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SEP • 29 • 17

## A Syrian Wedding

Ali and Nour met in Calgary after fleeing the war in their homeland. Their marriage gives family and friends a chance to contemplate all that has been lost as well as what has been gained.

Photo Essay by Leah Hennel

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DRUM MACHINES + AN ARTIST  
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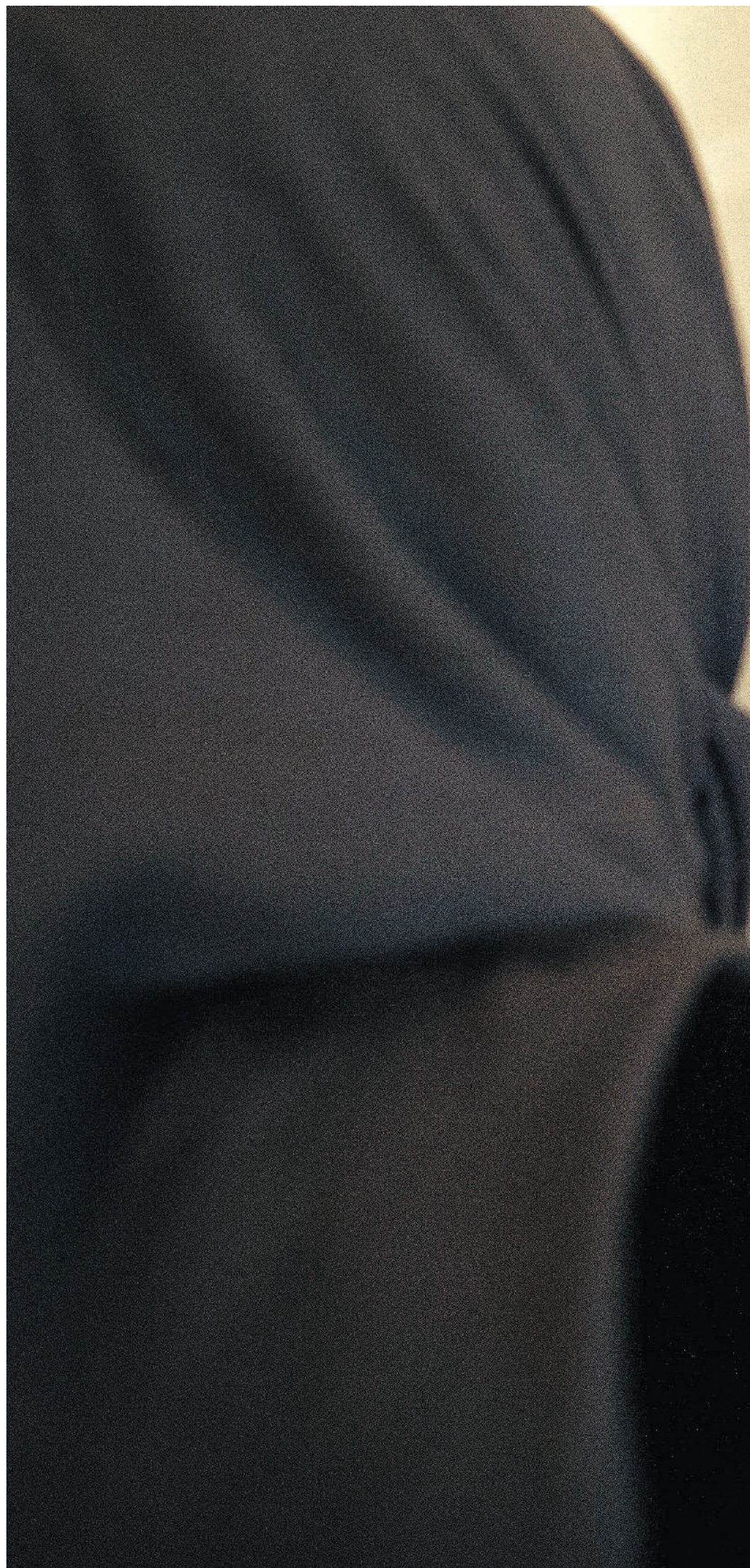
# Love in the Time of Displacement

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*When two refugees meet, fall in love and marry in Calgary, the party serves as a reminder of their recent past. More importantly, it's a chance for the couple to contemplate their new future.*

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*Photo Essay by Leah Hennel*





## Words by Kerianne Sproule

On their wedding night, with the celebrations over and the guests all gone home, Nour Yassin and Ali Bilal were settling into their new home—a three-bedroom main-floor suite in a home shared with Ali's older brother, his sister-in-law and their three children. But Nour had one last thing she needed to do: she placed a Skype call to her mother and sister, who had retired to their home in southwest Calgary after the wedding.

Upon answering, her mother and sister immediately burst into tears. It was not only the first night of her marriage but also the first night Nour, 20, would spend outside their home. It had been an emotional day for the eight Yassins who had fled Syria and immigrated to Canada. (One of Nour's brothers is living in Europe.) This marriage would launch another phase of adjustment for them all.

Nour and Ali lived in the same area of southern Damascus and both spent time in Lebanon after fleeing Syria. But they did not meet until they arrived, separately, in Canada in February 2016. They connected on Facebook, spurred on by mutual friends. Their first face-to-face meeting came while volunteering at a donation warehouse run by the Syrian Refugee Support group.

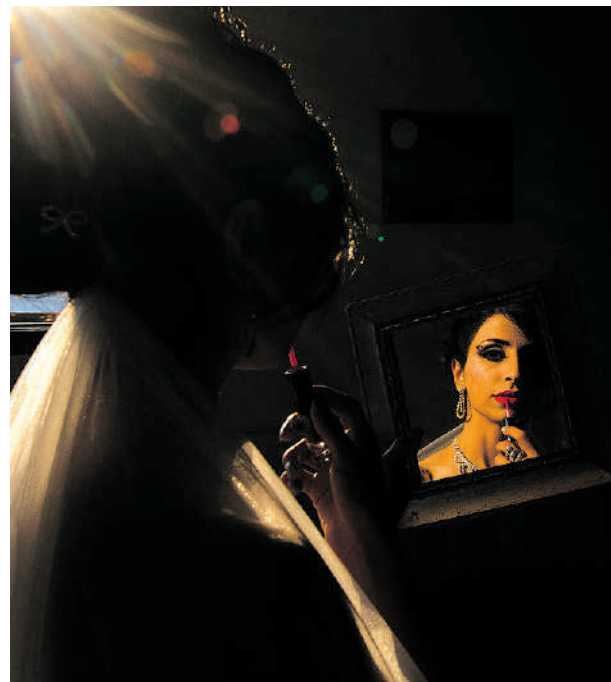
Their relationship grew quickly after that. "He's a kind person. Most guys when they meet a girl

they think, 'OK she's my girlfriend now. I don't know if I'll marry her or no,'" Nour says. Ali, however, had no doubts. "He was like, 'I love you and I'll marry you. I will live all my life with you,'" Nour recalls.

The big day was a mash-up of two cultures, with Syrian and Canadian friends present. The Canadians helped decorate a blue Mustang with cans and balloons, which later led a procession down Elbow Drive to the bridal celebration at the Haysboro Community Centre. This loud, midday convoy is typical of Syrian weddings, Nour says.

A few days earlier, in keeping with Muslim custom, Nour and Ali had been legally wed in a small ceremony. The bridal ceremony at the community centre was the culmination of the public part of the wedding. It was held on Aug. 12, one day after a similar party attended by Ali and his male friends and relatives. At Nour's celebration—a ladies-only dance party—guests were dressed to the nines in party dresses and heels; many removed their hijabs at the door before joining their friends on the dance floor.

Later in the evening, the music quieted, some guests rushed to put their hijabs back on; the groom had arrived to share a dance with his new bride. As the couple swayed to the music, friends and family watched, aware that Nour and Ali had overcome more obstacles than the typical young couple. **S**





**Previous spread:** With one final adjustment of her wedding cloak, Nour gets set to leave her parents' home in southwest Calgary.

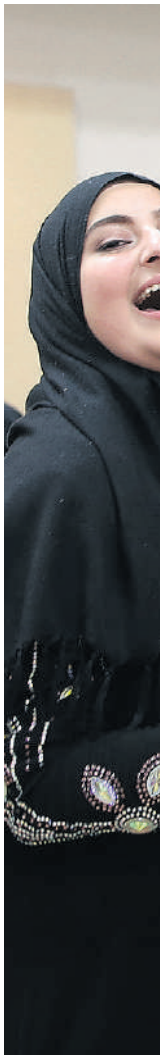
**Far left and left:** Syrian brides like to wear dramatic makeup and long false eyelashes. For her "something blue," Nour chose blue contact lenses.

**Below centre:** Nour's father Adnan walks her out of the family home to give her away to her new in-laws.

Nour's youngest sisters help decorate the wedding car.

**Below:** Nour gets into the Ford Mustang that will lead the convoy to the community hall for the ladies-only party.







**Left:** Close friends and family dance at the wedding and even toss the bouquet around a few times.

**Bottom centre:** Over the course of the ring ceremony, Ali moves the wedding ring from Nour's left hand to the ring finger of her right.

**Below:** Ali and Nour share their first dance. She is lifting her veil so that it will cover them both.



## RACE TO THE NHL PLAYOFFS

Flames could clinch berth this week **B1**



## PRAISE FOR FIRE 'HEROES'

Men saved lives in  
Macleod blaze **A3**

## NEWS

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# Police regaining public confidence

Local force still has work to do, as  
poll finds 45 per cent approval rate

SHAWN LOGAN

Public approval for Calgary's beleaguered police force is beginning to rebound following a devastating poll last fall that showed support had fallen to shockingly low levels.

But while the latest numbers from Mainstreet Research show the service's approval has risen to 45 per cent, a six-point increase over six months, it also found the number of people who said they strongly disapprove of local police

has effectively doubled.

The Postmedia-commissioned survey of 831 Calgarians on March 10 came in the wake of the public resignation of Const. Jen Ward before the Calgary police commission on Jan. 31, who told the board overseeing the Calgary Police Service she had been a frequent victim of bullying, sexual harassment and intimidation over the course of her 14 years of service.

Mainstreet president Quito

Maggi said Calgary police have been at the centre of a series of scandals over the past couple of years, which has tarnished the image of the department in the eyes of many it seeks to protect.

"They've had some bad luck in terms of some high-profile issues that have occurred," he said.

"When these things take hold in the public eye, it takes time to reverse course."

SEE POLL ON **A3**

# ROCKY MOUNTAIN TREAT



LEAH HENNEL

Syrian mom Lina Hejazi, 32, looks at the sights of Banff during a bus tour with Brewster Travel Canada, part of a program aimed at offering 2,000 refugees an opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the Rocky Mountains in Calgary's backyard. **A2**

## City arts scene 'hurting' as downturn curbs donations

LAUREN KRUGEL

Calgary's performing arts scene has become a casualty of corporate cost-cutting as the city's economic doldrums drag into a third year, prompting organizations to band together to seek more municipal support.

The energy sector has long been

a stalwart patron of the arts in the white-collar heart of the oilpatch. But weak energy markets have forced firms to tighten their spending, leaving less for sponsorships.

The issue came into stark relief earlier this month when Alberta Theatre Projects, a 45-year-old institution, put out an urgent plea for donations. It said it wasn't sure it

could survive past the upcoming season without a significant cash infusion by May 1.

"There's a level of uncertainty in the corporate environment and we get it. We understand," said Vicki Stroich, ATP executive director.

The organization's corporate sponsorship dollars have dropped 70 per cent since the price of oil spiked above US\$100 a barrel three years ago — more than double what it is now — and then plummeted.

The company, with a focus on new Canadian plays, was facing a \$400,000 shortfall.

SEE ART ON **A5**

## YOU

### HEALTH

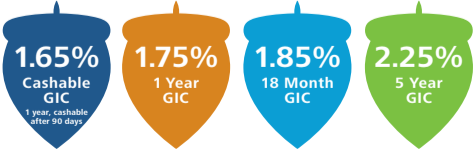
When morning  
sickness lasts  
all day **C1**

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Syrian refugees Khaled Hussain, 6, left, and Abdo Alotaiki, 13, react to seeing the mountains and Lake Minnewanka in Banff National Park during a tour of the Rockies offered by Brewster Travel Canada. LEAH HENNEL

# REFUGEES GET FIRST-CLASS TOUR TO SEE ROCKIES FOR THE FIRST TIME



VALERIE FORTNEY

They come from places where abject poverty and political unrest are facts of daily life. Some have even been eyewitnesses to wartime atrocities.

On Friday, though, such hardships are set aside for a few hours, as a group of newcomers to Canada join an experience that is exciting and, very often, awe-inspiring. The mix of refugees and immigrants are on a first-class tour of Banff and the Rockies, a sampling of the natural gems that are part of Calgary's natural playground.

"I've only seen mountains in photographs," says Isabella Justice'D, who arrived from Nigeria three years ago this July. "We have wanted to come to Banff ever since we moved here, but we just didn't have enough money."

It's hard for the average Calgarian to imagine this place being out of reach for anyone, Banff being less than a 90-minute drive from the city's western outskirts. The majority of the people filling two Brewster buses on this first week-end of spring, though, don't own vehicles. The cost of a day in the mountains is simply out of reach.

It's for this very reason that last year, Brewster Travel Canada launched a limited-time program to help new Canadians see Banff National Park for the first time. The company is well known in the area: In the 1890s, the Brewster family began ferrying visitors to and through the mountain park, everyone from King George and his wife — best known as the Queen Mother — in the 1930s, to generations of fly fishers and backpackers. Their program partners are PepsiCo and Gordon Food Services, which on this day provides a buffet lunch at the Elk + Avenue Hotel in downtown Banff, as well as the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, which has brought more than 65,000 refugees to the city since forming 35 years ago.

On the bus ride to the mountains, the drivers also act as tour guides, pointing out undiscovered spots for these newcomers along the way, such as Calaway Park and Canada Olympic Park. The buses are filled with

mostly children, their mothers and just a few dads. The husband bands of some of the women stay in Calgary for work, while some are back in their home country, working to send money to their families in Canada. In the case of one family, they don't even know the fate of their father in their war-torn country.

The kids, many of them likely on the first out-of-town ride since coming to Canada, press their noses against the windows, squealing with delight as they pass the amusement park on the city's outskirts, then cheering as the mountains come into view.

"My husband is back in Nigeria," explains Justice'D, who works in Calgary as a homemaker, about travelling solo with her three kids — Beatrice, 6, Alex, 9, and Sharon, 17. "He sends us money, but it's hardly enough to get by."

I meet Justice'D at the scenic lookout at Lake Minnewanka, as the two buses of Brewster guests stream out to take in the sights of this major attraction.

"It's so pretty," says Justice'D's youngest, Beatrice. "My dream is to learn how to skate on ice."

At the buffet lunch, the guests pile up their plates as though

stockpiling for a winter hibernation, the food offerings of pita, falafel, hummus and salads are familiar. Lina Hejazi and her two kids, Lara Hussain and Khaled Hussain, seem like they don't have a care in the world as they sit down to a laughter-filled lunch.

"I am very happy, I wouldn't have done it on my own," Hejazi tells me with the help of Meshleen Alkhouri, who has travelled with the group as an interpreter. I ask the mom about her life in Syria before coming to Canada a year and a half ago, when a local church group sponsored their journey here as refugees. "We were very scared," she says.

As she starts to describe their harrowing escape from a country that's been torn apart by civil war, the 32-year-old mother starts to cry. She wants to talk about it, she explains, but it's best for her loved ones back home if she doesn't.

When the conversation turns back to the present, Hejazi smiles again, as Khaled climbs on her lap. "This is such a nice thing for me, but especially for the children."

For those children, seeing the mountains is beyond exciting. After a ride up the Banff Gondola, they run around the upper terminal, trying all the interactive displays that teach about the history and nature of the area.

"The kids are having the best time," says Marwan Alotaiki, here with his wife, Fatin Brakan, and their four kids ranging in age from five to 15. "Very, very beautiful," adds the dad from Syria.

They've been lucky on this day, with cloudless skies offering a 360-degree view of six mountain ranges, along with the town of Banff nestled in the Bow Valley.

When they arrive at the top — with a multimillion-dollar view courtesy of Brewster's \$26-million upgrade of the facility — Luke Sunderland is there to offer them a hearty welcome.

"We started with the goal to host 2,000," says Sunderland, the general manager of Brewster Travel Canada's Banff Attractions and its director of corporate social responsibility. He says that 1,000 newcomers have already experienced the free day trip to the mountains, with another 1,000 to begin after a summer break. "I hope they take back that this is theirs, that the park is here for all Canadians to enjoy."

"I hope that in years to come, we will return many times," says Justice'D.

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## Toby just popped a Guinness record

ANNA BROOKS

One of the world's speediest dogs is now — officially — the world's fastest canine balloon popper.

Toby the whippet, age 9, beat the Guinness World Record on Sunday for popping 100 balloons in the fastest time, a record previously held by Twinkie the Jack Russell terrier.

With 39.08 seconds the time to beat, the feisty, fawn-coloured whippet used his teeth, claws and entire wriggling body to pop all 100 balloons in just 36.25 seconds.

"I am very relieved," said owner Christie Springs, who hoisted Toby in the air to a cheering crowd at the Shawnessy YMCA Sunday.

"We knew it was going to be a good event no matter what happened, but to know that we got a crack at that title is just a thrill."

Springs said Toby's obsession with balloons started five years ago when he came across a lone balloon in the family's backyard. The lean, little whippet was so fond of balloons (well, popping them at least) that Springs even threw him a special pool party, filling up their outdoor pool with balloons so Toby could have a swim and a pop.



Toby breaks the world record for fastest balloon popping by a dog. PIER MORENO SILVESTRI

"We saw the video of the current world record holder and thought we could do that, too," Springs said with a laugh. With a world record now under his belt, Springs said Toby will take a break before getting back to his normal routine of napping and performing at schools and seniors' homes. Winning the hearts of all who've been witness to the whippet's wild balloon popping, Springs said he's even been invited to the grand reopening of the Firefighters Museum of Calgary in May.

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## Youth volunteer program honoured for 'profound impact'

YOLANDE COLE

The Youth Volunteer Corps of Calgary has received a top honour.

The program of Youth Central was named a 2017 Gold Level YVC Affiliate, one of fewer than 15 Youth Volunteer Corps (YVC) programs in the U.S. and Canada given the title.

The founder and president of YVC's headquarters in Kansas City, David Battey, said the Calgary group is "paving the way" for programs across the U.S. and Canada.

"The program has had such a profound impact on both Youth Volunteers and the community they're serving," he said in a news release.

Youth Volunteer Corps gives opportunities for teams of youths to volunteer with community agencies and events. Last year, 545 volunteers gave more than 25,000 hours to non-profit organizations and participated in 783 projects in Calgary, including preparing and serving meals to Calgary's homeless, supporting seniors and children with disabilities, and building and maintaining community gardens and parks.

"We're so proud of this honour for the YVC program and the youth

volunteers involved," said Ros Doi, program director for non-profit Youth Central, which offers nine programs to young people in Calgary.

"We look forward to seeing all the great things that Calgary youth will accomplish this year."

Youth Volunteer Corps of Calgary offers volunteer projects for youth between the ages of 12 and 18. It is one of more than 40 affiliates of Youth Volunteer Corps.

[ycollection@postmedia.com](mailto:ycollection@postmedia.com)

### LOTTERIES

**SATURDAY**  
**Pick 3:** 0 9 5  
**Extra:** 1276759  
**Lotto 6/49:** 5, 9, 14, 24, 30, 35.  
Bonus: 21  
**Western 6/49:** 4, 8, 12, 16, 38, 45.  
Bonus: 7

**SUNDAY**  
**Pick 3:** 9, 8, 1  
**Extra:** 2660632

Numbers are unofficial. In the event of a discrepancy between this list and the official winning numbers, the latter shall prevail.



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# Syrian refugees donate blood to express thanks to Canada

**EVA FERGUSON**

Each has their own unique, harrowing story — witnessing the ravages of war, escaping gunfire and shelling, or surviving cold, excruciating months, even years, amid the squalor of a refugee camp.

But after arriving in the safety and compassion of Canada, 50 local Syrian refugees are thrilled at the chance to give back by “adopting” a blood collection centre to give blood for one day.

Canadian Blood Services will open its clinic at Eau Claire Market on New Year’s Day, allowing the refugees to give blood and help with what is often a slow time for blood donations over the Christmas holidays.

“In Syria, the donation of blood is considered the highest form of loyalty to the community. It’s very symbolic,” said Sam Nammoura, spokesman for the Syrian Refugee Support Group of Calgary.

“Here, there is a huge hunger among refugees to say thank you in some way for everything that has been done for them. To express their loyalty to this nation.”

Nammoura, who was born and raised in Damascus, Syria, arrived here 20 years ago and has committed his life to volunteering to help other refugees.

“We have a saying in Arabic: ‘I will

defend with my heart, and my soul and my blood. I will sacrifice with my life, with my soul and my blood.’

“It’s a way to affirm, to show how thankful they are about how they’ve been treated by Canadians.

“So many of them feel that at a time when the entire world turned their back on them, the only country that stood for them and helped them was Canada. This is like a dream land for them.”

Nammoura said he initially wanted to organize an event over the summer in response to a countrywide blood shortage he had read about. The response was huge, with hundreds of refugees wanting to give blood.

But because of strict screening regulations, the need for certified Arabic translators and gathering detailed information on donors’ health backgrounds, Nammoura said the event had to be postponed until the new year, and limited to 50 refugees for now.

“I have people calling me all the time, wanting to donate. It has really snowballed, everyone wants to give.”

Jhoanna Delrosario, Canadian Blood Services territory manager who helped organize the event at Eau Claire, said the refugees who will give on New Year’s Day are making an important contribution.

“They are really making a dif-

ference, so we’re very grateful to them.

“They’re giving back to the community, they’re saving lives and giving the gift of life.”

Canadian Blood Services has seen a notable increase in donations since Dec. 18, when it issued an urgent call for eligible donors to fill 35,000 open appointments across Canada by Jan. 6.

“We are pleased so many Canadians have stepped up to fill open appointments to give blood, and are confident others will join them by year-end or early in the New Year,” says Rick Prinzen, Canadian Blood Services’ chief supply chain officer.

Officials say the holiday season is often a slower time for blood donations, with travel, family activities and changes in routines posing challenges to blood collections, especially the last half of December into the new year.

While all blood types help patients, Canadian Blood Services says the supply of O-negative blood is in particular demand. Donors with O-negative blood are part of a select group whose donations are compatible with everyone. As the universal blood type, patients in an emergency situation can all receive O-negative blood.

For more information about giving, visit [blood.ca](http://blood.ca).

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## **A Lather Of Love For Soap-Makers Of Syria; Entrepreneurs revive centuries-old craft in appreciation for 'second chance' in Canada**

Calgary Herald

Page: A2

Section: City

Byline: Valerie Fortney

Source: Calgary Herald

When it came to his first entrepreneurial venture as a new Canadian, Abdul Fatah Sabouni never had a doubt about what he would do.

"I am fourth generation - making soap has been our family business for more than 125 years," says the 40-year-old father of four. "Even my last name, Sabouni, means soap maker."

Just a couple of years ago, though, he more than doubted whether or not he'd be given another opportunity to ply the craft he knows and loves so well.

In 2015, **Syrian** President Bashar al-Assad's military dropped warnings to residents to vacate his home city of Aleppo. Fearing for his family's safety, and weary of the sounds of bombs and gunfire, Sabouni and his loved ones had already joined the more than seven million Syrians desperately trying to escape the madness, first making their way to Jordan.

Two years after they landed safely on Canadian soil, thanks to help from the federal government, the gregarious father is proudly showing off the showroom and factory for Aleppo Savon ([alepposavon.ca](http://alepposavon.ca)), his new business.

On Saturday from 2 to 5 p.m.,

Sabouni and his partners, Walid Balsha and Husny Hadry, will welcome local dignitaries, as well as the general public at the grand opening of the store, located at 1303 Hastings Cres. S.E.

On Friday, the trio offers a sneak peek of the venue, which has giant stacks of colourful soaps, stacked up Jenga-game style, along with walls of soaps offering up everything from lemon and lavender-scented bars to unscented.

"Come to try it, to smell it, to touch it," says Sabouni, who served a 10-year apprenticeship under his father before taking over the family business. "I guarantee you'll love it."

While he may have to do a sales pitch for the average Calgarian, those in the know understand that having a master **Syrian** soapmaker in our city is a major coup. The centuries-old tradition of Aleppo soap-making - which uses no chemicals or other additives - often involves secret family recipes handed down through the generations. In the 11th century, the Crusaders brought the soap back to Europe, starting a centuries-long love affair with the coconut and olive-oil based soap said to be intensely moisturizing. It is also said to have been the inspiration for the equally famous Marseille soap of France.

As the **Syrian** war heated up, though, many of those soap-makers fled for their lives, and many of the factories in Aleppo were either destroyed or abandoned. It created a worldwide Aleppo soap shortage that warranted newspaper headlines in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Japan, where it is highly coveted.

When he arrived in Calgary two years ago, Sabouni threw himself into learning English, his entrepreneurial dreams never far from his thoughts. He met Balsha at English class; like Sabouni, the 58-year-old newcomer yearned for something better than his new delivery driver job in Calgary.

"Walid was a businessman in Syria too," says Sabouni. "He had his own tire business in Damascus."

The two teamed up with Hadry, a **Syrian** who came to Canada in 1994 as a 10-year-old. Hadry, who works as a system administrator with a local seismic company, helps them navigate the business ins-and-outs of their adopted country and also translates English to Arabic when the two have challenges with their new language.

"They bring a lot, because their experience adds up," says Hadry, who also credits Calgarians Saima Jamal and Sam Nammoura, co-founders of the **Syrian Refugee** Support Group and Calgary Immigrant Support Society, with helping them set up business and get the word out.

"We have big plans for distribution across Canada and North America."

For Sabouni, making the world-famous soap, also thought to be the world's oldest, is his way of giving back to a city and country that has given him and his family so much.

"Canada and Canadians gave us a second chance," he says with a wide smile. "This is my life and this is my job - I like to make soap." [vfortney@postmedia.com](mailto:vfortney@postmedia.com)

[Twitter.com/valfortney](https://twitter.com/valfortney)

Illustration:

- Leah Hannel / Husny Hadry, left, Abdul Fatah Sabouni and Walid Balsha at their soap store, Aleppo Savon, in Calgary on Friday.

Edition: Early

Story Type: Column

Length: 671 words

**PRODUCTION FIELDS**



Husny Hadry, left, Abdul Fatah Sabouni and Walid Balsha at their soap store, Aleppo Savon, in Calgary on Friday. LEAN MENDEL

# A LATHER OF LOVE FOR SOAP-MAKERS OF SYRIA

*Entrepreneurs revive centuries-old craft in appreciation for 'second chance' in Canada*



VALERIE FORTNEY

When it came to his first entrepreneurial venture as a new Canadian, Abdul Fatah Sabouni never had a doubt about what he would do.

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served a 10-year apprenticeship under his father before taking over the family business. "I guarantee you'll love it."

While he may have to do a sales pitch for the average Canadian, those in the know understand that having a master Syrian soap-maker in our city is a major coup.

The centuries-old tradition of Aleppo soap-making — which uses no chemicals or other additives — often involves secret family recipes handed down through the generations. In the 11th century, the Crusaders brought the soap back to Europe, starting a centuries-long love affair with the coconut and olive-oil based soap said to be intensely moisturizing. It is also said to have been the inspiration for the equally famous Marseille soap of France.

As the Syrian war heated up, though, many of those soap-makers fled for their lives, and many of the factories in Aleppo were either destroyed or abandoned. It created a worldwide Aleppo soap shortage that warranted newspaper headlines in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Japan, where it is highly coveted.

When he arrived in Calgary two years ago, Sabouni threw himself into learning English, his

entrepreneurial dreams never far from his thoughts. He met Balsha at English class; like Sabouni, the 58-year-old newcomer yearned for something better than his new delivery driver job in Calgary.

"Walid was a businessman in Syria too," says Sabouni. "He had his own tire business in Damascus."

The two teamed up with Hadry, a Syrian who came to Canada in 1994 as a 10-year-old. Hadry, who works as a system administrator with a local seismic company, helps them navigate the business ins-and-outs of their adopted country and also translates English to Arabic when the two have challenges with their new language.

"They bring a lot, because their experience adds up," says Hadry, who also credits Calgarians Saima Jamal and Sam Namsoura, co-founders of the Syrian Refugee Support Group and Calgary Immigrant Support Society, with helping them set up business and get the word out.

"We have big plans for distribution across Canada and North America."

For Sabouni, making the world-famous soap, also thought to be the world's oldest, is his way of giving back to a city and country that has given him and his family so much.

"Canada and Canadians gave us a second chance," he says with a wide smile. "This is my life and this is my job — I like to make soap."

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PM welcomes new premier (don't mention pipeline) **NP5**



SATURDAY, JULY 1, 2017 ESTABLISHED 1883 POSTMEDIA

## TRUE NORTH STRONG



LEAH HENNEL

Calgary youths Remco Van Dijk, left, Joel Newmarch, Diana Al Kawaairt and Taylor Sim show their Canadian pride on Scotsman's Hill ahead of Canada Day. Numerous events celebrating the country's 150th birthday are planned across the city this weekend.

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Calgary, its citizens hold special place in Canada **A2**

### 150 CROSSWORD

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