BRIDGES



PERSONAL NARRATIVES BY IMMIGRANT YOUTH

International Institute of New England

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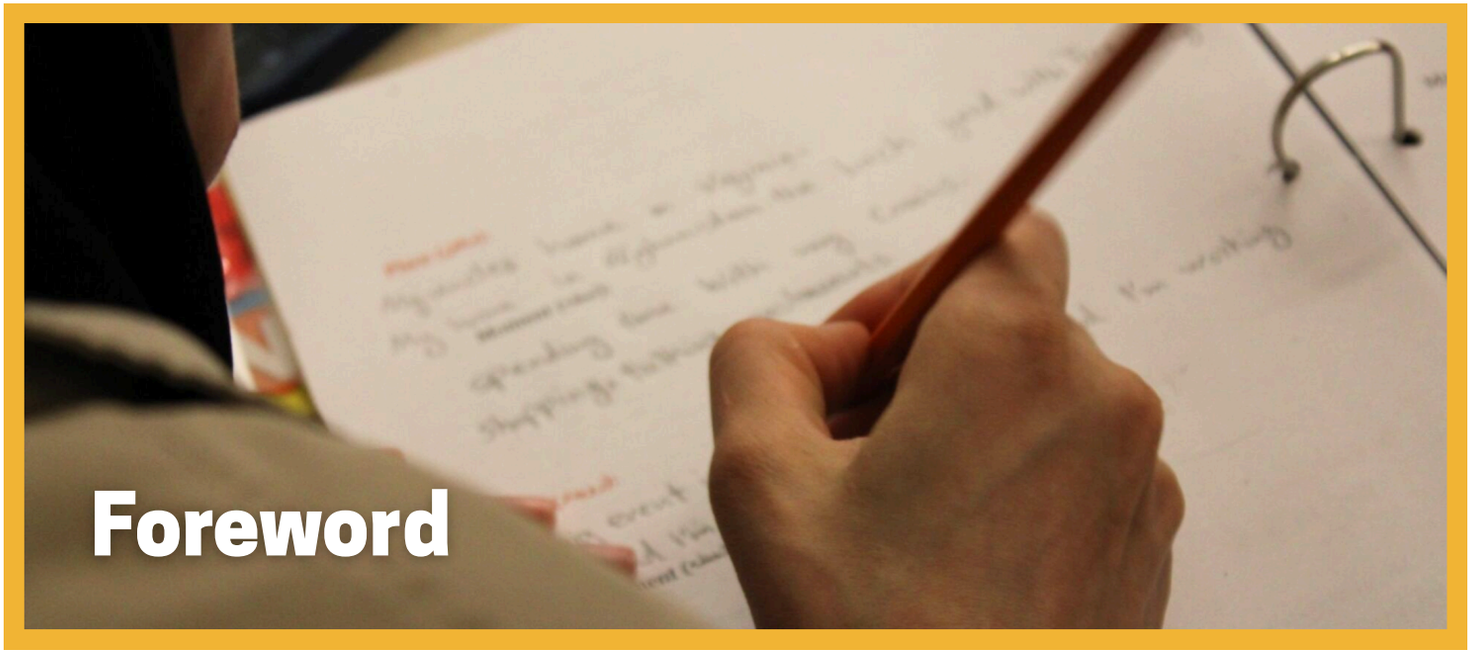


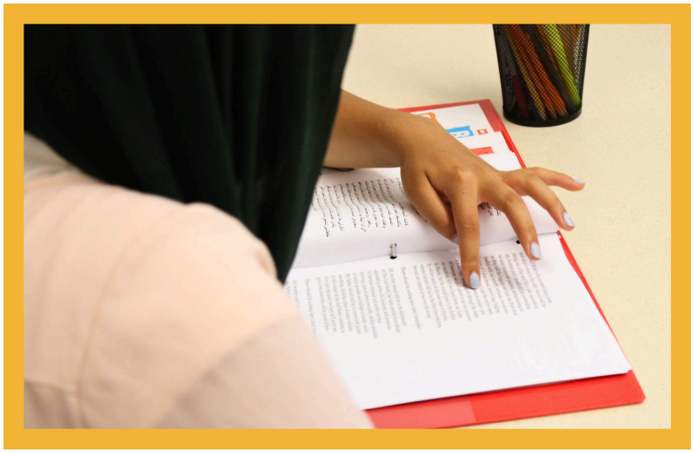
Foreword

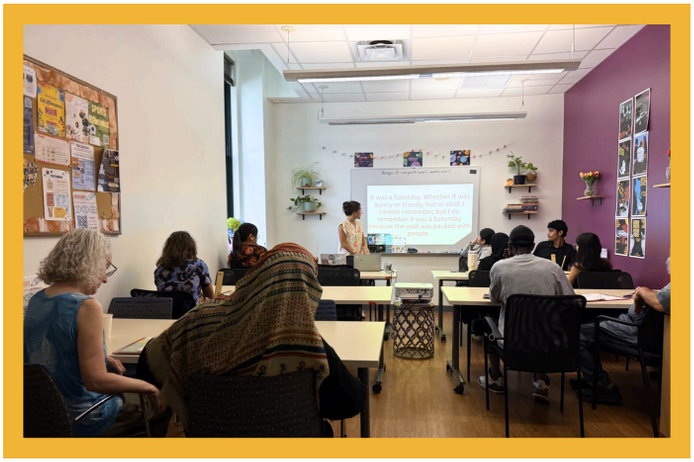
Founded in 1918, the International Institute of New England (IINE) is one of the oldest and largest social service organizations for refugees and immigrants in the region. For over 100 years, IINE has worked to create opportunities for refugees and immigrants to succeed through resettlement, education, career advancement, and pathways to citizenship. IINE serves refugees, asylees, unaccompanied minor children, victims of human trafficking, and other immigrants across the three sites in Boston and Lowell, M.A., and Manchester, N.H.

Since 2019, through its Refugee Youth Program, IINE's Lowell office has supported over 500 clients, aged 15 to 24, as they become accustomed to life in the U.S.

When a participant first enrolls, youth case specialists work one-on-one with each participant to explore their passions, define their educational goals, and articulate their long-term career aspirations.

All eligible participants enroll in secondary school; however, there are often barriers to enrollment. Some individuals come from countries with education systems that differ from the U.S., and others have fled war-torn regions, often leaving behind their high school diplomas. Additionally, factors such as English literacy and age at school enrollment can create challenges. To overcome these barriers, alternative schooling to obtain high school equivalency diplomas are offered to IINE Youth. Over the past few years, IINE has helped around 10 participants receive their HiSET and GED certifications.





Clients who have their diplomas or graduated high school while in the U.S. can access support to further their education through occupational training or college enrollment. Clients have become certified as clinical nursing assistants, social workers, medical interpreters, medical assistants, customer service supporters, real estate agents, and auto technicians.

Achieving positive outcomes like these requires time and a dedicated team that works hand-in-hand with clients, providing study support, connections to local resources, and events. IINE's most popular programming includes

personal and professional development workshops (often hosted in collaboration with community partners), tutoring sessions, mentorships, a women's empowerment group, as well as sports and arts activities.

The youth served are undoubtedly dedicated to their academic and career growth, as seen through their commitment to IINE programing. Even after a long day of school, work, and/or family responsibilities, week by week, we see participants improve their English, pass training exams, and build strong, lasting connections with their peers.



IINE takes pride in the many milestones our clients achieve. From securing job interviews despite limited English proficiency to obtaining Massachusetts-recognized certifications, the individuals we serve demonstrate consistent determination. IINE Youth clients commit to their success, and IINE is there to guide them on their journey.



After volunteering at IINE Lowell as a Youth ESOL peer tutor, then high school sophomore Lena Aloise was inspired to launch the Bridges Program. She felt the writing process fit the IINE Youth program's focus on English language learning and affirmation of diverse experiences and wanted to help share the voices of young immigrants with their communities. She secured a grant from the Groton School Dwight Internship Fund and reached out to IINE Youth Services Manager Isabel Goes in December of 2024.

Over the next nine months, Lena and Isabel put in many hours of work to make Bridges a reality, creating and translating workshop curriculum/materials, advertising the program, and securing volunteers. The writing workshop successfully launched in August of 2025.

Bridges took place over the course of two weeks, during which seven participants learned about the art of crafting short-form personal narratives. They were supported by many amazing volunteers who offered guidance and counsel every step of the way. Behind the scenes, student peer editors from the Groton School helped to ensure that the publication was the best possible showcase of the writers' vision.

The publication, which you now hold in your hands, is a testament to the incredible work being done at IINE, the power of writing, and above all else, the strength possessed by immigrant youth. The seven individuals whose work you are about to read have faced unimaginable challenges, leaving behind their entire lives and finding the bravery to craft new ones elsewhere. They possess great wisdom, insight, and morals, and a drive to improve not only their lives, but the lives of those around them. These are their stories - thank you for reading.

This publication is dedicated to all the young immigrants and refugees making the adjustment to life in the U.S.

May you always feel like your stories are heard.



International Institute of New England

When Everything Changed

BY STANLEY SEJOUR CONSTANT, HAITI

My name is Stanley. I was born on August 27th. The month of the year that marks the end of summer. The month where we have more sunlight, the month where things can only get brighter from here on out. I am not sure exactly what that says about me: maybe that I have a lot of darkness inside or a lot of potential for light. I am a combination of hope and despair. I love people, but I also can't stand them. I want to be happy, but sadness feels like a more familiar friend. I desperately want to be loved, but I often find myself running away when love starts to get too close. The person I have become is the result of all the sacrifices made by my mother and I. Every single person on this planet has a story. Don't judge people before you truly know them. The truth might surprise you.

***

On a calm morning in August 2015, I woke up to warm rays of sunshine gently beaming off my skin. I could smell the aroma of breakfast coming from the kitchen. I already knew today would be a positive day. Following breakfast, my family and I decided to make this day unforgettable. At lunchtime, we were gathered at the table ready to eat. Then, we planted flowers, played soccer, ran races, and cooked dinner together. It was so much fun. We lived in Leogane, Haiti at the time, and my mother tended to spend the whole day in Port-au-Prince (the capital city) selling merchandise. So, meals together as a family, especially with my mother, were key moments to spend valuable time together. The food was very tasty,

especially the chicken and the drinks.

After eating, my mom and I went to the living room and started talking. Soon, she asked a question that would change my life forever.
"How do you feel about moving to a different place?"
For the first time, I would move away from my family.

At first, I didn't like the idea, because Leogane is the only place I have ever known. I confessed that I didn't know if the people in Port-au-Prince would like me, and I didn't know if I would like Port-au-Prince. I have felt responsible for all of my family since my father's death and I didn't want to leave my three brothers. My mother is a tough woman, and I knew they would be fine, but I would no longer be at home to take care of household responsibilities and look after all of them.

A moment passed before I replied to my mother, "I want to help you raise my brothers, and Leogane is the only home they have ever known".
Afterwards, she got up and gave me a hug. "This would be good for us," she told me, "Port-au-Prince has better schools and more opportunities for college". She wanted a better life for me, so she told me to think about it and give her an answer. At that moment, I felt both upset and surprised by the news. A thought in the back of my head said maybe it could be a good opportunity for me. I spent time thinking over and weighing my options. I had a big decision to make. Eventually, I told her I was willing to go. When the conversation with my mother was over, we invited friends and family over to

watch a funny movie. Even though I was unhappy because I knew my entire life was about to change, we all laughed and drank together, enjoying this precious moment.

My mother had made endless sacrifices for my brothers and me. When we were in bed at night, she would go out on the streets to work to give us a life with more opportunities. So, even if I was unhappy about moving, I knew that I had to be courageous and follow the path she wanted me to.

We decided to take that opportunity to spend the rest of the day celebrating her with family and friends. She savoured a delicious meal we made for her and listened to the kind of music she likes, and all of my brothers danced with her. I bought a few special presents I thought she would like. Before I gave them to her, I told her that her children love her, and we were grateful to have a mother like her. I continued to say that all of us understood the many sacrifices she makes for us. She cried tears of overwhelming joy and told me that she is proud of all of us. I gave her the gifts I bought for her: a necklace, a bracelet, and a dress.

After the important conversation I had with my mother, I came to the conclusion that this is an opportunity for me to grow more and to start believing in myself. I acknowledged all the sacrifices my mother made for us, and now it was time to make my own sacrifices for myself and my family. My mother has only ever wanted to see each of her sons succeed in life. I have learned valuable qualities like patience and resilience from her. I knew,

despite the fact I changed places, schools and my life, I was not changing that much after all. It was the things she taught me that would help me to achieve what I really want in life. I believe I can do anything, live anywhere, and everything will be fine.

My mom gave me the opportunities to succeed. She showed me how strong she was when we moved to Port-Au-Prince. She inspired me through her courage to follow my dreams, set out to do what I want and persevere through any obstacles that try to stop me. I continue to live by her lessons today, and it has shaped who I am and who I want to be as a person.

Never hurt your mother, not with your words, not with your anger, not with your silence. She is the only one who loved you before the world even knew you existed. She carried your weight for nine months and literally tore herself apart to give life.
Have you ever looked into her eyes and heard her silent prayers?

Those wrinkles on her face are the scars of battles you will never understand.

I love you, Mom.



From One Field to the Next

BY RAIHANULLAH SANGAR, AFGHANISTAN

It was a hot and sunny Sunday morning on April 4, 2025. My friend had invited me to play soccer at the park. This was my first time playing soccer since I moved to Lowell from Texas. I started playing soccer when I was 14 with my childhood friends in Afghanistan. I was born there, but in 2022 my family moved to Pakistan, then to Qatar and finally to the United States of America in 2024. We lived in Florida and Texas for months before finally coming to Lowell, Massachusetts in 2025. It was a hard journey, and adjusting to a new community after each move had been difficult. I was relieved to be invited because I did not yet have many friends in Massachusetts.

We decided to play at a local park, about a 15 minute walk from my home. There was a school nearby, as well as a playground and a swimming pool. Because of this, there were always lots of people around: family members walking, riding bikes and playing sports. Before beginning our soccer game, we split into two teams, each with four players. Mine consisted of Naseeb, Irfan, Mati and me. We were all from Afghanistan, but they were older than me. The other team had a group of random guys.

After forty minutes of intense playing, the score was even. My team and I came together to discuss a game plan, which we decided would be to pass together. We had one goalkeeper and one defender who were both great

players. The goalkeeper was named Naseeb, and the defender's name was Mati. With five minutes left, I tried to pass to Irfan but was unsuccessful. The other team made a well-timed pass and they won.

Even though we lost I was not bothered and felt joyful for them. When my team lost, my team members felt blue. After the game I left and my team members continued to play soccer. I was elated to play soccer and I felt good to be running with my friends.

Sometimes, I like to imagine that I am in a soccer final playing for Royal Madrid against Barcelona and I am the goalkeeper.

I*t is Messi against me! I can save a goal or he can get a goal because he is a clever player. As the game was starting, I was too nervous and the stadium was too loud to think straight, but I knew my team had strong players. With 45 minutes left in the game, both teams had 0 goals at half time. After half time I slept on the ground. The ball was on the other side of the field. When Messi approached me, I just looked at his feet, and when he passed to another player I felt better. Finally, he shot, and when I dove, I couldn't catch the ball. Messi got a goal and Barcelona won the match. My team was sad and they asked me why I missed the goal.*

Even in times like this, however, I know that I would still love the game. I hope that if I find a chance I can play one day for college. When I go to college, the first thing I will do is find the soccer team and ask where the

coach is. I will tell him that I am a goalkeeper and it is my dream to join the soccer team. Then I will have a community of soccer players and get to play the sport I love every day. When I am playing soccer with a team I can connect with everyone and it makes me feel included. I hope to always have soccer in my life, no matter where in the world life takes me.



Life Goals

BY MUFALME N, CONGO

I grew up in a Rwandan refugee camp near the Akagera National Park. When I was eight, I started to play soccer in the refugee camp with my friends. We played for fun on the weekends, when it was Saturday and the weather was hot outside. Around us were the mountains and a flat green field. Sometimes I played after school in a small field by the mountains. The trees were goalposts, and the field was bumpy with stones and dust. We didn't have a soccer ball, so I used one made from balloons and paper wrapped in clothing. I didn't wear cleats because they were too expensive. Instead I wore sandals.

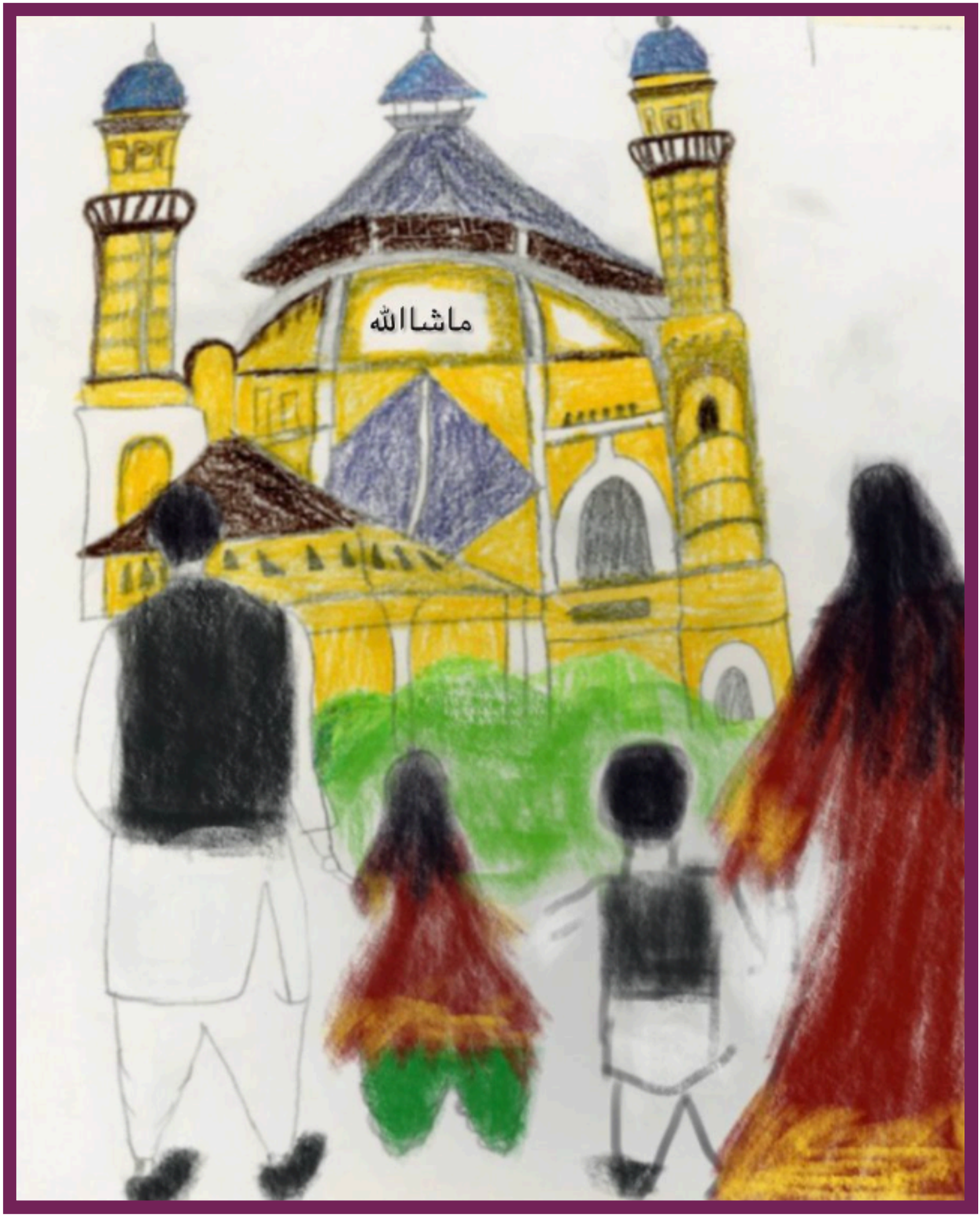
Soccer is important to me because while playing, I have made many friends who would often join me to play. One of my friends was Alex. He was smart, talkative, fast, and confident. I had another friend named Samuel, a strong, muscular, tall and fast midfielder. When I was playing soccer with my friends Alex and Samuel, I felt confident and calm. My mind was focused on the game: receiving a pass from my teammates, scoring a goal and winning. People from the camp would come to watch the games. They would cheer for us, and this support made me feel like a successful player.

One Saturday, we were playing hard. We were tied with the visitor: two goals each. I passed the ball to Alex. He dribbled the ball. I was running right behind him. He passed the ball, and I crossed it over. The goalie could not block the

ball with his head, and Alex scored the goal! At that moment, people ran to the field and hugged Alex because we won the game.

Winning was a great feeling, but I learned from other experiences that life is still good, even if we lose sometimes. I enjoyed soccer with friends and didn't let bad feelings change my friendships or my confidence.

I left Rwanda in 2022. Now, I have been in the US for 3 years. In the summer, I play soccer 3 times a week. Soccer is not just a game. It is important to me because it gives me confidence. I am not shy or insecure when I play soccer, instead feeling strong, calm and healthy. As I start college, the feelings I have about soccer will help me to be successful in college and life. Just like how soccer has given me positive energy in the past, it will give me positive energy for my future.



KHOJISTA AIMAQ, AFGHANISTAN

Building a Home

BY KHOJISTA AIMAQ, AFGHANISTAN

My story begins in Afghanistan, a land full of stories, love, and challenges. I grew up in a large, lively family in Baghlan, where every day was full of memories of people whose love helped me become the person I am today. My grandfather was a man who has always reminded me of a mountain. He was strong, hardworking, and steadfast. People in our area loved him not only for his strength, but also for his big heart. He never hesitated to help anyone in need. Whenever someone faced difficulties, my grandfather was the first to come to their aid. He was a model of resilience and courage and I have always been proud of him. Beside him, my grandmother was like a bright light in our home. She was very kind and hospitable, always welcoming everyone with a smile. Her house was always filled with the sounds of joy, the smell of fresh baked bread, and the aroma of tea. During Eid and New Year her hands never grew tired. She would bake swee, prepare the haft mewa, and gather us all around her with a heart full of love.

My father is a great hero to me. He is strong, hardworking, and very diligent. People in our area always held him in high regard because he, like his father, performed many good deeds. He is not just a father, he is also my life teacher, guiding me with his wisdom and showing me that life must be lived with faith and effort. My mother is an angel in my life. She is very kind, loving, and patient. Everyone loves her. She filled our home with love and welcomed everyone with her heart. My mother's smile was always a source of hope,

even on the hardest days.

Another important figure in my life is my eldest uncle. He is patient, calm, and strong, a big brother to my father and a mentor to all of us. He quietly taught us great lessons about patience and perseverance.

We lived in a large courtyard with our uncles. It was a home full of joy and the bustle of childhood. My girl cousins are like sisters to me; we played together, told stories, and shared childhood secrets. My boy cousins are like brothers; sometimes we fought, sometimes we laughed, but we were always together. Eid days are some of the most beautiful memories I have. Eid is a very special holiday for my family. During this holiday we pray, wear new clothes, decorate our hands with henna, eat special food and visit family and friends. On the night before Eid, everyone cleaned and decorated the house. On the day of Eid, my grandmother and aunts prepared delicious meals and sweets for us to eat on our best dishes. The courtyard was filled with the scent of henna and the sounds of laughter. The new year was also a big celebration for my family. We planted sprouts and prayed for a hopeful future. When everyone gathered together, my grandfather recited prayers. Those moments felt sacred and full of hope.

Life in Afghanistan was not always easy. War and insecurity cast heavy shadows over our lives. Sometimes, even ordinary days were difficult. But my family, with their love, patience and guidance, always gave me hope.

They showed me that even in the hardest times courage and resilience can light our path. When it was time to leave Afghanistan and travel to the United States my heart was full of excitement and anxiety, yet I was deeply sorrowful. I was going to miss my family, my friends and the childhood memories that made home so special. Leaving my grandmothers, uncles, cousins and our joyful home behind was very hard. At the airport and during the long journey, memories of my home and loved ones constantly ran through my mind. Tears of both joy and sadness filled my eyes as I thought about the life I was leaving behind and the new life that awaited me.

The first days in the United States were challenging. The language and culture were very different, and I had to learn how to navigate a new world. But the lessons I had learned from my family in Afghanistan–patience, perseverance, and faith–helped me to gradually overcome the obstacles. Now, living in the United States, I have the opportunity to pursue my dream of becoming a nurse. I would love to help people, just like my family has always helped me. I took a class to become a Certified Nursing Assistant and I hope to get a job soon. I want to study, succeed, and make both my family and my community proud. Looking back, I see my roots in Afghanistan in a family full of love, patience and strength. Now, my branches have spread in the United States, growing towards a future full of hope and inspiration.



POLWASHA YAQOOBI, AFGHANISTAN

More than Manto

BY KHOJISTA AIMAQ, AFGHANISTAN

It was a Wednesday at 3am. All of a sudden, I woke up to the beep of my alarm. I snoozed my alarm because my eyes and body felt so heavy. All I wanted was to go back to sleep, but before I knew it my alarm went off again and I was forced to drag myself out of bed. I went to the bathroom, washed my face, brushed my teeth, and prayed. I dressed for work in all black before catching an Uber to Starbucks. The first thing I did when I got to work was turn on the machines to brew coffee and the ovens to heat the food. Afterwards, I stocked the fridges with ice and checked food dates. We opened the door for customers at 4:30am. At first, two or three customers came, but then five or six more customers arrived. It felt overwhelming, but I'm a hard worker.

With three hours to go until my break, I was making drinks, taking orders, and talking with customers. It was a very busy shift, with music playing and people talking. Finally I went to the backroom, which I like because it's quiet. I watched the clock, waiting for 11am to come. Finally, my manager said that I could go home and I was very happy to hang up my green apron. My head was heavy and my feet hurt the whole car ride back. When I got home, I was walking quickly because I was so tired and hungry. When I opened the door, I smelled meat, onion and chili. I saw my mom in the kitchen wearing a white and black dress and talking with my grandma on the phone. Suddenly, I saw a steamer, and I knew she was cooking manto. Manto is like an Afghan

dumpling. It has sheep meat, onion, garlic, cilantro, yogurt, spices, and tomato sauce with yellow lentils.

I felt so happy. I know manto takes a long time to make. My mom knows how tiring my job is, and she knows my favorite food is manto. I left work thinking I would eat dinner, pray, relax, and sleep, just like a normal day. But when I came home and saw that my mom made 100 manto, I said “Yaaaay!” and ate 12 of them. Making 100 manto takes about two hours. I realized that even though my mom was so busy with all of her children, she still took that time to make sure I felt special. She always tries her best to make my day better. Looking at her face, I could see she was exhausted but she always wanted to work hard for her family. “Thank you.” I said with a smile, and she knew I was not just thanking her for the food; I was thanking her for everything she had given to me my whole life.

My mom is not just teaching me how to cook delicious meals, but also how to live a good and meaningful life. While we are in the kitchen together, she shares her recipes, her patience, and her wisdom. She tells me that cooking is not just about food. It is about love, caring, and making others happy. She also teaches me values like kindness, honesty, and respect. Every time I learn a new dish from her, I feel that I am also learning how to be a better person. I am so grateful for her guidance, her love and the lessons she gives me both in cooking and in life.



American Love Letter

BY BEHESHTA A, AFGHANISTAN

When I arrived at the refugee camp in Qatar from Afghanistan, I felt sad and happy. I was sad because I left some of my close family behind in the city of Herat, but I was happy because I left the criminals who had taken over our country. We were in a new country in the Middle East, and here, the people were kind to us. We had food and multiple rooms to live in. I even made two good friends. Their names were Susan and Mary. I first saw them at the airport as I was leaving Afghanistan - they were even on the same plane as me. We didn't speak, but I felt in my heart that we were connected. We would always look at each other and smile, and once we all arrived at the refugee camp, we were brought to the same interview room. That's when we spoke for the first time, and we soon grew very close.

We talked about where we came from, how we got there, and where we were going. We were all from the same home country and shared our stories of why we fled. I opened up about how I felt unsafe, and they remembered feeling the same way. We were unsafe back home for many reasons. When the Taliban came, the women were forbidden from studying or working. We were not allowed to speak to men outside of our family. We were constantly judged for everything we did. We even had to wear specific clothing. We lost the ability to make choices for ourselves. Then, the Taliban started looking for my father because he worked for the government. They wanted to take our home from us! There were 8 of us living there at the time, but the Taliban

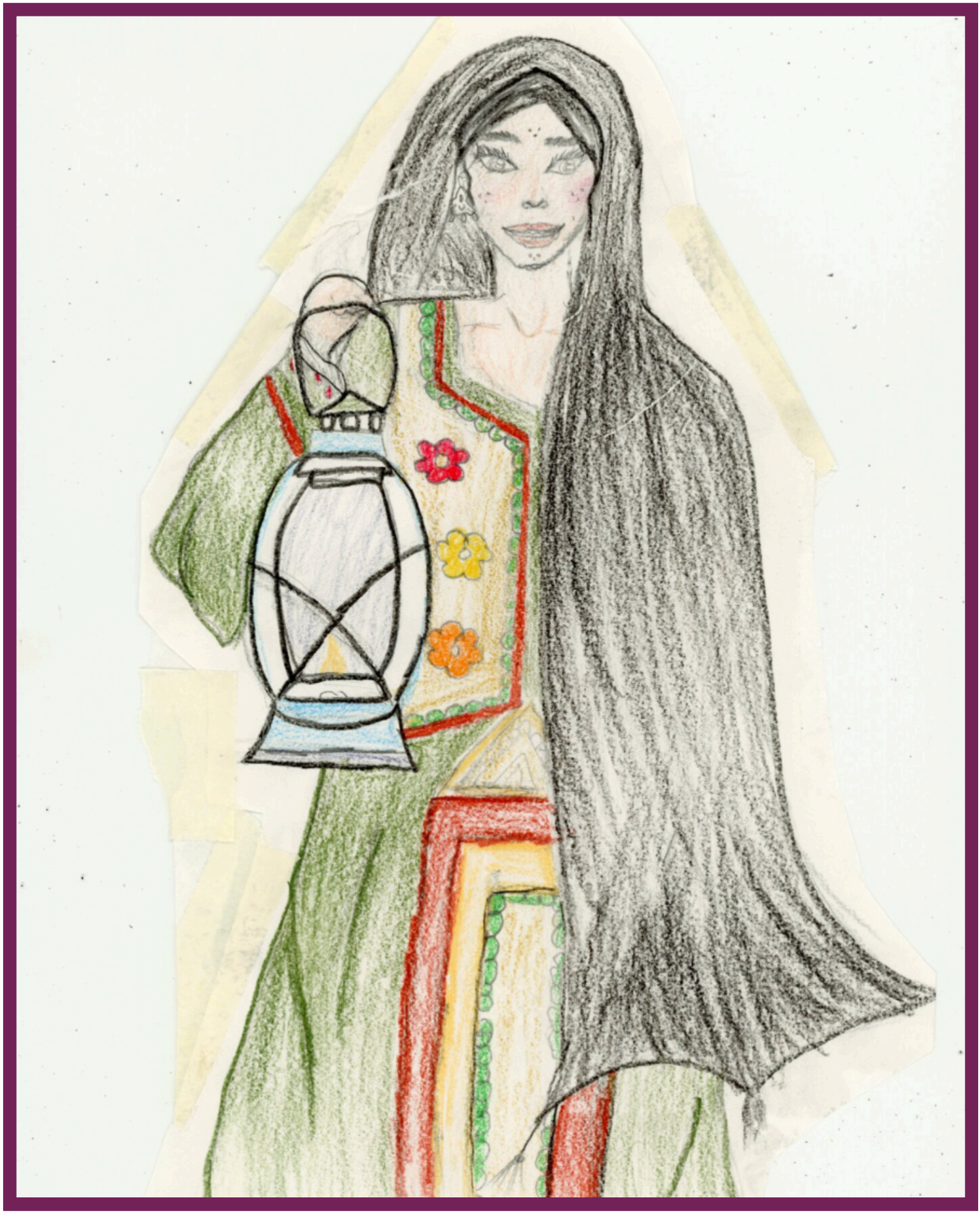
told us that we could live on the street. We were all terrified.

My family had lived in that house for 25 years, but when the Taliban saw it they just said, “Wow - you made this beautiful home for us”. We were all extremely saddened and shocked that this was even happening. Luckily, we were able to stay in our home until we got the opportunity to come to America. We could not wait until that day came. The Taliban are very aggressive and mean. They are wealthy men who have multiple wives, whom they abuse and treat very poorly. They don’t provide them with good food or clothing. I once spoke with one of the Taliban’s wives who mentioned that her daughter was getting married soon. Her daughter was around 10 years old. She was just a young child.

I was eager to leave and start a new life, but it upset me to leave my friends behind. I wondered if I would ever make new ones. I did not know much English, had never traveled much, and was nervous that I would be judged for my religious beliefs - I thought that these things would keep me from connecting with other people. I was soon proven wrong. What helped my nerves most when arriving at the refugee camp was meeting Susan and Mary. They were my first friends away from home. We were all going through the same hardships and could relate to each other. We would discuss our dreams and aspirations, and become hopeful for our futures in America. We could not wait to get our tickets for the flight. Once we realized that our tickets were different and that we were going to be separated, we were extremely sad.

This separation did not break our strong bond, however. We are still the best of friends, even living so far from each other. Even though we had different journeys coming to America, we have all been able to chase our dreams. My dream is to be an inspirational person who advocates for human rights. Susan dreams of becoming a doctor. Mary wants to be a journalist.

I am proud that I am studying here and participating in IINE youth events. My friends Susan and Mary are studying and working, and they are also proud to be here. Now we can feel safe and heard. We can study, dream, and meet many different people from all over the world. Even though I worry about the women in my home country and everything that they suffer, I am grateful for the opportunity to study math and history. I am lucky that I can choose my future. I have the freedom to make personal decisions about my clothes, my work, and my friends. I can independently chase my dreams and be in control of my own life. America, I love you.



ASMA AIMAQ, AFGHANISTAN

Shattered

BY ADAMA ABDALAH, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

It was February 25th, 2015. That afternoon, my friend Achta and I were home alone at my house. My mom wasn't home because she was visiting our neighbor's house, and my older brother and sister were at the mosque. At first, we were playing in the hallway with my bird house, but after a while we went to the bedroom to play. At that moment, Actha had an idea. "Let's jump on the bed!" she exclaimed!

Our bed was big enough for two people to sleep in — perfect for jumping. We were having so much fun until I suddenly heard a loud sound. Crack! There was glass all over the floor, and we realized that my mirror had broken. Achta and I got very scared because we knew the mirror was expensive and we didn't want to get in trouble. We didn't know what to do so we quickly left the bedroom. We went outside and started to climb the trees in my front yard.

After some time my mom came home and asked, "What are you guys doing?"

"Just playing," we answered.

She went inside, but soon rushed back, shocked and angry, and shouted, "Who broke the mirror?"

"We don't know. We were not inside the house" we lied.

We were worried that she would be suspicious, but she didn't seem to blame us. We had told her that no one was in the house, not even us, and she believed our story. We returned to our playing, uninterrupted.

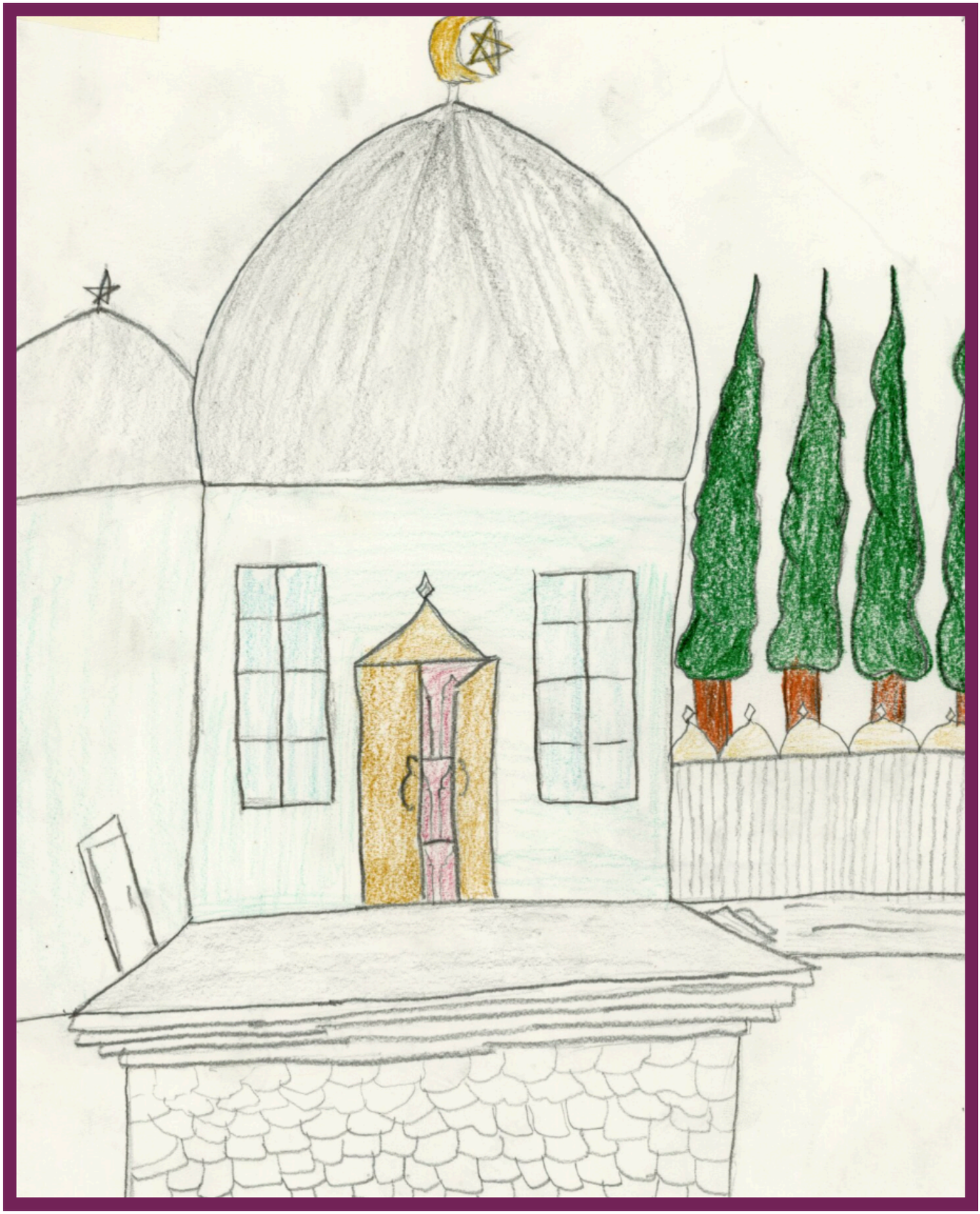
A few hours passed before Achta went to gather her things to leave. I went back inside and saw my mom cleaning up the broken mirror. I felt relieved that she believed me, but a little sad about lying to her.

She didn't question me again, but I know that deep down she knew it was me. I always ran around the house as a little girl without being careful. Even still, she didn't get mad. She simply bought a new mirror the next day.

I think that I am my mom's favorite because I have the same name as her mother, and I am the youngest daughter. She has always spoiled me. She never gets mad at me but she still teaches me lessons.

A few days later my mom had a conversation with me about why lying is wrong.

She said sternly "I know you broke the mirror last time. If you do something bad again you have to tell me the truth". Even though I was ashamed that my mom found out, I appreciated that she made me feel relaxed and made sure that I could trust her. Since then, I have never lied to her again.



A Wonderful Wedding

BY ADAMA ABDALAH, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Before the wedding:

Four of my friends and I went to the mall in N'Djamena, Tchad. We were looking for a nice satan for my cousin's wedding. A satan is a floor-length Chadian dress with a square beaded neckline. When I arrived at the mall, I told my friends that I liked the green satan. They wanted the purple ones instead. I agreed that the purple was also beautiful, and we bought five matching purple satans with white belts. Afterwards, we enjoyed some cold strawberry juice and then headed home.

Day Two: Henna Day

I went with another friend to surprise Zainap, my friend who was getting married, at her house. She was delighted to see us because she didn't know that we were coming. I asked her if she was excited to get married. Zainap said "I am so excited!" and offered us some rice with fish that her mom had prepared that morning. After we finished eating, we joined Zeinap's friends and family in the living room. We were sitting on the floor in a circle, waiting for the henna artists to arrive. The artists came to the house shortly afterwards and everyone decided what design they wanted. We were shown a variety of beautiful designs and I chose the floral pattern because I thought it was the most beautiful. While we were getting our henna done, we had a conversation about what we were going to do at the wedding. We planned to dance all day. Everyone was so excited. Eventually, we said goodbye to Zainap and we went back home.

Last Day:

I woke up at 7 a.m. and went to Zainap's house to get ready with our family and friends. We put on our satan and did our hair and makeup. I put on brown lipstick and white and brown eyeshadow. My hair was in braids with a side bang. I felt very beautiful, especially because I don't do makeup every day. After getting ready, we took photos, then went outside and danced a little with the other people. The musicians played some of our favorite songs and we were happy to have such good music. Next, we ate a big lunch that the moms and aunties had been tirelessly preparing all day. Everyone agreed that the wedding was so nice.

After our meal, I prayed and then I went to see Zainap. I sat with her and I told her the wedding was so wonderful. She was very joyful because she was about to marry the person she loved. After a few minutes, the ceremony started. All the women sat in one room and the men sat in a different one, but the women could hear into the men's room. Zainap and her husband were in the men's room. Their fathers and uncles read the Al-Fātiḥah chapter of the Quran, which is the part that binds them as a couple. Then Zainap, her husband, and his family went back to their house.

Zainap and I used to be very close. We went to the same primary school and would play with each other, but her new house is very far from my home in Tchad and I haven't gotten to see Zainap much now that she is married. However, I am still very happy for her because she got to follow her dream of marrying a man she loves. I hope that someday, I can follow my dreams too.



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