



REEMA AT HOME SHOWING OFF A PHOTO OF HER IN HER ROTC PROGRAM

REEMA'S STORY: 18 YEAR-OLD IRAQI REFUGEE, FOUR-YEAR BALTIMORE RESIDENT AND SOCCER M.V.P. AT PATTERSON HIGH SCHOOL

AS TOLD TO ANNALIES WINNY

When we first arrived in Baltimore, my parents wanted to move to another city, to Chicago. They didn't really like it here but after Soccer Without Borders, they saw we knew people, so they were like, 'OK, we'll stay.' I play forward. I was MVP last year at Patterson High. After high school, I want to go to the police academy. That's my dream. I need to apply for the cadets now, but they say I've got to be a US citizen, so I've got to apply for that. I'm supposed to apply for citizenship right now, so when they approve it I can pass the test. I don't feel behind in school and my grades are good. Me and my brother are both in ROTC. It's a class if you want to go be in the Air Force. I'm a master soldier now. I'm in charge of the uniform and my brother is the flight commander.

After my older brother was born, my parents left for Jordan because the militia kicked them out of Iraq because my dad is Palestinian. My mother is Iraqi, but they still kicked her out because of my dad. When Saddam Hussein was alive it was OK for Palestinians to stay there, but after he died they said Palestinians couldn't stay in Iraq and they started kicking them out. So my parents went to Jordan, but they didn't have any papers. They got to Jordan by bus. They stayed in Jordan until I was born and my other brother was born and they didn't have papers from the government—they actually stayed there in Jordan hiding for 13 years. I was born in Jordan. After I turned 5, we left and went to Iraq. My mother left first, so she could get a place, and then we went after her. It was dangerous for us to get there because we could have gotten killed. Because I think they found out that we were in Jordan, the Jordanian government told us to leave. I was in a private school in Jordan, we had to pay for our school, and my dad was working as a house painter. My mom used to work in a salon doing hair. We lived in a building that had all Iraqi people. Two families were Palestinian and the militia came and killed the other guy, the other Palestinian guy—they shot him in the head. He was a member of my dad's family. They shot him because he was Palestinian. I was six.

Soon after, my dad's friend came and said, 'You have to leave now because someone is asking about your children,' because me and Ahmed, my brother, used to speak Jordanian. It sounds really different from Iraqi. My dad came while we were playing outside. He took us inside and we didn't know what was going on, he just grabbed us and put us in the house, and packed up our stuff and we left. We went to my uncle's house. The militia found us there. They

actually had a paper that said we had to leave, and if not we'd get killed. After that they kidnapped my dad. You know how ISIS kills people for no reason? That's how the militia do it, too. We lived with my uncle for less than a month. Then we left for Syria. We were in Syria, in Yarmouk, for three years. It was nice. They weren't racist, they liked Palestinians. Assad was still the leader at the time. He got messed up. Syria was a beautiful place. Schools and teachers were nice. Even in holiday time, like during Eid, you'd see people everywhere shopping. We weren't hiding there. They were OK with us being Palestinian and Iraqi. That's how it was.

But one day a police officer from the government came to our house. I was the only person at the house. I was still just six and a half, still young. He came and asked me some questions because of my accent, because I didn't know how to speak Syrian very well. He came because we are Palestinian. After three years, they started kicking the Palestinians out. And the government police came to the house and started asking me questions. They asked me if I was Palestinian and he said, 'You need to tell your parents that they need to leave the house. They have five days to leave Syria.' So I told my parents and they called my uncles, who said we might get arrested if we didn't leave. My two uncles lived in a camp between Iraq and Syria and we called them, and they said, 'Come to the camp.'

We had fake passports on the bus. We had them made in Iraq. I had a different name. On the bus, my dad told me and my brother not to talk. When we got off the bus I was scared. As soon as the bus crossed the Syrian border into Iraq, my cousins were standing in the middle of the street and they stopped the bus. Buses were going between Iraq and Syria all the time. We weren't welcome in Iraq and we weren't welcome in Syria. The IOM (International Organization of Migration) were there to help. They gave us a tent, something to sleep on, pillows, food, healthcare, and all that stuff. They gave us expired food sometimes, but we would eat it. There was nothing else.

At school in the camp teachers hit us: If you didn't do your homework, if you said you didn't understand what was on the board. You'd have to stand behind the trash can and put one foot up for the rest of class. That's how I got a broken wrist, from a teacher. I didn't do the homework because I didn't understand what to do. I told her I didn't understand what she wrote on the board. She told me, 'Show me your hand I'm going to hit you.' I wouldn't give my hand, so the teacher hit me even harder, with a piece of wood—a big

ruler. It's normal in Iraq. In Syria they didn't do that. The teachers weren't from the camp. They lived in Ramadi. It's a nice place with houses, 30 minutes from our school. They would drive to us. So they used to show off. I missed one year after I broke my wrist. I didn't want to go to school so I stayed home. Ahmed, my brother, missed two years, too. He didn't like school in the camp because of the teachers. We were at the camp for six years. It was fun but it was scary to sleep at night because there were snakes, scorpions. Half of the camp had the same problem as us because they were Palestinians. Some of them escaped because they wanted to come to the United States.

Before coming to the United States, we had to go back to Iraq in a van for a few days. It was dangerous but the IOM took us and put us in a hotel and told us not to leave. We had to have physicals, lots of things. Interviews. They have to see that we didn't do anything bad. They were asking all kinds of questions: 'Why did you come to the camp?'; 'Have you killed anybody?' My mom's sister had to come to the hotel to see us. We went to the airport. We went from Iraq to Jordan. We stayed in Jordan for two or three days in a hotel. Then we flew from Jordan to New York. We didn't know anything about New York. We stayed there just for one night. We had never flown before. We weren't really scared. My mom was scared of flying. She was holding the Quran the whole time and reciting it.

Finally, we got to Baltimore. We already had some family here. First we went to the IRC (International Rescue Committee). We had to stay in a waiting room while my parents went to sign house papers and all that. Then my uncle came in and we jumped on him and hugged him. He left the camp three years before us. So he's been here for over six years. Then my other uncle came here, and after a year it was our turn to come. It was different here. We didn't understand what people said at first. The English they taught us in the camp was totally wrong.

First we were in an apartment. We got a house two years ago, and my dad painted it. In the neighborhood there's lots of Syrian people now, but our neighbors here are mostly American.

The other week during the travel ban, my mother was in Baghdad because my grandmother died. They stopped my mom and questioned her. Her flight was from Qatar. She said there were a few Syrians, just like us, who came as refugees and that it was their first time coming here. She said they took her and she thought, 'That's it, they're going to send me back.' They asked her, 'Why did you go to Iraq? What places did you go to? Do you know any ISIS people? People from your family? Militia?'

They took her phone and every phone number she had in her phone, they wrote it down. And she had a bag. They took it from her and said they needed to see what's in there. She said every time they'd ask her a question they'd say, 'What do you have in the bag? What do you have in the bag?' She said, 'you just saw my bag, what do you think I have in it?' They took the bag and threw it on the table and started looking in it. She told them, 'I can take the stuff out.' He said, 'I'll take the stuff out for you. I need to do it.' But they actually cannot do anything since we have papers, social security, green cards. We're not here without papers. They can't kick us out from here. But Donald Trump sent back a lot of people that weekend. There were some families in the airplane she was in, and they sent them back. That's why she was afraid that they would send her back.

I was out waiting for her and the officer with her called me. My mom told him my name because he took my phone number from her phone, so they called me. He said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'I'm her daughter.' He acted like he didn't know who I was. And he said he needed my home address to put on the paper. I said 'She's got the address in her information thing.' He was like, 'What's your name?' And I said, 'Reema.' He thought my mom was faking and he said, after five hours, 'OK she's gonna come out in a few minutes.'

It took her like an hour to come out. An officer brought her out, too.

Other than that, I haven't noticed a change. A lot of people are standing with us. To know people are out there marching for us, that makes me feel kind of better. We feel supported because all these people, especially the Islamic people, they support us. But we don't feel safe-safe. Because Trump could say, 'We're gonna kick them out, nobody can do anything.' Maybe he's gonna kick us out. Anything can happen.

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