**Syrian family in Rutland now U.S. citizens**

* [By Patrick Mcardle Staff Writer](https://www.rutlandherald.com/users/profile/Patrick%20McArdle)Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Many celebrated the Fourth of July holiday in Rutland County over the weekend from the parade marchers in Poultney on Monday to the crowd at the Summer Smash Demolition Derby at the Vermont Fairgrounds on Sunday, but last weekend American independence was celebrated by two of Rutland City’s newest American citizens.

Hussam Alhallak and Hazar Mansour had their July 4th party at their Crescent Street home in Rutland during the last weekend in June.

Carol Tashie, a volunteer with Rutland Welcomes, said what was most striking when walking into the backyard for the party was how everything was decked out in red, white and blue. She said it was the epitome of a patriotic Fourth of July party in Anywhere, USA.

Alhallak spoke with pride about the party. He said he and Mansour had invited many friends.

“If you come to see my home now, in the front, the porch, big flag, American. My country now,” he said.

Alhallak added that the decorations from the party were still up a week later and he said he wants to keep them up and the many American flags on display.

But like many American citizens, the family’s story did not begin on American soil.

Alhallak said he met Mansour when they both lived in Syria through his sister who was a friend of hers. After he got to know her, he learned that her father was a professor under whom he studied. That relationship made the process a little easier when Alhallak realized he wanted to marry Mansour.

“In my country, you have to ask, before getting engaged. I have to ask her parents. My parents go to her parents to ask if they accept me to get engaged to Hazar. It’s different culture, you know what I mean,” he said.

Violent conflict in Syria led the family to decide they needed to relocate.

“We stay in Syria and we waiting for the war to be gone but the situation is getting very, very worse. After my father die in the war, after this, we are very scared about kids, about my husband, about me, because my father, he was in his car, he was going to his work, you know, and he just got gunshot and he died,” Mansour said.

They were able to leave the country immediately and move to Turkey where they lived for about two years until they had the opportunity to come to America. Mansour said the family came to the United States as refugees with the assistance of the United Nations.

“We don’t know anything about Vermont or about anyplace just the famous places. But we didn’t know anything about Vermont. We couldn’t find Vermont on the map,” Mansour said with a laugh.

She said they initially stayed with a family in the Rutland area and then found an apartment. She and Alhallak then took classes at the Community College of Vermont to get certified as accountants in the United States.

Alhallak had been an accountant in Syria but Mansour had been a French teacher.

They also studied American history in order to take their citizenship test in February. Alhallak said they got all the answers correct and then qualified to become American citizens at a ceremony in March.

“America is my country now. This makes a big difference to me. It makes me happy, you know,” Alhallak said.

Tashie said she was reminded that years ago, before the pandemic, she had a conversation with Mansour who told her, “There’s magic here in Rutland.”

“That’s something I believe. I believe Rutland’s a very magical place. But to hear it coming out of her mouth, to know that after all the struggles in getting here and getting set up, she and that family sees Rutland as a magical place. I think that’s something we can all appreciate,” she said.

The whole family has adjusted to life in the United States. The family’s youngest member, Danyal, 4, was born in the United States, and their other two children Layan, 15, and Mohammad, 12, are now students in Rutland schools. Alhallak said Layan loves to read and appreciates the high school library.

Mohammad has developed his skills as an athlete.

“Mohammad is doing very good for basketball. When I was playing with him, oh my goodness, he doing great at basketball,” he said.

While there was controversy in Rutland about Syrian refugees around 2016, Alhallak said he had not had any negative experiences with residents of the city and said people had been very kind to him and his family, including the volunteers who came to Crescent Street, as part of the Habitat for Humanity of Rutland County, which was dedicated in September 2020.

In an email interview, Dick Malley, chairman of the local resource and development committee for the Rutland affiliate of Habitat, said he was “inspired by what they have accomplished and are doing to make the most of the opportunities that are there for all of us.”

“They left everything they had worked so hard to accomplish when they left Syria. But they brought with them the positive ‘can-do’ attitude and step by step they have made a home for themselves in Rutland. That they have been so successful is a credit to them and to the many wonderful people in Rutland who have welcomed them to their community. Yes, it is a story about the American Dream where hard work and a positive attitude can open the door to a world of opportunities. but it is also testimony to the generosity and strength of the Rutland community,” he said.

The home is a three-bedroom, two-story house, designed with the help of Efficiency Vermont to be energy efficient, with a front porch and a backyard.

Tashie said her experience with the family began almost the first day they arrived in the United States. She said from the first day, she found Alhallak and Mansour to be “two of the most positive, well-intentioned people I’ve ever met.”

Tashie said the two have made an “amazing, enviable life for themselves.” She said when the thinks of Hazar and Hussam and their three children, she “sees the American dream staring me in the face.”

“Nothing makes me happier than to know that this community has welcomed people, welcomed these folks and others, and given them the opportunity to feel like they belong, like they have friends, good jobs, their own home and now, ultimately, citizenship in the United States of America,” she said.

Tashie added that Alhallak and Mansour are now giving back themselves and helping Rutland Welcomes as the volunteer organization works with Afghan refugees.

“They were right there. They were right there to help and offer whatever they could. So they got help and they’re giving help which, again, is the ultimate American dream,” she said.

patrick.mcardle @rutlandherald.com