

Syrian refugees find new home, challenges in NC

The Shareefs now live in Durham after having lived in Turkey for four years.

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The Durham VOICE

Reporter's note: The interview was conducted in and translated from Arabic.

Three days. Adnan Shareef and his family spent three days in the mountains of Syria waiting to cross the border to Turkey. Rain poured down on Adnan, his wife and their six children. The storms continued until they could sneak past the guards at the Turkish border. They finally made it to the Syrian refugee haven that is Turkey.

"As you know, there are soldiers and guards at the border. The guards won't let you cross without a passport, and we don't have any passports. We crossed the border running," said Adnan, 40.

With barrel bombs demolishing buildings and soldiers fighting rebel forces in Adnan's city, Aleppo, obtaining passports would have been difficult.

The family made their way to Turkey in 2013. Adnan said he went to Turkey in 2012 to get things ready for the arrival of his family before they all crossed in 2013.

He brought his wife, Fatima, 30, and six children: Shafeea, 15; Fahima, 14; Ramada, 11; Fayad, 9; Ghanam, 6; and Muhammad, 4. The war in Syria had already been going on for two years when Muhammad was born.

According to the Shareef family, life in Turkey was great for them. The family lived in the city of Adana. They had no difficulty with the Turkish language. Adnan explained that they are Turkmens and had been speaking Turkish in their household for generations.

"Our life in Turkey was really great. The Turkish people are great. The Turkish people and

the Turkish government really help the refugees," Adnan said. "They didn't care that we didn't have papers. They have us identification papers for free. We would get medicine for free. Whenever we wanted, we would go to the hospital for free."

For Adnan and Fatima, the free health care was a blessing. Their son Fayad has an opening in his heart and requires medical attention constantly. It is their son's health condition that prompted the family to apply to come to a Western country with better medical facilities.

Adnan applied to leave Turkey through the United Nations. He was placed in the United States in 2016.

Four years after leaving everything in Syria, the family left everything again in Turkey. At that point, their extended family had joined them in Adana. When the Shareef family left Turkey, they did not know when they would see their family again.

"My heart and soul are in Syria and with my family."

Fatima Shareef

They found themselves in Durham, North Carolina, and have been here for a little over two months. The move to the United States has been more difficult for them than the move to Turkey.

"The difficult thing about here is my family. There are eight of us in my family. And here, if you don't have a car, it's a huge problem. It's the biggest problem," Adnan said.

The United Nations gives the refugees enough money to pay for rent for three months. After that, the refugees are expected to have found a job and settled into their new country. Adnan is struggling to find work. And for the work he does, Adnan



The Shareef family, originally from Syria, has been living in Durham for two months. (Madeleine Bennett)

says that \$7 per hour is not enough to support a family of eight. It's not even enough to pay his rent.

The family came to Durham for their son Fayad to get proper medical attention, but without a car, Fatima said, reaching the hospitals and other appointments is difficult.

"Yesterday we waited 45 minutes for the bus, and it even drove past us," she said.

Adnan said the best memories he has of Syria are of his home, his car and his job.

"Now all of those things are gone," Adnan said.

Adnan worked as a shoe repair man in Aleppo. He had his own store.

"It took my husband 40 years to build a house. Is it going to take another 40? It's not like he can live for 100 years," Fatima said.

However, the family does have hopes of a better future in America. Fatima said she and Adnan go to a local church every week for English lessons. Students from UNC-Chapel Hill also go once a week to help their children with homework and English.

Their children are behind on their schooling. Turkey provides a lot for Turkish refugees, but nothing in regards to education. There is no way for the children of Syrian refu-

gees to enter the public school system in Turkey. The Shareef children went four years without school. This setback hasn't deterred the children or Adnan. Both Shafeea and Fahima, who are in the eighth and seventh grade, respectively, have dreams of becoming doctors. They are both students at Sherwood Githens Middle School.

"I am not an educated man. I do not know how to read or write," Adnan said. "I don't want my kids to grow up like me. I want them to be educated."

Adnan said he has never seen a group of people show refugees such respect as the people of Durham have. He said everywhere they go, people in Durham try to help them.

The family hopes to have attained green cards by the end of their first year here. When talking about becoming a green card holder, Fatima became excited with the idea that she might be able to go back to Turkey to see her family again. They are ready to start their lives here, learn the language and become part of the working class.

But their hearts still linger in Syria.

"My body might be here, but my soul and heart are in Syria and with my family," Fatima said.