

Local Kurds United against Saddam Simpsonville Offers Young Families a Future on a Street 'that God Built'

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SIMPSONVILLE -- Deep in the green pastures of southern Greenville County is a dead-end street where 30 ebony-haired children from nine households scamper from yard to yard, porch to porch, as at home with Mama Bahar as with Mama Jalila.

Kurdistan Way, residents call it. Flanked by 23 acres of grass and hardwoods, it is as unlike the sand and rugged mountains of their native Iraq as possible. But it is now the Kurdistan where they will live out their lives.

As the rest of the United States debates military action against Saddam Hussein, the neighborhood of Iraqi Kurds speaks with one voice: Remove him, whatever the cost.

They know that many of their 20 million to 25 million fellow Kurds blame America for withdrawing support in 1975, when the Kurds allied with neighboring Iran over a territorial dispute.

They know that after the 1991 Gulf War, the CIA backed a Kurdish uprising to remove Saddam from power.

Its failure led to thousands being killed by Saddam's forces and thousands more fleeing into Turkey and Iran, littering the roads of northern Iraq with abandoned clothes and possessions.

But these families were also rescued by Americans, and it is with their new country that they are casting their future.

Most of the young men heading the families ran afoul of Saddam by drilling wells for Global Partners, an international relief agency aided by a Simpsonville well-boring company. Saddam thought anyone working with Americans was spying for them, said Swar Zubeer, and the dictator offered rewards for killing the Kurdish workers.

So when the American military pulled out of northern Iraq in 1996, Lutheran Family Services brought 10 families to Greenville County, where six Baptist churches took them in and helped them find jobs, enrolled their children in school and English classes, taught them to drive, to shop, to open bank accounts, to fill out papers.

It's not been easy, not a moment of it.

Swar and Parween Zubeer fled in mid-winter 1996 to a refugee camp in Turkey, where it was so cold the young parents feared their 3-month-old daughter, Suham, would die.

"We thought we were doing good job, drilling wells for the people," Swar said. "But when we got to Turkey, they treated us like we're prisoners, like we're going to prison for crime."

The United States flew thousands of Kurds to Anderson Air Force Base in Guam for refugee processing, before dispersing them across the country.

In Greenville County, Fork Shoals Baptist took in four families, and Cedar Shoals, Augusta Road, Taylors First, Greenville First and Brushy Creek, another six.

Joyce Medlin of Augusta Road remembers the day Ramadan Omer and his family arrived with fewer English skills than any of the others.

"When we picked them up at the airport," Medlin said, "he had a cardboard box with all of their belongings. The only thing he could say was 'Thank you' and 'I don't understand.'"

"He was so humbled that people would help him, but he wanted to be a man and wanted to help himself. ... Now they own their own home (off Poinsett Highway), which is remarkable."

Village life

Four families, including the Omers, are scattered across Greenville. But another nine -- some of the originals plus later-arriving relatives -- find that Kurdistan Way provides the village-style life they crave.

A couple from nearby Fork Shoals Baptist was able to buy the property at a price that surprised them and made lots available to the Kurds at affordable rates. The Kurds pitched in to renovate as each pre-built home was brought to the street, one after another.

"This is the street that God built," said the former landowner.

This is also the street that gave the Iraqis culture shock.

Swar Zubeer remembers his wife's disbelief when they moved into the first house on Oaklawn Road, the country lane that leads into Kurdistan Way. Quite correctly, she protested they were in the middle of nowhere -- a location, explained Swar, that would invite danger back home.

It took Swar some time to persuade her that sheriff's deputies and EMS squads were only minutes away.

But Parween Zubeer, a former high school teacher in their hometown of Zakho, didn't waste a lot of time worrying. She got her driver's license on her first try, while Swar, a university-educated mechanical engineer who had to unlearn Middle Eastern driving habits, took three.

One day, while driving through Simpsonville, they passed a Publix with a Help Wanted sign in the window. Parween told Swar to stop.

Not wanting his wife to work, he stopped only because he was sure the grocery store wouldn't hire her. But the next thing he knew, Parween was a Publix baker, a job she's held ever since.

Now Swar, 36 and recently laid off from Hitachi, is studying for a master's degree at Clemson University. His daughter Hibba, 9, wants to be a teacher. Suham, 6, wants to be a dentist.

Both are possibilities, he knows. Real possibilities.

Families have dreams

Kurdistan Way is, most likely, the only street in the Upstate on which every adult is fasting for Ramadan, the 9th month of the Islamic year observed as sacred with fasting practiced daily from dawn to sunset.

And on March 21, the neighbors will gather for a huge bonfire and picnic in honor of the Kurdish New Year.

The residents watch out for each other, and most fiercely, for their children.

Up near the cul-de-sac, Shivan, 32, and Jalila Abdulziz, 30, work opposite shifts at South Carolina Box and Chick-Fil-A, respectively, so that one is always home with Rejan, 6, and Faner, 4.

Halfway down the street, Muhsen and Aysha Othman live with 10 children, with names such as Shilan and Nizar, Hawar and Hishyar.

But their youngest child -- born the summer after they arrived -- is Susan, named in honor of their Greenville First Baptist friend, Susan Shelley.

Next door are the Zakholis -- Salam, 44, and Bahar, 29, and their three daughters and infant son, Moses. A visitor approaching at mealtime will not get away without a plate of tapoli and kabobs -- even if a guest's presence deprives Salam of a kitchen chair and he has to eat standing.

Salam loads boxes at Hitachi. Bahar cooks at Chick-Fil-A. Their oldest child, Sundus, 11, is a voracious reader with her eye on Harvard Law School.

Like waves of immigrants before them, such second-generation dreams make return to Iraq unlikely.

"Kurdish people, they don't have future," Salam explained in his halting English. "No have safety. We need to be free."

At home now

None of the residents of Kurdistan Way expects to see the real Kurdistan again.

Almost every family has one or more U. S. citizens, born after their arrival in Greenville. Even the older children, the parents say, would no longer enjoy educational opportunities if they returned to war-blasted Iraq.

More important, their children wouldn't be safe.

"When you don't have safe in your home and you come somewhere you feel safe," Zubeer said, "you'll know what I'm talking about. Just sleep safe and don't think about tomorrow. That's the good thing, I think."

Perhaps that's one reason why they have no criticism for American military policy.

Zubeer said U.S. soldiers helped protect northern Iraq until 1996, and then evacuated those who would be targeted because of their association with Americans.

"It wasn't that they left Kurdish people alone," he said. "They still got (no-)fly zone. They still protect them. ... Saddam Hussein, he can't go to northern Iraq."

The Kurds, too, say they support President Bush's campaign against Saddam, though they know bombing will mean deaths among friends and family back home.

"If they bomb over there, they'll kill a lot of people," said Shivan Abdulziz. "But we need to do that. We need Saddam Hussein to go away from there. Nobody has no freedom over there, no jobs, no food. ... I'm sure all the people who live over there, they want the United States to do that."

Their biggest fear, said his wife, Jalila, is that if Saddam is not taken out quickly, he may turn on the Kurds, as he has in the past.

The residents of Kurdistan Way will watch intently on the Kurdish and Arabic channels they receive by satellite dish.

But for them, the Kurdistan they call home is a street in Simpsonville.