

'What makes America great.' Son of Holocaust survivors teaches English to Syrian refugee in Providence

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Their friendship has become about much more than their shared connection to tragedy.

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PROVIDENCE — Three years after Mohamed Alshawaf came to the United States as a refugee from Syria, he can now have a basic conversation in English.

Yet, as with any learner of a second language, some words still escape him.

"Do you know this word, survivor?" Leonard Newman, Alshawaf's English-language tutor at the Refugee Dream Center in Providence, said slowly, to make sure Alshawaf understood the question from a Journal reporter. "You survived the terrible things in Syria. My parents survived Hitler.

"Is this important ... that you are a survivor and my parents are also survivors?"

Alshawaf did not answer. Newman — the son of refugees from the Holocaust — said that even if outsiders see symbolism in their relationship, for them it's just two friends, helping each other out.

"I think that is important in principle but not in terms of our relationship," he said. "Teaching and learning take place first and foremost on the relationship between the teacher and the learner."

Newman has been working for a number of years teaching English refugees, such as Alshawaf, who is 70 and lives in Johnston. For him, the key to success as teacher and student is not so much the curriculum as it is the way they interact with each other.

“Teaching and learning take place first and foremost on the relationship between the teacher and the learner,” Newman said, as he motioned toward a binder filled with worksheets and study guides for the citizenship test that Alshawaf plans to take. “Our relationship grows more through these quotes and reading of fiction than it does going over grammar and the citizenship test.”

“When we do this work, it’s like going through the swamp,” Newman said. “It’s hard work, but the poetry and the fiction give him so much joy.”

That became evident when Alshawaf began to speak with excitement about his favorite English-language writer.

“There is a boy who goes to the forest and he speaks to the tree,” said Alshawaf, talking about the poem “The Giving Tree,” by Shel Silverstein. “I love it because the tree loves the boy.

“The boy ask it for money, the tree said I don’t have money but I give you apple. I give you wood. You sell it and get money.”

In Syria — where he lived until war forced him out in 2013 — Alshawaf grew up with clothing, food and the poetry of Khalil Gibran — a Lebanese poet best known for his 1923 book “The Prophet” — and Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri, an 11th-century poet and philosopher from what is today Syria.

“He was blind,” Alshawaf said, referring to al-Ma‘arri. “He lived 83 years but he [was] blind ... He has very good poetry.”

Newman said his game plan is informed by multiple studies that demonstrate second-language acquisition is improved by reinforcement and appreciation a person’s native language.

“We always try to honor the native language,” Newman said, adding that literacy in a native tongue and leveraging a persons fluency helps second language acquisition more often than not. “It allows us to have a relationship [based on

respect] and learning moves more expeditiously and more quickly.”

Alshawaf ran a clothing store for years in his native Idlib, Syria, until forces loyal to President Bashar Assad bombed it in 2013.

From there, his family went to Turkey, Lebanon, and eventually Cairo, where he lived in a two-bedroom apartment with six family members. To make a living, he would purchase socks and resell them on the street. He came to the United States in 2015.

Newman said that his parents’ experiences help him to relate to what Alshawaf has been through.

“My father was in eight or nine different concentration camps [during World War II],” he said. “When he came to the U.S. he was quiet and he stayed quiet.”

Newman’s father, David, was 16 in Nazi-occupied Poland when he and his family were taken to the camps in 1940. He was forced to work laying down tracks in preparation for Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union.

“They worked you until you dropped dead from exhaustion,” the elder Newman told a Journal reporter in 1987. “The ones who tried to run away were brought back and hung. ... The entire camp was forced to watch. Of the 500 I went with, about 30 survived.”

David Newman died in 2008, but not without leaving his own legacy in Rhode Island.

“In [1983], he went to the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Their Descendants that Elie Weisel had,” Len Newman continued. “After he came back he said it was the most impactful experience of his life. ... He would say, ‘Before I was a greenhorn. I came back to this country a holocaust survivor.’”

From that point forward, according to Newman, his father became vocal in his recollections and even spearheaded the effort to build the Rhode Island Holocaust Memorial, whose groundbreaking was in 2015.

For Len Newman, teaching is as much about the joy he gets from the experience as it is his family’s history.

“For me to be part of this community is enriching,” he said. “For me to be able to share my experience as a teacher. ... It gives me great pleasure as well.”

He also said his connection to Jewishness propels him forward in the work.

“Our work has to be to care for and take responsibility for one another when we are in a condition of distress,” he said. “We have a responsibility to refugees in America. It is what makes America great.”

Alshawaf said his experience in the United States supports that, even if recent U.S. policy has lessened the nation’s role in refugee crises worldwide.

“I like that [in] the law of America ... nobody up is above the law,” he said. “The leaders obey the law. The government must obey the law.

“It’s beautiful and the people of America are very very good. They help the refugee.”

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