

From the *Sag Harbor Express*

IRAQI REFUGEES CELEBRATE

CHRISTMAS ON LONG ISLAND

Struggling to Find Their Way in America

“Oh yes, Christmas dinner with your family would be wonderful. We just don’t eat pork, but we will like anything else you serve...No, Muslims don’t drink wine or any other alcohol...We would be happy to be with you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Early in the afternoon on Christmas Day I drove 33-year old Firas, his younger brother Ali and their mother Malkia to our house. At the door Firas asked, “Should we take off our shoes?” Not a bad custom, but I said “Not necessary.” Firas proudly presented my wife Ann with a bag of Starbucks Coffee. Malkia wore a black head scarf, a “hijab,” and we were afraid our grandchildren -- five, three and two-years old – might be uneasy, but they were more interested in riding a plastic roller coaster than in noticing our Iraqi guests.

Because Firas had worked in Baghdad as an engineer for Bechtel, an American contractor, Al Qaeda killed one of his brothers, mistaking him for Firas, then kidnapped and killed his father. A surviving sister and brother are still in Iraq with their spouses and Malkia’s grandchildren. Whenever our two-year old grandson Sam went near her, Malkia smiled and finally she reached out to kiss and hug him. Firas told me that when they arrived in America, his mother cried for weeks.

Before the Iraqi family joined us on Christmas, we thought about the strangeness of coming to America from Iraq, through Syria where Firas had fled, and being dropped down in the wealthy community of North Haven, near Sag Harbor. They lived for several months with Marie Maciak, a film-maker and instructor at the private Ross School. Firas had worked for her as a translator in Damascus, and she fought through a bureaucratic maze to gain refugee status for him, Ali and Malkia. They recently moved to a small cottage in Sag Harbor but must leave it before summer and are looking for a permanent place they can afford.

A couple of months ago, when St. Andrews Catholic Church asked me to help the Iraqis, we drove to the Suffolk County Social Service office in Riverhead to fill out Medicaid forms. Several uniformed officers kept watch in a large room where men and women, some with children, waited to be interviewed. Others lined up at windows labeled "Medicaid Applications" or "Public Assistance." A sign on the wall said, "NO weapons, threats, cursing, alcohol or drugs, or disorderly conduct. Persons violating these rules will not be able to conduct their business for the day and may be subject to removal from the building." As we sat on the metal benches, a man toppled to the floor with a seizure and the officers called an ambulance. Two women had a fistfight outside the entrance. The Iraqis stared straight ahead, pretending not to notice.

Christmas dinner went well and we were pleased when Malkia felt comfortable enough to accept a second serving. Firas is determined to support his family without charitable assistance. He works part-time at Ross School and teaches Arabic classes while Malkia opens boxes in the storage room at TJ Max. She gets a ride to the food pantry at the Presbyterian Church on Tuesday and stretches the food for a week.

Twenty-three year old Ali was a welder in Iraq but lack of transportation makes it difficult for him to find work. He is gradually picking up English which Firas tells him is needed for life in America.

Malkia wants to return to Iraq, despite the dangers that remain, mostly because she desperately misses her grandchildren. She also suffers from the winter cold and would like to have access to a mosque where she could pray.

Firas told us that despite what we may have read in the media, life in Iraq before the “invasion” was quite normal. Healthcare and education were free, and Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds lived peacefully side by side. Intermarriage was unremarkable. He says that after the occupation, American civil authorities decided to allocate seats in the new parliament based on ethnic percentages. In his opinion this created rivalry among the Iraqis, and Al Qaeda exploited it to inflame the insurgency.

In unguarded moments Firas reveals ambivalent feelings about the war. While still in Iraq he had a friend who was held on unspecified charges in Abu Ghraib Prison. When the friend was released he showed Firas wounds on his body from dog bites. Firas says, “He went a little crazy after that.” Firas exchanges emails with people in Iraq who tell him that the “shoe thrower” has become a national hero.

But Firas tries to suppress political opinions and talks about his warmhearted feelings for Americans. He is amazed by the number of people in the Sag Harbor community who have reached out to help him and his family. He contrasts this experience with that of Iraqi refugees he hears from in Sweden and Norway who say Arabs are discriminated against in those countries.

Asked what he likes most about the U.S., he says “your organization.” As simple a thing as busses and trains that run on schedules, which we take for granted, impresses him. (Apparently he hasn’t traveled on the Long Island Railroad.) Our social services may entail miles of red tape but eventually seem to accomplish results. Firas holds a master’s degree in environmental engineering from an Iraqi university and his ambition is to become a licensed engineer in the U.S. Through research on the Internet and phone calls to helpful educators and trade associations, he has learned the steps needed to achieve his goal.

Our adult children and their spouses talked to him about “networking” and using the Internet as a way to find someone who may know someone who may know of a job that fits his resume, while he works towards engineering certification. Unfortunately the Iraqis arrived in the U.S. in the middle of the recession. Sitting together after dinner, with the grandkids back on the roller coaster, we encouraged Firas not to give up, that most refugees in our history had to struggle through equally tough challenges. He knows it won’t be easy but he is eager to become part of the great American immigrant story. Despite all the problems ahead, his face lights up when he says that he and Ali and Malkia all love our new president.

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