



### *Building Community for Climate Refugees*

Mohamad Al Jounde

Syria/Sweden

In December of 2017, 16-year-old Mohamad Al Jounde found himself standing at a microphone at the International Children's Peace Prize award ceremony in the Hall of Knights in the Hague, with a roomful of people applauding him. Looking into the audience, he could see his mother clapping along with everyone else, wiping tears from her face as he accepted the award. Sitting right in front of her was Malala Yousafzai, the young Nobel Peace Prize winner, who had just introduced him. It was an emotional high point for Mohamad, part of his long journey away from his home in Syria to his new life in Sweden.

The road that brought Mohamad to this moment had actually begun in Lebanon, where he and his family had fled for safety in 2013. Mohamed was 12 at the time, and the adjustment was difficult for him. When he, his mother and uncle had arrived in Lebanon, they had a house and a roof over their heads, but it didn't feel like home to him. His father had had to stay back in Syria, so Mohamad's family was torn apart. In Syria, Mohamad's world had been built around his school, his family, and his friends. In Aley, the city where his family now settled, he didn't know anyone his age.

There was no school for Mohamad in Aley because government regulations did not permit Syrian children to attend Lebanese schools. So, without school or friends, Mohamad's social life disappeared. As any young person would, Mohamad struggled and felt very alone.

Climate change had forced thousands of Syrians to leave their homes and become refugees in Lebanon. Since farmers in Syria use only the rain—not irrigation—to water their crops, they are especially vulnerable to climate change. And since droughts are increasing—from once every 55 years, to once every seven years—it's hard for them to survive. Most of the farmers and unskilled laborers who fled Syria to go to Lebanon ended up in the Beqaa Valley. And even if the conflict in Syria ends, many can't go back there, since climate change has ravaged their lands.

While Mohamad was home, without school, he discovered photography. His father had introduced him to a well-known photographer, Ramzi Haidar, who mentored Mohamad like his own son. It was the first time Mohamad had ever touched a camera. He loved photography because it helped him to see and appreciate the details of his new environment, as well as the wide range of human emotions in a new light. Over the years, Mohamad's photography has evolved: he's now produced three documentaries as well.

One day, he went with his mother and uncle to volunteer at a nearby refugee camp. They brought food, clothing and materials to build tents. Mohamad was too young to help the volunteers distribute everything, so he played with the children who were living in the camp. After visiting several times, Mohamad made new friends with children there. He soon realized that his volunteer work was a two-way street. While he was helping them, doing something positive also made him feel happy again: he liked being able to do something useful and productive. He encouraged the children to take photos, and showed them how to do it so they could share their stories. "These kids are too shy to talk, but they can take photos," Mohamad says. "They can create images of home, pictures of happiness."

Mohamad started thinking about how he could do something more meaningful, something that would help the children in the camp in a more significant way. So, he decided to start his own school. At first, the "school" was very basic. There were not many resources to work with. The school consisted of tents that volunteers put up with their own hands. To

begin, his family pooled their knowledge to teach classes at the school. His mother taught math; his uncle taught Arabic. And even though he was only 12, Mohamad taught the English classes.

On the very first day, Mohamad was thrilled to see that 100 children showed up! To make room for everyone they had to hold different classes throughout the day. They taught classes from 8:00 in the morning until 8:00 at night, so everyone who wanted to could have a chance to learn.

With the school project, Mohamad finally felt like he had a new home. And he had discovered his own form of activism as well.

From a young age, activism and revolution been part of his family's life. His mother was an active political organizer, and both of his parents had protested in the Syrian revolution. Their living room was a hub of activity: there were always activists coming and going from their home. Mohamad didn't fully understand what was happening at the time, but he understood that this was important work. "From watching my parents, I started envisioning what it means to be an activist; how you socialize with other people, how you build social networks," he says.

He also came to understand that it was dangerous work: his mother was arrested twice for her organizing activities. After her second arrest, she was told she had a week to leave the country, or she would be arrested and killed. That's when Mohamad fled Syria with his family.

But for Mohamad, revolution is not just about protesting what is wrong. "Revolution is also about building a community," he says. And it is about fighting for positive ideas and values.

So, to expand the school they had started, Mohamad reached out to family friends from Syria who now lived in Germany and asked them for help. Soon schools all around Germany were sending school supplies and monetary donations. He named this initiative Kids for Kids. After a while, this new partnership started to get media attention, and with the additional exposure came more resources.

Unfortunately, the school didn't last long. After only six months the Lebanese government destroyed the school and the four surrounding refugee camps. This was a devastating loss for Mohamad: he felt like he had lost the underpinning of his new life. To him it felt like a second displacement.

However, undeterred by this blow, Mohamad and his family found a creative way to reopen the school. They rented a big house and turned it into a school. The Lebanese owner was very sympathetic, and offered them legal protection so they were safe to reopen.

Today Mohamad's activism has expanded to an international stage. In 2017, he and his mother and uncle moved to Sweden, where he started an NGO (non-governmental organization) called Gharsah Sweden, to support the refugee school in Lebanon. And he is continuing to work tirelessly to preserve the educational values most important to him.

After winning the International Children's Peace Prize, he now has more money and resources to help the school. But Mohamad stresses the fact that money isn't all that is needed. "Activism can't be focused only on raising money," he says. "It has to be a fight to end systemic issues. Even global issues are best addressed when smaller communities are empowered. With enough support and resources, local people and organizations can create the solutions that will work in their own communities and situations."

By building the school in a refugee camp, Mohamad and his family challenged the system that creates refugees. "No one can expect refugees to start building schools out of nowhere and then just start teaching," he says.

When Mohamad meets other young people on the frontlines of activism, he feels encouraged and energized by their work. He also likes knowing he's not alone. "I realized you can be an activist, and also be normal," he says. He considers himself lucky because he has mentors like his mother and father who taught him about the values needed to create this global revolution. "Most young activists don't have someone telling them that," he says.

Despite everything, Mohamad sees himself as an optimist, though not in the traditional sense. His version of optimism is not based on the belief that the future is bright and beautiful. Instead, he believes in maximizing happiness each day. And he strongly believes that providing refugee children with the chance to continue learning, even in very difficult circumstances, is not just a way of keeping them on track educationally: perhaps even more important, it is a way of helping them to be happy and hopeful about their future.

*Refugees are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, with the same hopes and ambitions as us—except that a twist of fate has bound their lives to a global refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale.*

**Khaled Hosseini**

**Call to Action:** Support the school Mohamed created for Syrian children in Lebanon: donate through Gharsah Sweden. <https://gharsahsweden.org/the-school/>

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