

## A LONG WALK TO THE ALTAR

Pastor joins Muslim pair at synagogue

**BY LARAIN WESCHLER**

REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

SOUTHBURY — Surrounded by 50 new friends, Reem Alhaji and Khaled Mohammad walked arm and arm up the aisle in the backyard of B'nai Israel on Saturday, Alhaji resplendent in a white gown with pink and blue flowers embroidered on top and Mohammad looking sharp in a new suit.

Five months ago, the Syrian couple was living as refugees in Turkey with little work and an uncertain future. Alhaji sold her wedding ring to make ends meet.

Saturday, the Muslim couple renewed their vows before a Christian pastor at a Jewish synagogue.



Syrian refugees Khaled Mohammad with his wife Reem Alhaji, were married during a ceremony Saturday at B'nai Israel in Southbury. The couple, who were married in Turkey in 2004, didn't have the paperwork to prove their alliance when they came to the U.S.

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Friends from Boston and New York attended the intimate wedding, along with members of the team assembled to shepherd them through the process of immigration to the U.S. and the challenges of starting a new life in a foreign country far from everything they've known.

The couple beamed at one another as they struggled through vows in English, a language they've been working hard to master with lessons five days a week.

"We don't expect this would happen for us," the couple said through interpreter Mohanad Abdulwahid after dancing to "We Found Love Right Where We Are," by Ed Sheeran.

Mohammad was in Turkey and Alhaji was still in Syria when they signed the contract formalizing their marriage on April 6, 2004. A month later, Alhaji joined Mohammad in Turkey where they celebrated with a small party with Khaled's family. As refugees in Turkey, they didn't have the means for a big traditional celebration and didn't have the paperwork to prove their alliance when they came to the U.S.

Saturday's ceremony performed by pastor Tim Olsen of the Covenant Church of Thomaston legalizes their marriage here.

Rabbi Eric Polokoff of B'nai Israel said he was delighted to host the refugees for the civil ceremony in the social hall.

"It seems to me that having a Muslim couple being married by a Christian minister in a synagogue in this instance is a trifecta of understanding and pluralism," Polokoff said.

He said members of his congregation have gotten to know the family and are working with New Start Ministry to support them.

"We are to remember the stranger and open our hearts to the refugee. This is in keeping of a strong religious understanding that we possess," Polokoff said.

Olsen said he was honored to help his neighbors from across the sea.

"God's hand has truly been in this all the way, guiding them," Olsen said.

Speaking through translator Zainab Salem, the Syrian couple said they've learned a lot in the four months since they fled their war-torn country for Waterbury, from how to use the bus system to where to buy groceries. They've seen doctors, attended the Waterbury Symphony and gone to parties at the sponsoring churches.

At a synagogue festival, they introduced the couple's 2-year-old daughter, Elin, to cotton candy for the first time.

"At first she didn't know what to make of it, but then she wanted some more," Polokoff said.

Life has settled into a routine. For Alhaji it consists of feeding her daughter, cleaning the house, reading and English lessons.

Alhaji will soon be joining a mother's group in Naugatuck where she can hang out with other moms and Elin can play with other children her age. Before the problems in Syria, she felt comfortable coming home at 3 a.m., but despite Alhaji's growing familiarity with the community, she said she's still scared to go to the store by herself.

Three weeks ago, Mohammad landed a part-time job with Marie's Moving in Southbury. Alhaji will seek a job once Elin starts preschool.

The couple still needs to get up to speed on English, and obtain a license to drive a car. Mohammad said it's harder to speak than to understand English.

Cindy Latham, who oversees English instruction for the family, said it's been a remarkable experience getting to know them and helping them learn new phrases every week. She said she was teary-eyed at the wedding.

"It was like watching my own children grow up before our eyes," she said. "They trust us to kind of take over their world and that's a pretty amazing thing to me."



Syrian refugees Khaled Mohammad and his wife, Reem Alhaji, were married during a ceremony officiated by Pastor Tim Olsen of the Covenant Church of Thomaston at B'nai Israel in Southbury on Saturday.  
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