

## *Be Unafraid Photo Tour: Maggie & Bnyad's Story*



*Former Nashville resident Maggie Anderson and Bnyad Sharef, an Iraqi refugee, first met at the “Be Unafraid” photo shoot in May of 2018 and have since formed a friendship despite their different backgrounds.*

Before Michigan-native Maggie Anderson, 19, befriended Bnyad Sharef, a 21-year-old Iraqi refugee who was nearly sent back amidst the administration’s first travel ban, she believed that all refugees living in the U.S. were dangerous. In fact, when she arrived at the “Be Unafraid” photo shoot, as one of its non-refugee participants, she prepared to voice those concerns.

“I studied for it,” Maggie admits. “I’ve always loved politics, so I spent my time memorizing statistics, and just trying to find facts to win and prove why it would be bad to let refugees in [to the country].”

Born on the other side of the world, Bnyad, a community organizer, came to “Be Unafraid” as a

seasoned teller of his story. He had shared with many audiences that his father was an Iraqi translator working for the U.S. government and that the family weathered close brushes with violence, came under threat from ISIS, and eventually received a Special Immigrant Visa to the U.S. They were on a layover in Cairo waiting for their flight to Nashville in January 2017 when the president enacted the travel ban, and they were unable to proceed. With the help of the Tennessee Immigrant Refugee Rights Coalition, U.S. Representative Jim Cooper (D-TN 5<sup>th</sup> District), and a boost from the media, Bnyad and his family were eventually able to legally enter the country.

At the Nashville photo shoot, photographer Jeremy Cowart urged Maggie and Bnyad to collaborate on how they would pose together for photographs. When they struck upon the idea of each holding the other's string of holy beads, they began to chat about religion. Bnyad wanted to continue the conversation, so he asked Maggie to meet for coffee a few days later.

Over a series of conversations, Maggie felt herself questioning some of her previously held beliefs. "I guess I pictured all Muslims as extremists," she explains. "Before, I saw these people as statistics, not human beings, and I almost feel like when you are having conversations with people face to face, you're not anonymous anymore. It makes everything real and brings humanness and emotion into it."

Soon after, Maggie underwent a profound change of heart. She decided to leave Nashville mid-summer to move back home to Michigan to enroll in Northwestern Community College at Grand Valley and re-ignite her education. She had been praying for vocational direction and now she had found it: she wanted to study law so she could help migrants and refugees. "I had no meaning or direction in my life [before the experience in Nashville]," says Maggie. "Honestly, I feel it was a gift from God to help me with what to do with my life and how to help people."

Bnyad finds Maggie's conversion inspirational.

When citizens and refugees meet in person, reflects Bnyad, "there is human dignity attached to it and you treat everybody with respect because nobody really wants to have an adverse or uncomfortable reaction. It's a combination of those things, but mainly just the human interaction of speaking with someone else [that makes a difference]."

