

2016 Worthy Women's Professional Studies Scholarship

By Danielle Wofford

Bombings and mortar are raining over Aleppo again this week, thousands of people run toward death because they have nowhere else to go... I sit across from her at a coffee shop in Central Beirut, waiting for an entry visa to Syria for research. From the outside, she looks like any other patron. On a closer look, her clothes tell a story of taste, her jewelry communicates grace, her smile brightens the day; certainly, her story beckons attention. She took the turbulent 8-hour journey from Syria to greet me at the coffee shop and escort me into war-torn Syria.

She is my mother-in-law, Hadeel, an English professor who was born in late 40's, married a Syrian man in the 60's, and conceived three children by the mid-70's; the youngest is my amazing husband. While dating my husband, I was marveled by the sparkle in his eye as he narrated stories about his mother. Surviving war and an oppressive government alone, makes her the most inspiring woman I know, though there is more to her story.

Hadeel was married by age 16 and left school to raise three children while her military husband was absent during a tumultuous time in Syria. The country was under strict communist rule, everything was rationed and monitored. Rice, flour and eggs were given out as precious gold; with never enough to go around. Hadeel would travel secretly to demilitarized zones on a donkey to neighboring countries and smuggle food for her family. Her zest for life pushed her further; Hadeel went back to school, received her GED with honors, studied English Literature, and became a renowned English professor. Hadeel was disappointed when she started teaching filtered and politically corrupt books. My mother-in-law would travel to Lebanon, purchase contemporary literature, tear each page, wrap the pages under her children's clothes, and then smuggle them through Syria's border. My husband chuckles when he remembers, "my mother used us as children-smugglers, I was only eight, I thought it was completely normal to wrap paper under your clothes." Ultimately, she followed her mission to educate future agents of change for herself, family, and community.

Hadeel's story typifies the meaning of a worthy woman. Worthy is deserving of admiration, and every woman's story is worthy of hearing. Selflessness, sacrifice,

tenacity, and determination are what inspired me about Hadeel and my vision of a worthy woman. Her determination for education, inspired me to pursue a PhD and DNP in nursing and health innovation. Her passion for education, even through great risks, precipitated my desire to care for the 65 million refugees worldwide. My current research addresses contemporary issues facing vulnerable Syrians. When asked about all of these hardships, Hadeel smiles, "I am blessed, my life is wonderful, these hardships shaped the woman I am today." I can never fully comprehend Hadeel's story and dare not to compare her life to mine, I am however encouraged by just one worthy woman's story to make a difference.