

Fresno family represents the plight of Syrian refugees

By The Fresno Bee, adapted on 09.30.16

FRESNO, Calif. — The Kashak family arrived in the United States three months ago as refugees from the war-torn country of Syria. Now, they are busy adjusting to a new life in Fresno, California.

Thafer Kashak works as a sous chef, second in command at a restaurant that serves Middle Eastern food. Kashak has done that for two months, along with getting his wife, Nour, and their three children settled into a Fresno apartment. Their new life is an ocean away from home, and from a war that ripped their lives apart.

Settling Into Their New Community

Last Saturday, the family cooked a traditional Arabic breakfast at a walk to support Syrian refugees. The Kashaks say they are grateful for the hospitality shown to them by their new neighbors, and want to give back, sharing that their Muslim faith teaches manners, acceptance, tolerance, love for others and respect. Muslims are followers of the religion of Islam, which teaches that there is only one God, and that Muhammad is God's prophet. The family says that terrorists are not Muslims, they are criminals.

Money raised during the walk will go to the Syrian American Medical Society. It is a group that brings medical care and humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees and other displaced people in Syria, the surrounding countries of the Middle East, and Europe.

Millions Displaced By The Syrian Conflict

The Kashak family are among about 10,000 people in the U.S. who fled the Syrian war. The Associated Press says that number is just a small amount of the millions displaced. Aimee Abu-Shamsieh works with Central Valley Physicians for Humanitarian Aid, and helped organize the fundraiser. She says that the pre-war population of Syria was estimated at about 23 million, and about half its inhabitants have since fled their homes due to violence. The Kashaks fled Syria in 2012, after people were shot in the streets outside their home and cars were set ablaze. Before the war, the family lived a quiet life supported by Kashak's sweets shop and factory.

They ended up in a refugee camp on the border between the countries of Jordan and Syria. The family lived in a tent in the desert without running water for a few days before relatives living in a nearby city came to get them. However, camp guards did not let the family leave, citing a lack of paperwork, so they escaped into Jordan. Their oldest son says that to leave a refugee camp like the one where they stayed now, people must pay a “sponsor.”

In Jordan, Syrian refugees were not allowed to work, so Kashak had to bake sweets illegally to provide for his family. Later, he was approached by United Nations officials who asked if he wanted to take his family to the U.S. Kashak accepted because he wanted his children to receive a good education and have more opportunities. He says the interview and background check process took almost two years; finally, they were allowed to enter the U.S. They settled in Fresno because a family member was already there.

More Refugees Coming To The U.S.

Last week, the White House announced that the U.S. will accept more refugees from countries around the world. The increase will happen next year, and will raise the number from 85,000 allowed in 2016, to 110,000. The Rev. Tim Kutzmark of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno says the U.S. should accept even more. "Many members of our church are concerned that such a small amount of Syrian refugees are being allowed to enter this country compared to, for instance, Germany," Kutzmark says. "We are doing so little as a nation at a time when the need is so great."

He added that the fundraising walk is a way for the people of Fresno to do something to help refugees at a time when there is so much anti-immigrant sentiment in the country. The walk is a shared statement declaring that all people have worth and deserve to be treated with fairness, kindness and respect. Kutzmark says, "My heart breaks each time I see a photo of a frightened Syrian family fleeing for their lives. So many religions, including Unitarian Universalism, teach that welcoming the stranger is an essential part of living a life of faith. We seem to have forgotten that."

Jim Grant is director of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fresno's social justice ministry. He took part in the walk, and says Pope Francis is urging people to help refugees. "He said welcoming refugees into our homes is the greatest security against terrorism," Grant says. "The pope sees that refugees are not a national threat. They are a benefit, and if we could please take care of them, that could end terrorism."

Reza Nekumanesh shared a similar plea. He is director of the Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno. "It is terrible that it has become a political issue instead of the humanitarian issue that it truly is," he says, "Families are seeking safe haven from war and terror, and because of ignorance and a supposed fear of importing terrorism, the families become targets of suspicion and hatred. They are seeking safety and solace from the very terrorism that Americans fear."