

## ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Louay Al Obaidy

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*Louay Al Obaidy is an ESOL student from Iraq. Louay has lived in the United States for a little over two and a half years. He has just successfully completed his first semester at MCC. In this piece, Louay shares the story of his barber, Tom, who also immigrated to the United States from Iraq.*

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Louay Al Obaidy, 2016

### The Survivor

Tom was one of the first people that I met during my earlier days in Rochester, New York. I was living across the street in a building in front of his barbershop, and one of my friends introduced him to me. Since he was also from Iraq, he was very helpful to me and offered his services in case I needed something. He showed me the city, and where I could find what I needed.

When I was still living across the street from his shop, while I was waiting for the bus in the morning, I used to watch him start his days by sweeping the floor and cleaning his small and modest barbershop to be ready to serve the customers and the visitors. He spent most of his days there. His shop contained three black barbers' chairs, mirrors, and some haircut pictures hanging on the white walls beside three religious symbols. Watching him working hard and trying to do the best he could for the customers, made him a good candidate for my interview essay.

Tom is an Iraqi man in his middle age, with average length, black hair, and black eyes with some wrinkles around them. I called him to schedule an appointment, but when I told him

that I was going to interview him for my interview essay, his voice faded, and he was not too excited about it.

The next day I was worried that he was not going to show up, but when I went to his shop, he was there, working on one of his customers. He welcomed me and asked me to have a seat. I asked him if he had time to do the interview, and he said, "Of course", but he had to do it while he was cutting one of his customer's hair. I answered that would be fine, I did not have any problem with that, but the truth was, because he was working, it was very hard to read his body language. Sometimes I was looking at him though the mirror.

Before the interview, I had always wondered and asked myself if Tom was really happy and satisfied by his life because Tom was always smiling, laughing and cracking jokes all the time. Now, I was going to find out.

Tom explained that he attended barber school in Iraq, and he got his license. He was the first in his class. When he first graduated from barber school, he got a job in a barbershop. However, after working in the shop for only twenty days, the owner showed his willingness to sell the

shop; therefore, Tom bought the shop from him and became a business owner. He has been working as a barber for thirty-two years.

I asked him how and when he came to the United States. He answered that he came to the United States as a refugee fourteen years ago with his wife and his three children. I asked him how his life was in Iraq, and he stared at me for a moment, just like someone who recalled old memories in his mind. Then he continued answering that his life in Iraq was stable and settled, filled by hopes to see his children grow up in safety among their relatives and friends.

When I asked him how he ended up being a refugee in the United States, he stopped cutting his customer's hair, and a look of sadness covered his face. He looked at me and said, "In 2004, I worked as a barber for the coalition forces." In 2005, he started receiving some threatening messages, and, after a while, there was an attempt to assassinate him because he kept working with the coalition forces. He said that a sniper bullet hit the window of his home, but he was lucky because the bullet

hit the metal bars of the window and changed its course.

I asked him how he felt at that moment. He said that he was terrified and ideas and questions started flashing in his mind in a matter of seconds. What if he died? What about his family's future? Who would take care of his kids?

This was the beginning of his long journey. He decided to leave his home, his dreams, his hopes, his business, his friends and his relatives, and take his family to Jordan, his first stop. In Jordan, he stayed three years working as a barber to provide a decent level of income to his family.

After that, he traveled to Syria. In Syria, he said, he opened his own barbershop, and his life was going on smoothly, but he said, "I didn't feel this country (Syria) was my home or the best place for me and my family, so I made a request to the United

Nations office to be a refugee. When they asked me what country I preferred, I told them the United States of America." After eight years in Syria, the United Nations' office called him, asking him to prepare his luggage to leave for America.

At this point, I paused and asked him, "How would you describe yourself in two words? He smiled and said that he was a boat. "Why did you choose a boat?" I asked. He replied that he was a boat because he was carrying his family from one place to another until he landed by the shores of safety and the land of opportunity.

Then I asked him that what he had learned through his journey and who he was most grateful for. "I am grateful to my spouse who was supporting me during the journey, and shared with me the sadness and the happiness. She was all my crew on that boat." He informed me that

having a career helped him a lot to start a new life in different countries. He continued saying, "I am also grateful to the government of the United States for giving me and my family the care and the support that we needed to start our new life."

I ended by asking him what his plan was for the future. He said that he was satisfied with what he has achieved, but his goal and his happiness now are to see his kids getting the education that they need for their future. After that, the customer looked at him and said, "Oh, you are a survivor."

Now, I know why Tom is smiling and laughing all the time - it's because his life has been running smoothly for a while. Looking at Tom, I realized that his long journey only ended by settling in a place which, in his perspective, is the best for him and his family.