

# Let's celebrate achievements of refugees in Canada

BY DONNA WHITE

ONE of Canada's finer moments was when it welcomed more than 25,000 Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016. Leaving their war-torn country, Syrians were greeted with great enthusiasm — some personally by our prime minister — and given winter clothing before they headed out of the airports into our blustery cold winter air. While our weather was harsh, our message was warm and welcoming: come, stay, enjoy what we have: freedom, security and peace.

In celebration of world refugees, it's important to also celebrate the achievements of those who came to Canada. Their stories are many and their accomplishments are commendable, like that of Aya Wadi who arrived on Canada's doorstep one cold November day in 2017.

Aya was 20 when she arrived with her father, Khaled, her mother, Duha, her sister Zenab, and her youngest brother, Aladdin.

"The weather shocked us so much when we stepped outside for the first time that my mother wanted to turn around and go back," Aya laughs. "We didn't know how we could survive in such extreme cold."

Now, Duha is proud to say that



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she loves Canadian winters and appreciates the coolness of our summers. Even when it's 35 Celsius.

After a year in Canada, Aya and her mother began to run a catering business out of their home with the hopes of opening a restaurant in the near future. This July, their dreams came true. Despite the setbacks experienced from the COVID-19 pandemic, they opened Royal Aleppo Food at 17 St. Paul Street, beside Swell Bakery, and are already enjoying busy days preparing Syrian, Middle Eastern, and Halal food, and serving customers with appreciative smiles.

Bringing Syrian food to Thunder Bay is one way of sharing their



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**Duha Wadi, left, and her daughter Aya opened Royal Aleppo Food on St. Paul Street in July.**

culture.

"We think of Syria as our homeland — 'our mom,' 'our love' — but we don't think we will ever go back," Aya says. "Even if we were to get our house back, it wouldn't be the same. We've lost too many family members and friends. And Canada is wonderful. It is a land of kindness. The people are friendly,

just like the people in Syria were before the war. The war changed everything. Everyone."

With the restaurant established and a fantastic menu for all to experience, Aya says it is now time to set her mind on achieving goal number two.

"My brother is in Germany studying computer programming.

We miss him dearly and we would like to bring him home to be with us."

After this is accomplished, goal number three is becoming financially independent.

But perhaps out of all of this, something more substantial has come into existence.

Duha recalls her life in Syria.

"My work was staying at home, being a wife, a mother, a seamstress, and making ceramics," said Duha. "Now that I'm here in Thunder Bay, it's different. I'm in our restaurant, cooking for people, serving them, and seeing their smiles in return. I feel valued now."

As does Aya, for Canada is a land of opportunities and she will thrive. Just wait and see.

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