

From Syria To Toronto



Mahmoud al Rassoul at work.



Mahmoud al Rassoul + Hisham Mohsen (instructor at Labour Education Center)

It would be the most important newspaper story ever written in the lives of Mahmoud Al-Rassoul and his family.

In early January 2016 the Globe & Mail published a front-page story about a Syrian refugee family and their childrens' their first day of school in Canada. They arrived in Toronto after spending three years in Lebanon where they fled when the fighting from the civil war reached close to their home in the city of Homs. In a sentence in one of the story's last few paragraphs, there was a question about the family's economic future, given that Mahmoud had been a construction worker back home.

That one sentence caught the attention of Labour Council President John Cartwright who himself comes from the construction trades. Cartwright reached out to get in contact with Mahmoud. It turns out that Mahmoud is a carpenter with over 25 years' experience, starting while he was in his mid-teens learning basic carpentry skills from his uncle. Mahmoud came to the Labour Council's office with his sponsor to meet with Cartwright, Najib Soufian of Labour Community Services, and Chris Campbell from the Carpenters Union.

At the meeting, Mahmoud showed Campbell pictures on his phone of his concrete forming work in Syria. It was clear that he could get and excel at a carpentry job in Canada with a little help. But first, Mahmoud wanted to learn some English before entering the workplace.

Fast forward to February 2018. Mahmoud's oldest child is now 18, and his youngest is five. Mahmoud can now hold conversations in English about the work he has been doing. Since arriving in Canada Mahmoud has also received union safety training and landed his first job. One of the union contractors is an Arabic speaker and helped to set Mahmoud up with a job in concrete forming. Mahmoud has worked on projects all over Toronto

and surrounding municipalities. He is now making good wages and his family to be covered by union health benefits.

At first, Mahmoud encountered some significant differences in the construction industry between Syria and Canada. The biggest difference he says was the level of the safety in construction. In Syria, Mahmoud says, "there is no safety." In Canada, he has been working on mid-sized commercial and industrial sites. While many construction methods are similar, Mahmoud had to get used to power tools which were not used much in Syria.

Mahmoud says, "When you go to work here, you have to be flexible and know what skills you are good at. You will always be learning for the rest of your life so watch, ask, and learn from everyone."

With an attitude like that it's not surprising that Mahmoud says he learned to be comfortable on the job here within two months. Mahmoud admits he is homesick for Syria, but he also says that those "who have gone back to Syria get homesick for Canada."

But Mahmoud seems ready to stay in Canada for the long haul. While his experience seems like a one-in-a-million stroke of good luck, the Labour Education Centre, COSTI Immigrant Services and unions in the construction trades are developing collaborative programs that can help get Syrian refugees with basic skills into the workforce as soon as possible. Mahmoud's experience won't be the last success story for a newcomer to Toronto. And our construction affiliates have a strong track record of making those stories happen.