

Podcast Transcript: The Huddled Masses

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Welcome to the Harrisonburg 360 Podcast, I'm your host Kelsey Liske.

The Harrisonburg 360 Podcast is an attempt to capture and record narratives of immigrants living in the Harrisonburg community. Using past and present voices of Harrisonburg immigrants, students in our JMU English class have collaborated to create a space focused on the importance of listening to each other's voices. Every person deserves a chance to share their story, and we, as a class, are privileged to share these stories with you in hopes of expanding perceptions of what it means to be an immigrant in Harrisonburg.

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Each week, Harrisonburg 360 is produced by a different team of students. This week's episode, The Huddled Masses, was produced by Carrington Balsler, Kelsey Liske, and Corinne Martin. In this week's episode, we'll be sharing the stories of two refugees: Nasser Al Saadun and Zee AlKhatir. Within these two narratives, we hope to draw connections between their experiences immigrating to America and the lives that lay ahead of them in Harrisonburg. We explore each of their stories, and the nature of their inclusion in the immigrant population - the huddled masses - as Emma Lazarus says in her poem "The New Colossus," made famous by its placement on the statue of liberty. However, Nasser Al Saadun and Zee AlKhatir's stories instead reveal the personal hardships, motivations, and human spirit that makes each story entirely individual.

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Nasser Al Saadun was interviewed by Daniel Brennan in April of 2009 as a part of the *Shenandoah Valley Oral History Project* currently located in the James Madison libraries' Special Collections. Al Saadun shares his life and experiences as a refugee, starting with his work alongside the United States Army during the war in Iraq. He describes the violence his family faced because of his work as a translator and after a year and a half, being asked "do you want to leave?" as his country becomes increasingly dangerous. He accepts the chance to come to America, and discusses how aid and assistance programs in the United States really function for immigrants and refugees like him. As he becomes more familiar with the Harrisonburg area, Al Saadun sees an abundance of immigrants from Iraq--his observation raises questions about what that number really signifies...

NA: "I worked with the United States, with the US Army. And for that reason the militia kidnapped my father and tried to chase me, because anyone there working with the US Army was killed. You know, would be killed by the enemy militia. And so after kidnapping my father they killed him, so we couldn't stay there. I took everyone in my family and we moved to Syria and from Syria to Lebanon.

“They ask, “Do you want to go to America?” if not then you may stay another 2 or 3 years. Meaning that, you don’t have choice. You need to accept any country, because you are illegal in the country that you are in. So you need to move, to leave. So if they said to me, “Darfur is accepting you, do you want to leave?” I would say yes. Yes I want to go. Because you are chased by the police there, even though you are a refugee they chase you because you are illegal. So imagine that, if any other country say or the United Nation say, “this country is accepting you, do you accept?” you would say yes. And when you hear America, this is the biggest country in the world and it’s the strongest, and the most richest country. So definitely you would say that you were a lucky guy.”

In this portion of the interview, Al Saadun distinguishes the concept of choice, or in this case, the lack thereof. As a refugee, he is aware that his position in both Iraq and Syria during the early 2000s erased his ability to choose where he would like to go, though if possible, the only place he would have wanted to be is in Iraq. The conflict in the middle East had developed in its entirety and the efforts to occupy the country left it as a war-zone district. At that time, civilians in the area were subject to danger--soldiers and civilians were indistinguishable the chance of being killed was high and there was really no safe place to be within those borders. Al Saadun, as a translator for the United States Army, was in an even greater position, as his occupation made him an accomplice to the enemy forces. The kidnapping and killing of his father after his cooperation with the U.S military proved this to be true, and it is from there that his option to stay in the premises was dissolved and his journey as a refugee began.

At this point in his narrative, Al Saadun's perception of America prior to arriving is also noticeable. He regards it with a degree of honor because of its size and strength, but once he arrives in Harrisonburg, that view is severely altered by the lack of assistance his family received, and he continues with a harsher opinion of what aid programs provided and in what ways his own morality for helping people shaped his experience...

NA: “Because when you help a person, anybody, you expect that he will help you. In return. That’s something normal, if I help you this time you’ll help me next time. So when I came here and said that there was no help, nothing, no one would ask about you. I said that I lost my father because of working with the US army, and I said I didn’t care because my work was to help people, to translate, to see people, the needs. And in return the US must help us.”

DB: Most the refugees that are in the area, are they from your area or are they from all over the Middle East?

NA: “Well, mostly from Iraq now, mostly from Iraq. Well actually there are some refugees that we can see that are in good manner. I’m not sure of that, I can’t tell you that, cause some of them are from Russia. And they in good manner. Why especially us? Why are all these people coming from Iraq? Suffering, where as others are not.”

It is in his descriptions of American assistance that we get a truer sense of who Al Saadun is. His belief about what it means to help people and address the needs for others in that time of crisis overpowered whatever internal emotional he had about even about his own father’s death, and yet

he still didn't receive assistance in finding new work or a place to live--he was left alone with a wife and a very young child. This belief, and the expectation that the United States would acknowledge his contribution to the conflict, largely shapes what he perceives about the country. His connection to the military also gave Al Saadun a closer look at American administration and politics. Perhaps it is his individual perspective of this system that motivates him to advocate for refugees like himself and encourage American assistance. As someone who provided help without receiving any in return, he is able to see the faults in the American system and acknowledges the ways that America could do better for those who follow him.

Once established in the Harrisonburg community and in the immigrant population as a whole, Nasser Al Saadun raises an interesting question about the number of refugees from Iraq in Harrisonburg... Why were there so many? What brought such a large amount to the Shenandoah area? Why do they suffer more once arriving?

Though tensions in the middle east had been on the rise for quite some time, the war in Iraq officially began in 2003 when President George W. Bush, despite the United States lacking a well-formulated strategy for occupying the country, began an operation designed to invade and disarm what was known as the Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction, or WMD, and to end the rule of Saddam Hussein--the revolutionary leader of the social party in Iraq.

The violence between armies and militias was known for being particularly gruesome, but what is more noticeable was the danger for civilians in the area. Citizens and soldiers were indistinguishable--United States combatants fired at anyone that hadn't evacuated the war zone and bombed large cities; the Iraqi soldiers killed anyone that cooperated with the American Forces and led a reign of terror for the duration of their rule. The majority of government or public institutions were squandered, and the severe loss of any developed infrastructure left the citizens with little to nothing.

As the conflict accumulated, around 4 million of Iraqi citizens were displaced--some claimed refugee status in Syria and Lebanon, but the number one country for the resettlement of these people was the United States.

So what created the poor treatment of these immigrants? Why did we seem particularly unwelcoming? The war's close proximity to the terrorist attack on 9/11 might be an ample explanation, despite the fact that Al Saadun reports these mistreatments in 2009, years after the initial intensity of negative sentiments around Middle Eastern immigrants. Today, as the topic of immigration becomes more debated, the climate of our country does not seem to be warming up to immigrant populations...

Nasser Al Saadun still lives in Harrisonburg--he is a language professor at James Madison University and Bridgewater College and is also involved with multiple businesses in the area. He is a constant advocate for enriching the culture of the community and assists new immigrants and refugees as they transition to American life.

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In Al Saadun's interview and the historical facts of the war, we see reflections of the story of Zee AlKhater. Like Al Saadun, Zee who is from Iraq, fled to Syria after experiencing an act of violence herself, and nine years later, came to the United States with her two sons. There are obvious similarities in the experiences of our two subjects today, but as we saw in an interview with her this March, her open-minded perspective and passion for storytelling makes her story unparalleled among millions of immigrants.

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Zee was interviewed by Corinne Martin this spring in one of James Madison's libraries. She came ready to share her story--and spoke openly about her immigration process and the violence that erupted in Iraq. Though as she continues describing her life, she shares more about what she hopes to accomplish while in the United States--receiving a masters in English, writing a best-selling book, and creating a positive face for her community here. Her story here is explained with a description of her life in Syria and the intense chain of events that led her to America...

ZA: "So war happened there and I was pregnant with my second child and that delayed our travel. And they - they told us, we are going to the United States and you have no other option. And so it's like, okay, I guess we're going. But the country was burning very fast at that time, it was - we lived at the bottom of a mountain. And then there were the rebels at the top of the mountain and then the Syrian army - next to us. We were in the middle between the fight and there were long nights that I had to cover up one of my kids, fearing that the bullets will hit them because it was big windows and everything. It was, it was something I'll never forget. I'm not sure if that would be acceptable for the session to say. There were big arches at the beginning of every city. And on that arch of my city, it was very close to my apartment. They used to hang people there every other day, the Syrian army would hang the rebels every other day, the rebels would hang the Syrian army over there. And it was, I had to cover my, my kids eyes if we went to the UN so they will, they will not see any of that. But then we, we did leave and they close the airport. We left at 6pm of July 29th of 2012. They close the airport the second day at seven morning. We lucked out, big time. And then the owner of the apartment, called us after two weeks, he said, I am very thankful you guys left because the apartment was blown out with the attack attack."

Her story is deserving of attention, but even as someone that survived near-death experiences almost every single day, her problems didn't stop after coming to the United States. In public and at work, she was a target for negative comments and questions, including politically charged misconceptions that her ethnicity was associated to the illegal distribution of weapons. And yet she still has hopes that people will accept her as the peaceful United States citizen she is.

ZA: "Half Harrisonburg, I felt they were very welcoming and the other half they were just go home. And or, uh, I'm not kidding, one of them was asking me about all kinds of weapons. I was like, dude, I don't know what you're talking about. Do you see me like a weapon person or do I sell weapons?"

“...I've been harassed a couple times for that. I mean, I'm only two shades of white. But I really hope that people don't see me as a threat. Because, I really mean peace and mean well for everyone.”

Like Nasser Al Saadun, Zee experienced both the mistreatment because of where she is from and the neglect to provide any assistance at all. In her eyes, the ability to speak English upon arriving to America was enough for people to look the other way, leaving her mostly on her own to forge through endless documents and policies that apply to United States immigration, taxes and insurance programs. Because of this, she has an underwhelming sense of connection and community in Harrisonburg, and often misses her own culture and the sense of safety and solidarity that is associated with it.

ZA: “Not as an organization now because they saw that I speak English and they said, Oh, you don't need anything. That's it, you, you're on your own. Which I know the English, the language, but I don't know the culture. That is a big difference. I, I feel that they should be more aware of that. I had no idea how to do my taxes, I had no idea how to apply for health insurance or car insurance or how to buy anything here, other than grocery. But, um. I had, I had some good friends who helped me through. They got my back and I'm very thankful for that. Other than that, I am on my own.”

“I miss a lot of my own culture. It's, uh, it's very close. You feel that--how do I say it? If you're my sister or one of my relatives, I have to make sure that you're okay, even if I have to meet you. It's kind of that thing, that mentality. I have to make sure that you're good and I'm good. Here, it's not much. I've seen parents that they have not seen their kids for years and that kills me. I really hope that I don't end up like that with my kids, because they're the only ones I have here and all my family's overseas. I like how someone may be facing a funeral or something bad or some, or even a wedding. I like the community. They just chip in and they help each other with that. I like that. I like it, so much. It happens so quickly here. I'm very surprised. I'm very proud of that. I like it. I don't know. I wish, I wish there would be a face for my culture here. A positive presence, to show people that not all different people from here are threat. That is all I wish for. But, we'll see.”

By bringing attention to the lack of resources that would make American life easier, Zee and Al Saadun both supplement a worthy argument against the stereotype that immigrants and refugees don't do enough and are inherently less likely to succeed in our country. It is easily imaginable that if the immigration system were to be more attentive to those who came into the country, rather than leaving them to face those obstacles on their own, they would find the support they've lacked in their new lives in America. Immigrants and refugees have found their own routes to success despite these obstacles, but there is no doubt that it would be valuable to give them the help they need in order to make that transition smoother. These narratives are in and of themselves advocates for immigration reform--in order to see the kinds of successes we ask for from immigrants, we have to adjust the system to provide them with the resources, opportunities, and knowledge they need to do so.

Zee has the intense escape story, countless interactions of harassment in the Harrisonburg community, and the experience of being on her own for quite some time--and despite all of these things, she has a particularly positive attitude that radiates in her ambitions, the goals she has for the future, and the advice she gives to others. When asked what she hoped others would take away from hearing her story, she responded with exceptional points that are applicable and relevant to all--

ZA: "Don't ever be too proud to ask for help. Don't step on your pain as if it's nothing, we learn from pain, we learn from our needs. It's, without it, without them we wouldn't be doing a lot of inventions and everything. I would really hope people will let go of the stereotype. Things like if you're in my religion, you're the same. You're a good person now. People are good and evil everywhere, every religion, every culture, I've seen it. I cannot emphasize harder on it. It doesn't matter what people think you do what makes you happy. That's what I wish people would focus on. As long as you're not causing any pain or harm to anyone or yourself, be at peace. That is, if people would embrace that, trust me, there wouldn't be any war or any fight. I wish people will not embrace politics as if they embrace their family or anything. Believe me, politics will not - I mean, if you look at politicians, they don't even know your name. They don't know anything about you. Why do you think they would care about what you would need or what you wouldn't need? Their - that if you just realized that it is not a good reason for you to fight others, or I've seen on Facebook and I've seen in families, they're just break apart because of political issues. I was like, "does that really matter?" It's a very silly reason that people will focus on. I hate politics. If you didn't notice that. They - they, they just ruin lives. You do what you think right? And that is all. Don't let that be your label. You don't have you don't need a label. You're a human. That is it. That's all I want to say."

Zee currently lives in the Shenandoah area with her two sons. She hopes to return to school to study English, and most importantly, to have her writing published and enjoyed by all. She also hopes that one day she might return to Iraq to see the family members that still reside in that area.

Both Nasser and Zee experience a shared history as citizens experiencing violence in Iraq and Syria and eventually again as refugees in the United States. Their shared history could easily label them as merely part of the 'huddled masses' as refugees, however their stories reveal just how complex and different they actually are. Al Saadun has a rare perspective that developed through his translating for the United States, and the emphasis that he places on helping others; Zee has an exceptional stance on what she wants to see in the world and how she wants the world to view people like her.

There are refugees from all over the world, from all walks of life, and the fact that two refugee stories, sharing so many similarities, are still so different, is a testament to the fact that each refugee and each immigrant has their own story to share. The huddled masses are composed of individuals, and individual stories, each of their own value. To identify them all together is to risk

dehumanizing these people and their stories. Each refugee, no matter how similar the origin, has faced different struggles to overcome, endured their own losses, and found the unique thing that motivates them forward. Their stories are just as complex as every other person, if not more. That's why it is necessary that we hear their voices, and we see them beyond being a part of a larger statistic, we're then able to recognize the stark humanity found in these stories, free from any label beyond being simply human.

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In the lives of Nasser Al Saadun and Zee AlKhater, we discover far more than their immigration stories. When we identify refugees as only one large group, limiting them to a single narrative, we lose the pure value of someone's humanity and the contribution that makes within a life story. Beyond their experiences as refugees, these people are humans with stories that impact communities all over the world. When we meet the faces among the huddled masses, we welcome them, and accept them not as immigrants or refugees, but as themselves - simply and powerfully human.

Thank you for joining us today on Harrisonburg 360. We're grateful to our sponsor Dr. Fagan, those from JMU libraries, Nasser Al Saadun, and our interviewee Zee AlKhater for helping make this episode possible. Our host today was Kelsey Liske. Our interview with Zee AlKhater was conducted by Corinne Martin. Our research and content producers were Kelsey Liske, Carrington Balser, and Corinne Martin and our audio producers were Carrington Balser and Corinne Martin. Join us next time on Harrisonburg 360.

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