

# “Our Main Goal As a Family Is Education”

What do you think of when you hear the label ‘refugee’? Diane Lemieux interviews Manar Aburshaid and busts a few stereotypes.

By Diane Lemieux

Whatever image the word refugee elicits, it is certainly not the charismatic, intelligent face of Manar Aburshaid. Had I met Manar six years ago, I would have used words like businessman and entrepreneur to describe him. Back then, Manar employed 200 people in his factory in Damascus, producing acrylic, polyester and cotton yarn.

“I’ve been travelling to Europe for the last 20 years, and before that I studied in America,” says Manar in his gravelly voice. Life was good: his company was doing well; his four kids were at the elite international school of Choueifat studying in the British IGCSE system in English. But on this cold, dark February evening, I meet Manar and his 17-year-old son Muwaffak as ‘refugees’ – that politically-laden word that has come to represent the dreaded, faceless ‘other’.

Sitting across the bare wooden table in the *Binnenrotte* café of Rotterdam’s public library, Manar paints a vivid

picture of their struggle to live a normal life in Damascus. In April of 2011, war broke out in Syria and within six months Manar’s factory was unreachable, with mortars falling in his neighbourhood and around his children’s school. He and his wife developed her talent for fashion design into a retail operation for women’s clothing. Stock was produced in local workshops and distributed to outlets across the city. “We were determined not to leave our country,” he says. But then Manar, like many business owners, was kidnapped from his home by armed men. He was lucky: the loot they took from his home was substantial, so they let him go that same evening.

In 2013, Syrians awoke to the realisation that [so-called] ISIS had taken over half the country. “At that point I de-

cidated that I had to find a solution. At 18, my sons would be dragged into the war and would lose their future.” His eldest son, Muwaffak, now 17, sits quietly next to his father; bookish and slender – certainly not the sort of young man you would imagine lugging an assault weapon. He is wearing a light, unzipped jacket over his jeans and sweatshirt despite the cold February evening chill – a typical teenager.

Manar explains, “For two years, I did my best to find a normal solution. I have enough proof to show that I am a businessman and have visited Europe many times. I should have been given a chance. But not even one embassy said ‘welcome.’”

## Making It Happen

By 2015, it was clear that the only option open to him was to leave through Lebanon and Turkey “like everybody else”. He made it to Amsterdam, a city he had last visited as a tourist in 2010. Struck, again, by how friendly the people were, he decided to stay and apply for asylum. The process would take six months before his family could join him. The delay was anguishing – the thought of his wife and kids in danger was unbearable. But his goal was clear: the education of his children. “I promised them they would go to America to study for university, just like I did. Our main goal as a family is education, education, education. Before anything else. That is why we are here.”

As Manar tells the story of his journey, I am struck by his frequent use of the words ‘I decided’. “The only people I was allowed to be in contact with were COA people [Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers, the Dutch organisation that houses asylum seekers, ed.]. They told me, ‘Manar, forget about it. We can’t allow you to rent a house, or get a job. You are not allowed to do anything.’ But I said: ‘I’m sorry, I’m here for the future of my family. Just let me start my own life.’”

He had no choice but to wait for the ‘procedures’ to work themselves out. But he did determine the conditions under which he would wait. Although by virtue of being an asylum seeker he was not allowed to work, every day

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Manar and Muwaffak Aburshaid  
Photo by David Blackburn

at 8 A.M. for what turned into 10 months, Manar made himself available for both the COA staff and the asylum seekers until he became an unofficial member of the daily meetings and presentations. “I was not there to get paid. I was there to feel the value of my own self.”

Manar decided that Rotterdam was the city that offered him the best opportunities to succeed in the long run. Choosing his own city was against the rules; but he made it happen. First, he approached the American International School of Rotterdam (AISR). The children’s transcripts showed them to be exceedingly bright. With a discreet smile Muwaffak explains that his SAT scores were in the high 90th percentile range. He achieved this without electricity, without attending regular classes...

### Moving to Rotterdam

“We had enormous respect for the really high academic achievements of the two eldest boys,” explains Willem Horbach, Business Manager at AISR. “As a private school it is difficult to make special arrangements, because paying parents can challenge our use of funds. We were lucky to come to an agreement with the W.K. Gordon Scholarship Fund Foundation which enabled us to provide opportunities for the children, because that is what school is all about, from our perspective. This Foundation has supported deserving students, helping them attend our school with scholarships and loans for the last 40 years. We are delighted that its Board decided to give its support in a case as unique as this.”

And then, with the help of the office of Ahmed Aboutaleb, the mayor of Rotterdam, Manar got himself a job in Rotterdam with Stichting Nieuw Thuis Rotterdam, basically doing the job he trained himself for dur-

ing the asylum procedures. Armed with his contract and the school’s admission letter, he obtained permission to move to Rotterdam.

### Determination

In the end, it took nearly 1.5 fear-filled years for his family to join him. The children landed on January 22, and started school the next day. “We couldn’t miss any more,” chuckles Muwaffak, shaking his head. “It’s great!” Never once in the story did Manar see himself as a victim of circumstance, as a pawn in someone else’s game. Even when faced with the Dutch government’s attempt to turn him into a faceless, powerless ‘refugee,’ he was determined to keep agency in his own hands and work to achieve his goals.

He even returned the loan given to him to help set up his apartment. “I don’t want it; I will manage my new life totally on my own.”

Manar studied Dutch at the Language Institute Regina Coeli. Now, he works with Syrian families in Rotterdam, providing them with houses, integration, and schooling in order for them to leave the *uitkering* (government benefit) system as fast as possible. Becoming a productive member of Rotterdam society is his personal goal as well. “My ambition is really big. I would like to go back to the business background where I come from.”

I leave the foyer of the brightly-lit public library, charged with Manar’s energy and determination – a man who, by his choices and actions, refuses to melt into the grey mass of faceless ‘other.’ ❧

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