of other things about your family’s experience of this transition. You had children already before you came to the United States, right?

Mohammad: Yes.

Janet: And so what has your children's experience of resettlement been like?

Mohammad: (laughs) They just like the place. As I said before, I'm lucky to get this opportunity, which is changing my life. And depending on changing my life, my children, they will get a new future, a new life and it should be bright. And my children were very happy to just arrive in USA and they finding everything like gifts, like games, food, they find the heaven.

Janet: And their adjustment to school and to speaking language and that's all gone well?

Mohammad: Yeah.

Kendall: Is there another part of your journey or your story that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Mohammad: Actually, I would share some, it's not like a story, it's just I would like to thank [everyone] who has supported me and gave me this opportunity to come here. And during these challenges, I found the strength to pursue my dreams. And I appreciate the help I have received from the government, the agencies, and the people, and everyone who helped me to be myself right now.

Janet: Well, your “self right now” is pretty spectacular. So it's very much to our benefit in Syracuse and in the United States to have people like you who bring such a wealth of experience and such a desire to get to work and to pursue your dreams. That's really important to everybody, I think.

Kendall: Absolutely. And Mohammad, I'm just so grateful for your time. This has just been so wonderful! One of the questions we love to ask everyone as we end our interviews is for you to share with our listeners what home means to you.

Mohammad: Home to me? (Yes.) OK.

I believe that home is where my family is, where I feel safe and loved. It's not just about the physical location, but rather the people and the sense of belonging they bring. And home is where I can be myself and I can create lasting memories with my loved ones. So I will just say something. There is a humanity, then I'm a human and I'm at home. That's the important thing.

Kendall: That's really beautiful. Thank you so much, Mohammad.

Janet: Yeah, thank you, Mohammad. You said so much that's really important. And I really appreciate you sharing so much of your experience and your wisdom with us.

Mohammad: Actually, I just would like to thank you to giving this opportunity and sharing my information, my story. It was a pleasure.

Janet: It was an honor and a privilege for us also.