



In Pursuit of Art

Photographer leaves Damascus to pursue art safely in Campbell River

Contributed by the Welcoming Communities Coalition

In Damascus, Syria, simply carrying a camera in public could be perceived as an act of rebellion.

As an aspiring photographer, Sarmad Almouallem was approached by the military nearly every time he went out in the streets with his camera. To keep his equipment, he often had to offer money or delete his digital photo card.

Syria has been in the midst of a complex and violent civil war since 2011 that has displaced millions of people. Some areas are controlled by the regime, such as Damascus, while other parts of the country are held by Syrian rebels, jihadists, or Kurdish forces.

Almouallem was born and raised in Syria, and had obtained a degree in electrical engineering at Damascus University. He worked at his father's electrical and mechanical engineering company on projects such as a thousand-bed hospital, but his true passion was photography.

"Photography was the medium that I felt I can be connected to and communicate with other people and show them my view," he says.

Almouallem says it was difficult to comprehend why citizens could carry guns in the streets but not cameras.

"I was so focused on trying to do photography and produce art, but it was so hard. I love street photography and it was so hard to carry a camera in the street."

In 2013, he decided to leave Syria for the United States, landing in New York with a visitor visa. His parents stayed behind and, as an only child, he changed his mind and returned to be with his family. A dear friend and photography mentor asked him to reconsider his decision.

"I was like, if we left – the young generation – we have the ability to rebuild ... And he was like, 'It's not going well, you should leave,'"

In 2015, Almouallem went to the oceanside with friends to camp and say goodbye once again. He recalls enjoying the beautiful mountain landscape and that time on the beach and with loved ones while across the water bombs fell and smoke billowed into the sky.

Leaving a second time, he says, took an emotional toll.

“Emotionally and mentally, it was hard on me because I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know if I am going to get sent back. I don’t know if I’m going to see family and parents and friends again.”

Almouallem traveled to the United States by way of Lebanon and Dubai. He made his way across the U.S. and into Canada in September 2015, headed for Campbell River where his godfather lived and applying for status as a protected person.

After a few months living with his godfather, Almouallem managed to bring his dogs over from Syria, found a place to rent on Quadra Island, and took a job as a dishwasher at Heriot Bay Inn. Almouallem speaks Arabic, some French, and English – in Syria, he taught himself English by watching English-speaking comedians and listening to English-language music.

And, importantly, he was able to safely pursue his art ([instagram.com/sarmadalmouallem](https://www.instagram.com/sarmadalmouallem)). He considered moving to Victoria to seek opportunities as a photographer there, but first decided to attend a contemporary Syrian art show at the Campbell River Art Gallery where he met his now-partner. On the day of their first date, he was also offered a job at Photo Tech Foto Source developing film. Needless to say, he decided to put roots down in Campbell River.

Almouallem’s responsibilities at Photo Tech Foto Source increased, and soon he was managing the store when the owners were away. When they decided to retire, Almouallem “rolled the dice, took a risk” and bought the business in February 2021.

He says the support from the community is why the shop is still standing, with residents willing to wait longer for their equipment to arrive from a small local business.

A few years ago, he also successfully brought his parents to Campbell River, and moved off Quadra Island to be closer to them. He says the transition has been more difficult for his parents. They have found the lack of a Syrian community isolating, whereas Almouallem wanted to settle in a community where he could immerse himself in Canadian culture.

“I wanted to try on my own with the people around me,” he says.

Last year, he was appointed the Walter Morgan Studio’s first artist-in-residence by the Campbell River Arts Council and, on June 29, he took his Canadian citizenship test at The Immigrant Welcome Centre. Currently, Almouallem is working on a photography project with a colleague involving a 1932 four-by-five camera with a modern Polaroid back that they plan to show at the store.

When asked if he has advice for other newcomers settling in Campbell River, Almouallem says, “Love it and enjoy the ride. Try your best to share love and respect.”

This article is one of four in an October series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre’s Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in Campbell River. The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Sarmad Almouallem’s story at holdingheritage.com or download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts.



“Photography was the medium that I felt I can be connected to and communicate with other people and show them my view





Inspired

by a father to
experience the world

Contributed by the
Welcoming Communities Coalition

When Taj Singh was nine years old, his father left their home in Punjab, India, to work in the United States, hoping to create a more secure financial future for his children.

His dad worked at 7-Eleven stores in the U.S. while Singh grew up on the family farm with his mom and five siblings.

"He always had a dream for his kids to go to better schools and to have better studies."

One day, a regular customer asked his father if he aspired to own his own 7-Eleven. This conversation lit a spark and eventually he did come to own one of the franchises. Singh says his

father, who has traveled to many countries, is the inspiration for his decision to experience the world. When his dad sold the store and returned to India, Singh was 19 and preparing to leave for post-secondary school in New Zealand in 2009.

"We kind of had seven to eight months of time," he says, which they spent sharing stories. "It was a lot to catch up for him and I think he did a great job."

While Singh already had a bachelor's degree in computer science, he decided to study business administration in New Zealand. His younger brother and an older sister came along, and



he fondly recalls them being “a great team.” After a few odd jobs while studying, Singh started working at Subway Restaurants where he became a manager, and was often sent to different stores by the owners to help get them off the ground. With that experience, he decided to apply to immigrate to Canada, landing in Prince George in the middle of winter.

“The day I landed in Prince George it was minus 28. And I got out of the plane, I’m looking at my hands – I’m like what is going on, because nobody told me it was that cold,” he recalls.

Singh took a job at Staples as a sales consultant and was quickly

promoted to the tech department and then to a management position. After six months he was asked if he would like another promotion to a position at the Staples in Campbell River.

“I had never heard of it. I was like, how’s the weather up there? They said, it’s great. It’s like, when do I move?” he says with a laugh.

He arrived not knowing a single person, but found the team at Staples to be incredibly welcoming.

“I was the only Indian actually working in the store at the time and they asked me questions about my religion and about myself or my country. I was just so over the moon, actually, to tell them because I am a proud Indian.”

It was November 2017, and there were few people from India residing in Campbell River. Singh met other Indian families and stayed connected to his culture through the local Sikh temple.

Singh’s love of food led him back to the restaurant industry. Today, he is the proud owner the Pita Pit on Shoppers Row, one of three on Vancouver Island, which he opened in November 2021 with his partner Shaylene Harry. He recalls being introduced to the franchise in New Zealand more than 10 years ago when a Pita Pit opened down the road from where he worked. He was impressed by the creativity, healthy ingredients, and having the opportunity to influence the menu.

The couple has been at the store seven days a week for 14 to 15 hours a day since opening ten months ago to ensure a successful launch. Harry had to work while Singh attended his Canadian citizenship ceremony on July 2, surprising him when he came into work with a Canadian flag and cake. The pair likes to explore through cooking and trying new menu combinations while respecting cultural dietary needs (such as keeping meat and vegetarian grills separate). One of their goals is to create a menu item that ends up on Pita Pit’s Creation Nation menu across the chain. He estimates that about 60 per cent of their customers are regulars.

Singh and Harry now employ a team of 12, including one of Singh’s sisters who moved to Campbell River this past summer. His young niece has enthusiastically learned to wear a hair net and ensures the chip racks and drink machines are fully stocked.

He continues to reach out to his dad for business advice, saying, “He is the best advisor I could ask for.”

Both his parents continue to be supportive.

“Dad will ask, how is business going? Mom will ask, hey, did you eat today?”

On opening day back in November, his father wasn’t able to be there so he texted Singh in the early hours of the morning - and told him he was living his dad’s dream. It was an emotional moment for Singh. “I took a screen shot of that.”

This article is one of four in an October Newcomer Entrepreneur series contributed by The Immigrant Welcome Centre’s Welcoming Communities Coalition that shares the experiences of newcomer entrepreneurs in Campbell River. The Coalition is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Listen to more of Taj Singh’s story at holdingheritage.com or download the episode from Holding Heritage wherever you get your podcasts.