

Mohamad Bassel Khair, Class of 2016, Montclair State University

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In May 2016, Bassel became an alumnus of Montclair State University, where he received his master's degree in nutrition and food science. His feelings of affection for his alma mater go beyond the oft-heard "beautiful, walkable campus," "diverse student body," "superb facilities and professors." When Bassel talks about Montclair State he gets the same joyful gleam in his eye that is present when he talks about his wife and two very young children. He gets a little teary eyed, however, when he talks about his mother, who, still living in Syria, more than likely never will get to hug his two-year-old toddler (Sami) and his infant son (Jad).

Bassel's full name is Mohamad Bassel Khair, a resident of Clifton, NJ, a Syrian immigrant, who is "profoundly" and "eternally" grateful to MSU for "giving him and his family an opportunity to thrive." And even though the 29-year-old has to focus on his responsibilities as a husband, father, and as technology entrepreneur, he makes time to give back to those who are in the difficult situation he found himself not so long ago.

The Syrian Civil War forced Bassel and his wife Lama Alassil to leave Syria in 2012. Bassel and Lama aided dissenters who were injured or lost their homes, because of their opposition to the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In Syria, she was a media student, and he ran a successful nutrition business. She in particular was targeted with threats, because she posted criticism of the regime on Facebook.

When a truck bomb exploded outside of his nutrition clinic and shattered the windows and injured Bassel, their plans for a productive life in their homeland also were shattered. They fled to Egypt where they found no employment, but discovered information that upended their lives in a good way. Bassel learned about a scholarship program for Syrian students founded by the U.S.-based Institute of International Education. He was accepted into the program and won a full scholarship and free housing to Montclair State University. Montclair is part of a consortium of 79 institutions in several countries that give aid to Syrians, in fulfillment of a mission to help students in countries where war makes it life-threatening to go to school. In fact, as of December 2016, Montclair ranked third among host institutions for taking in the most Syrian students and scholars.

Although the funding came from the Institute of International Education, the nurturing came from Montclair State. When Bassel and Lama arrived in the United States on August 4, 2013, MSU's Global Education Center assisted them in all aspects of transition – from pillows and blankets to advice on insurance and his asylum application.

As far as fear of being forced to leave the United States, Bassel feels "reasonably secure," but is grateful to have gotten his recommendation for asylum approved in the fall of 2016. When he first arrived, he had an F1 Visa like any other student. But once his status changed to MSU alumnus, Bassel, in order to remain in the U.S. had to be granted asylum on the basis of the dangerous political circumstances that caused him to flee the country. The news on Facebook continually reinforces the danger Bassel would face in Syria. He recently learned that a good friend – the father of a one-year-old – was just killed.

After Bassel applied for asylum, the U.S. agencies did an intense security and background check on Bassel and his wife. Then came a lengthy interview, followed by a final FBI check. Both were “recommended” for asylum and now are waiting for final approval. Once the final approval is given, Bassel and Lama after one year can apply for green cards.

The Global Education Center also provided Bassel with a job that enabled him to get on his feet until he started his own business – the Watan Network, a certified YouTube service provider. Bassel and his 12 employees help original content owners to monetize their content, protect their copyrights and build complete business strategies. His love of technology may seem unconnected to his love of nutrition and health. But in fact that is not the case. His master’s thesis was based on data derived from a computer program to read facial expressions and study people’s reactions to foods. He is considering returning to Montclair State for a PhD in nutrition science, while still pursuing his technology business.

“I like the health science profession – I really want to help people live better lives,” said Bassel, who along with his wife is very pleased that MSU is located near a large Syrian neighborhood with ethnic foods and restaurants. In addition to nutritional advice, Bassel and his wife dispense the same type of services to immigrants that he received when he and his wife first arrived.

“We provide things for their homes and often do virtual volunteer work from our computers after the kids are asleep – like developing websites and helping others to find online resources,” he said.

The most amazing thing about living here, said Bassel, is a reason that many Americans tend to take for granted. “People in America can speak their minds without fear.” That is not something his mother ever will know, nor will she ever know the joy of holding her grandchildren. Every time she sees them on video chat, she starts crying “which breaks my heart, because there is nothing I can do. But I do know she is as grateful as I am to Montclair State. And that is great comfort to her,” he said.