

More Than Just Refugees:

An Interview with Sedra Alshamaly



Nabeeha Ahmed

“How can I help?” Sedra asked her father, Ahmad, at eight years old.

“His intent wasn’t to push me into action. It’s common for parents to want their children to understand the trials they’ve overcome.”

Sedra’s father shared stories online about the Syrian Civil War with Sedra and her younger sister, Shahd. Despite their young ages, he urged his daughters to remember the struggles their family faced before they sought refuge in Canada.

The Alshamaly family fled Syria in August 2012 and took shelter in Istanbul, Turkey.

“We thought we would hide for two months in Turkey until the war settled.”

Two months turned into four years for Sedra’s family, before a sponsorship opportunity brought them to Toronto, Canada in September 2016. Sedra Alshamaly is now seventeen years old, enrolled at Elsie MacGill Secondary School in Milton, Ontario.

Now, Sedra champions Syrian refugee voices through her organization Elegant Art. Since then, she has conducted interviews with *CBC*, *Global News*, *Al Jazeera*, the Syrian Canadian Foundation, and numerous Turkish and Arabic media outlets. She plans to detail her experiences in an upcoming book.

“When you’re in safety, you think everyone else is fine. Especially when you’re young and in the midst of war, you don’t grasp the full extent of what you’re going through.”

Sedra’s family lived in Al-Malihah, a village located on the outskirts of Syria’s capital, Damascus.

“Before the war, there were countless qualities about Syria that made it special.”

Sedra reminisces about the community.

“In Canada, if you want to visit your neighbour’s house, you’d have to book an appointment or something, and say, ‘Oh hey I’m coming over,’ but in Syria, everyone is welcome at any time—we’re all just a big family.”

Sedra recalls The Water Room in her home.

“I have memories of us huddled up on the floor, sleeping there.”

The name came from the empty water dispenser positioned in the centre of the room.

“It wasn’t too big...it had a comfortable size. We intended The Water Room as the dining room. The room had a refrigerator and it’s where my mom hung clothes to dry from the laundry.

“If any bombs happened to drop in our area, it was less likely that we would die if we slept in The Water Room because it’s in the middle of our house. So the outer layers of the house might have gotten destroyed, but maybe not the The Water Room.”

Civilians were bombed as a result of indiscriminate military tactics used by various factions, including the Syrian government, to target opposition-held areas. This resulted in widespread destruction and loss of civilian lives.

“We escaped Syria by car. We crossed numerous borders and faced threats of being sent back.”

These experiences ignited in Sedra a passion to pursue a career in law.

“When we got to Turkey, we had a lot of violence against us as refugees. We had to go into hiding. There was a huge prejudice against my family, and I want to change that by helping others achieve justice. That’s why being a lawyer is a big aspiration for me.”

A sponsorship opportunity came as a big relief and led Sedra’s family to emigrate to Canada.

“It was almost suspicious how nice people were in Canada! We weren’t used to such warmth. My earliest memory is of one of our sponsors welcoming me with a stuffed bunny. Ever since then, bunnies became my favourite animal. That small act of kindness stuck with me.”

Due to her father’s insistence on keeping Sedra and Shahd informed about events in Syria, Sedra was inspired.

“That’s where my sister and I came across this idea of starting an organization to express ourselves through art. We started Elegant Art in February 2019.”

Sedra was 11-years old and Shahd was 9-years old. The sisters create plantable postcards embedded with wildflower seeds which depict the struggles of children in war. They collaborate with the Molham Volunteering Team to ensure that proceeds from their sales go directly towards Syrian refugee camps.

“We know what it feels like to be stripped of your childhood, so we hope we can let others experience a happy one.”

She began writing her memoir after launching Elegant Art.

“Writing is a big form of expression. It’s where I can let out all my emotions. I started writing with the vision of telling the story of my family, and the story of refugees since I come from that background—and I know how these people feel.

“I’ve never told the truth of it all. In the events that I speak at, I say, ‘Okay, yeah, I moved because of the war.’ But then what? There’s so much more to that. There are so many things that I haven’t had the chance to say. I feel like through this book, I will say that.”

Sedra explains, “I began to contact people in 2021 when I was in Grade 7, and they were like, ‘Well, I don’t think you can publish a book since you’re in that age group.’ A lot of people don’t realize that young people have stories to tell.”

Sedra reached out to publishers and outlets. Many responded and said she had a great story. Her excerpt titled, “In Canada, my family doesn’t have to dodge bombs and bullets anymore,” was published in the *Globe and Mail* in 2023.

“This gave me a lot of hope that maybe one day, I will publish my book fully.”

Sedra received an invitation from Plan International to attend the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)’s 2023 Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, Switzerland. At the forum, Sedra delivered six speeches on various topics including psychosocial support for refugees, refugee youth participation and child mental health.

“It was a change from the speeches I’ve done before. This time, everyone was there for the same purpose. I admired that. But, it was disappointing to see such little youth representation in that big space, because it’s kind of like we’re talking about what we should do for these people...without these people?”

During the event, Sedra shared her concerns with Stephen Omollo, the CEO of Plan International.

“He took the advice right away. He stepped down from his women’s refugee rights speech and gave me room to talk. It was kind of him, and I’ve never seen that initiative in other leaders. I can say that speech came straight from my heart because I spoke heavily about my experiences.”

Before the interview concluded, I asked Sedra for her advice to young changemakers.

“A lot of people think that if they are going to enter the humanitarian sector, they need to change the entire world. But you can’t do that. As human beings, we can’t take everything on. Don’t overwork yourself and understand that you also have a limit. Focus your time on the things you’re passionate about, because we truly can’t do everything. And don’t give up. Speak in front of an audience if that’s your passion, write about it, or whatever medium you want to make a change in the world.

“Coming to Canada presented us with the hope of starting new and *being more than just refugees*.”

Sedra’s goal is to instill this hope in other refugees too.