

Announcement

From Baghdad to Denver

July 13, 2017



Maytham Alshadood speaking at World Refugee Day in Colorado at the State Capitol Photo: Brandon Marshall/Westword

The last thing that comes to mind when you meet Maytham Alshadood, is the word refugee. You may think young professional, motivated, driven, witty and well-spoken. Or friendly, and like many Coloradans, into the outdoors. Maytham is all of these things and more. He's a transplant nurse, an interpreter for the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a community organizer, and a voice and advocate for refugees and immigrants

through a local initiative he helped create called DRIVE Project Colorado. Maytham also had to flee his country due to conflict.

Born in Baghdad, Iraq, Maytham is the youngest of four children. During the first Gulf War his father, a military professional, made a choice to protect his family from harm by moving them south. To this day, Maytham credits his dad for keeping the family together

and prepared for the future. “From childhood, I watched my father make the best choices in bad situations. He encouraged me to always have a back-up plan. While then I may have not understood, I know now that his choices allowed me to be where and who I am today,” Maytham said.

After moving back to Baghdad, sanctions placed on Iraq during the 1990s made life difficult. “My mother shielded us from many of the hardships, using her ingenuity and ability to adapt to keep life as normal as possible,” said Maytham. “She taught herself to make just about everything from scratch. From pickling to baking, she made sure we had what we needed as a family,” he continued. “And while education was a priority, my father also wanted me to learn a trade, to help bring in money and so that I could make a living if things got worse. That’s why, throughout middle school, I worked in a mechanic’s shop at night.”

Maytham’s parents also made sure he kept up with his studies. He loved languages and began learning English by helping his older brother look up words in his English medical school books. He continued to learn more English during high school and in college in Mosul, where he was studying to be a veterinarian. Then in 2005, his education was cut short due to conflict. It was too dangerous to attend school and Maytham made the choice to return home to Baghdad. “Based on the situation, and after talking to my parents, I decided to leave. Many of those who stayed, never returned home,” he said.

Once back in Baghdad, and unable to transfer to a new college, Maytham found work with a U.S. company, laying internet cable and perfecting his English. After a few months, he wanted to do more for his country. At that time, the U.S. military was desperately seeking interpreters to help build a new Iraqi army. He took multiple tests and went through many background checks prior to securing a position.

Over the next three years, Maytham became a trusted colleague of many high-ranking

officials in the U.S. military and the newly formed Iraqi army, most of whom relied on his skills to understand and articulate what was being said. He also worked in the field as a liaison, helping build trust between members of the military and local leaders. Every day, he put himself in danger. He was targeted by opposition forces and was fired on by snipers on numerous occasions. He rarely saw his family, and when he did, he put them in danger too. As Maytham thought about the future, he realized he had nowhere to go. He couldn't go home or resume the life he had before. It was then that Maytham made another choice. He applied for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) to permanently move to the U.S.

To get the SIV, Maytham had to prove his life was in danger due to his job. He needed letters of recommendation from many of the top U.S. officials he worked with, and went through interviews, background checks and investigations from just about every U.S. agency — with his name matched against every available list. He completed hundreds of pages of paperwork, stamped by U.S. and Iraqi agencies. And just when he thought it was done, more paperwork was requested. While waiting to hear, Maytham continued working. Then, in September 2008, he received word that his visa had been accepted and gave the U.S. military his two week notice.

“While I was excited to come to the U.S., it wasn't an easy decision to leave everything and everyone I knew,” Maytham said. “I didn't have family or friends here to turn to and I had to start over. And while I had to overcome many of the hurdles that all refugees face, I was fortunate that I had experience working with Americans, understood the culture and spoke the language.” Even with his English skills, finding a job was difficult.

Maytham continued to be resourceful and began volunteering as an assistant to an employment specialist – helping other refugees and immigrants find jobs. “I was patient and, as my parents taught me, doing whatever I could to make choices that would lead me in the right direction,” he explained. Through his volunteer work, Maytham met many

people and eventually found a job. He worked hard and wanted to continue his education. After caring for a friend who underwent a liver transplant, Maytham decided to go to nursing school, focusing on transplant medicine. He was accepted into the honors program, formulating his own original research on refugee health and utilization of healthcare services by refugees.

Today, Maytham is a full-time transplant medicine registered nurse, works part time for the IRC as an Arabic translator and is a strong advocate for Colorado's refugees and immigrants. He also helped start a community initiative, The Denver Refugee and Immigrant Vitalization and Empowerment **(DRIVE) Project**, dedicated to bridging the gap between established communities and newcomers, by building a well-connected refugee and immigrant population. "I am someone who had to leave everything behind and start over, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to come to the U.S.," Maytham said. "Because of this, my goal is to give back to others by helping them navigate and succeed in their new country too."



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