

Interview with Ali Chaied

by Lisa Friedman

The following interview took place at the main office of Habitat for Humanity Metro Denver with Ali Chaied. He and his family will be the recipients of Habitat Interfaith Alliance's spring/summer 2017 home build. It will hopefully provide a more personal look into his experiences before and after immigrating from Iraq to the United States in 2011.

Ali now lives in Denver with his family: his wife, Huda, and 3 children, Zainab, (11), Hussein (6) and Zayne (9 months). He has a college degree in journalism from a university in Iraq and is bilingual in Arabic and English. When the US entered Iraq in 2003, he worked for 5 years with the US Department of Defense for a construction company that handled military contracts, while living in Baghdad. From 2008-11 he was hired as a translator for the US military with Global Language Solutions. When the US military left Iraq in 2011, he and his family applied for a special immigration Visa, designed to help Iraqi interpreters and their families to immigrate to the US. It took almost 2 years to receive the Visa after completing the application and his family immigrated in 2012. Within 2 weeks of arriving in the US, they received their green cards due to the expedited special Visa program.

1. Why did you decide to leave Iraq and immigrate to the United States?

I decided to leave for safety reasons and a better future for my family. My life was in danger because of my work with the US military forces; I was not trusted by the Iraqis. Even my own extended family was not supportive of my work. During my one week off each month while returning to my family, I faced significant dangers from my own people. My family lived many miles away from the military compound and I had to take local cabs to go back and forth from work to home. In 2005, twenty one Iraqi interpreters were murdered, having been given up by their drivers to the Iraqi extremists.

2. How did you end up in Colorado?

I had a very close friend with whom I worked. He was a US sergeant from Colorado and encouraged me to come to Colorado once I received the special immigration visa. He felt Colorado could provide opportunities for economic security, affordable housing and strong education for my children. He was also willing to be my sponsor, serving as a reference and vouching for my character and background.

3. As an immigrant to the US, what have been the greatest challenges you and your family have faced?

The cultural challenges have been the biggest challenge for us, leaving everything we knew behind and trying to adjust to a very different lifestyle in the US. Leaving our families behind, learning a new language for my wife, trying to be a good role model for our three young children and figuring out how to be successful here have been huge priorities for us. At first I found work as a stocker at Walmart during the days and in hospital security during the evenings. Eventually I found employment as a security guard with the Denver Post, while also working as a translator for the Denver Public Schools. My wife is hoping to continue her education here in Elementary Education in order to become a kindergarten teacher. I am studying to take the GRE exam and will apply for a Masters degree in International Relations this fall.

4. What has surprised you the most about living in the US?

I am most surprised that people here are so human, welcoming and helpful. The message we got in Iraq was very negative about Americans but we have not found this to be true at all. We are so grateful to everyone who has welcomed us and shown such kindness.

5. How did you get connected to Habitat for Humanity Metro Denver?

A friend we met here in Denver told us about a humane organization that might be able to help us find a better place to live. This organization turned out to be Habitat for Humanity Metro Denver. When we first moved to Denver we were living in a small condominium in a very dangerous location. This was not safe for us because of the drugs and drug dealers in the neighborhood. We have had two other temporary homes before being accepted as homeowners by Habitat for Humanity Metro Denver. After our third application process, we were finally accepted and are so happy to begin our partnership with Habitat Interfaith Alliance as together we build our new home at Sheridan Square this spring.