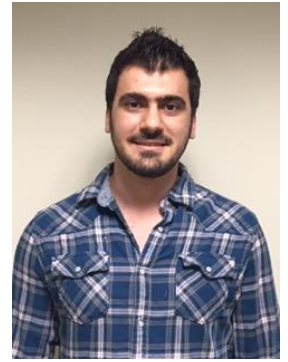


ESOL VOICES: Student Spotlight

Mohammad AlFayad

Mohammad AlFayad grew up in Damascus, Syria, where his family settled after becoming refugees when Israel seized the Golan Heights from Syria in 1967. He obtained a degree to become an elementary school art teacher; however, he left his home country during the midst of the Syrian Civil War. He dreams of a future where his family and his country are safe from the oppressive government. He graduates from MCC this year with an AAS in Tooling & Machining.



Mohammad AlFayad, 2015

Welcome to the World

We watched as the Arab Spring spread through Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, but we never thought that it would make its way to our homeland of Syria. Our government told us that our community was strong, and that a revolution would never have a place in our land. What they really meant was that the government's secret service agents knew about our every move and we would be foolish to even dream about change in our country. Little did we know that the long, cold winter had begun to thaw and our spring was about to bloom.

There were news stories on AlJazeera about our government regime kidnapping and killing children in Dera'a, and citizens filling the streets to protest. Gossip about the events filled the streets in Damascus. The government television channels showed us that everything was normal and there were no protests. The government had completely

destroyed the city of Hama in the 1980s when there was protesting, so we were all scared to see what would happen now. Fear had been planted for 40 years in our hearts. Even the whisper of the word "freedom" was met with bloodshed, but we had been trained to believe that it was for the good of the country. I did not know that the President we supported would commit crimes against humanity, or that I could become one of his victims.

In our college, all the teachers were government workers. They told us that we had to meet at a famous mosque in the middle of Damascus on a Friday, or we would be punished. When we arrived, the teachers gave us blue wristbands and said that if anyone in the mosque said anything against the government, we should respond by chanting pro-government mantras to drown out the opposition. If anybody videotaped us, we should

immediately attack them. This seemed so wrong. We were regular individuals and it was not our job to attack other people. How could they be telling students like us to do this? I could feel that the government was setting regular citizens against each other, when we were really all the same. Would they turn all the citizens into killers to keep their position of power? I tried not to think about it.

When I emerged into the sunlight after Friday prayers, I saw two large groups standing on opposite sides of the street. On one side were regular civilians, some of whom had been sitting near me inside the mosque. On the other side of the street, I saw a huge group of police. It is normal to see police everywhere in Syria. There are a lot of them on all the corners, usually oblivious to everything around them, smoking their cigarettes and lazily balancing their guns on their shoulders. This group of police was

different. They all had helmets, shields and sticks. They stood in straight lines, very organized, and ready to fight. All the students from my school were standing behind them, as we had been told to do. Without even a second thought, I walked over to stand with my people, the regular civilians. Once in the group, I turned to face the opposing group of policemen and classmates, my head held high.

We stood quietly as the police yelled at us to go home, shouting threats and beating their sticks against their shields. Then, a voice from our group of citizens shouted “Freedom! Freedom!” More voices joined in, repeating “Freedom! Freedom!” Soon, we were so loud that I could feel the beating of the words through my chest. It was the best moment of my life. Every fiber of my body was beating with the word that had always brought fear to my heart. The rhythmic beating stopped and was overtaken by a roar of shouts from the other side. The huge crowd of police and government supporters, including my classmates, ran straight at us like an old war movie. I was frozen. My heart was with the protesters, but the blue wristband on my arm said I was with the government.

The police ran past me, missing me by a hair, but they didn’t touch me. I felt they were like dogs running behind their prey. I didn’t move, so they did not run behind me, but they chased the other protesters down. I turned and followed the chaotic crowd. As I ran, I saw four policemen standing above a protester on the ground, beating him with their sticks, kicking him with their boots. There was so much blood that I could not tell where it was coming from. One of the old men from the mosque was on the ground with police officers standing over him. His thick eyeglasses were laying on the ground, not far from his swollen face. Even as the police sticks landed all over his aged body, his hands searched the ground as he cried out “Please, my glasses. You can do whatever you want to me, but all I want are my glasses.” Officers were dragging bloody, broken bodies off to their cars to be detained.

I got home unharmed, not because I was lucky, but because of the blue wristband on my arm. I was grateful that I was not sitting in a prison with my ribs broken, but deep inside, I was feeling like a coward. I stood with the protesters, but I was not brave enough to stay them to the end, or to face the fate that so many of them

suffered that day. I just froze and disappeared into the crowd. When I returned home, I turned on the TV. That night, the government news cameras were in the same street where I saw people being beaten and bleeding. They showed that the streets were empty and peaceful. They said that the reports of a protest were a lie and nothing happened there that day, and anyone who believes that there had been a protest was an anti-government terrorist.

They had made their agenda clear. The regime’s goal was to label the peaceful freedom-seekers as terrorists so they would have free authority to exterminate us all. I felt a target on my head. I felt a target on the roof of my family’s house. We were now labeled as terrorists and were active enemies of our ruthless government because we now understood the truth about the 40-year-old regime. I had no choice but to continue with the simple, peaceful demand of “Freedom! Freedom!” My country’s future had come to a tipping point right in front of me, and my options were to stay safe and watch it fall, or risk my own future to watch it rise. That night, the blue wristband lay at the bottom of the trashcan, cut into a dozen pieces.

ESOL Voices a collection of stories written by ESOL students at Monroe Community College. This semester, we are highlighting students from Middle Eastern countries. Look for a new story in the Tribune each month. We hope you will find these stories interesting and inspiring.

Katie Leite & Pamela Fornieri, ESOL Program, April 2015
