

## Announcement

# "I want the same things everybody else does. To be someone."

September 22, 2017



Meet Zak. He always dreamed of becoming a fashion designer. And he has his notebooks to prove it. They contain years of detailed drawings that include elaborate haute couture gowns and dresses. Now, resettled by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Denver, this 23-year old from Yemen will have the opportunity to achieve this dream, as well as many others. But that wasn't always the case.



Zak always dreamed of becoming a fashion designer. Photo: Matthew Serafin/IRC

Zak grew up in a conservative family in Yemen. "I was expected to follow certain rules and traditions," he explained. "And that meant hiding my hopes, dreams and individuality to meet everyone else's expectations, including my parents, five brothers and six sisters, and Yemeni society." And although from a very young age, Zak knew he was different, he worked very hard to fit in. "It was hard to pretend that I was just like everyone else," he continued. "I was bullied and abused, and as I got

older, I couldn't take it anymore. It was really a struggle to hide who I was, and watch as people I knew were killed and beaten because they were different."

Zak was smart though. He did well in school. He learned languages, including French and English. "We studied English in school, but I really became fluent through American music. I listened to the lyrics, wrote down the words and learned what they meant," he said. He went on to excel in college, studying business because that's what was expected. Zak lived a very "normal" life on the outside. But on the inside, he was suffering. Then came another obstacle.

With his older brothers already married, Zak was next in line. His parents were pushing him to find a bride. Instead, Zak applied for fashion and design school scholarships, looking in other countries where he was free to live his life on his own terms. In 2015, he was awarded a scholarship to study fashion at a school in Switzerland. Although his family wasn't happy with this choice, Zak decided move ahead, traveling to Egypt to get his visa. Unfortunately, Zak's visa didn't go through. And while he was in Egypt, civil war broke out in Yemen and has been ongoing since.

Zak was stuck in Egypt. Flights into Yemen were canceled, and even if he could return home, it was very dangerous—especially for someone like Zak. Egypt's conservative society also posed a threat, but luckily, he was able to stay at a friend's house. At the age of 21, Zak was far from home, alone, scared and depressed. During his first year in Egypt, his parents were able to get to a nearby Western Union to send him money. But, as the war dragged on, funds were becoming scarce. He knew that something had to change.

Zak began searching online and came upon a global human rights organization in New York that helped people who were in situations like his own. He began emailing with a young man who worked for the organization named Hossein, a refugee from Iran who left

his own country for similar reasons as Zak. Hossein explained the process for Zak to apply to the United Nations (U.N.) in Geneva for fast-track refugee status, given the dangers he faced if he stayed in Egypt or were to return home to Yemen. In the spring of 2016 Hossein helped Zak apply, and within weeks, Zak had an appointment with the U.N. in Egypt.

In late 2016, just a few months after he had his appointment with the U.N., Zak was informed that he would be traveling to the U.S. in December. At his orientation and interview with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Zak found out that he would be leaving for Baltimore in early January 2017. One day before he was supposed to leave, Zak received word that his travel would be delayed due to a missing document. After collecting the final document, he went back to the IOM and was told he would not be leaving until January 30. With the first travel ban looming, Zak was worried. But at the last minute, with only hours to gather his few belongings, he was informed by the IOM that he would be leaving on January 24, one day before the travel ban went into effect. It wasn't until he reached New York that he found out he was going to Denver.

The IRC in Denver was a bit surprised too. Zak wasn't expected until January 30, but arrangements were quickly adjusted. On January 24, 2017, seventeen months after he left Yemen for Egypt, approximately four months after he contacted the U.N., and one day before the first travel ban went into effect, Zak temporarily settled into a 3-bedroom apartment in Arvada, Colorado. “It was all we had available with last minute notice,” said Jess Davie, MSW, IRC in Denver Family Stabilization Specialist. “The original plan was for Zak to share an apartment with several other roommates but unfortunately, due to the travel ban, the others were barred from entering the U.S.”

Fortunately for Zak, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky had just announced that the company would provide free temporary housing for refugees and immigrants impacted by the travel ban. Jess was connected with Airbnb host (and now IRC Denver friend and

volunteer) Susan, who immediately invited Zak to temporarily stay in her Airbnb property in Denver until something more permanent could be found. "I am so lucky," said Zak with a big smile. "Susan and her husband are amazing. They opened their hearts and their home, introducing me to so many people." Susan introduced Zak to her friends and neighbors who in turn, helped him find a part-time job. Zak also found more permanent housing, renting a room in a beautiful downtown Denver brownstone from two of Susan's friends who welcomed him into their family.

Today, approximately seven months after he arrived in Denver, Zak has quickly settled into his new life. "I smile a lot," Zak said. "Here in the U.S., I'm free to be who I am. I am grateful to this country and to the IRC. I love Denver and continue to be amazed by the generosity and kindness of the people here." Zak is working, making new friends and will be attending college in the fall. While he still dreams of future in fashion design, he's going to start out studying business—not because it's expected of him, but because he knows that even in the fashion world, a business degree can help him get ahead.

"Today, living in the U.S., I can have hopes and dreams and know that with hard work, they can come true," he said. "And I want the same things everybody else does. To be someone."



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