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Saving Scholars

An international program rescues teachers from oppression and chaos abroad. New Jersey institutions are major supporters.

By **Beth Weinhouse** | | October 8, 2016



Thanks to the Scholar Rescue Fund, Jumana Jaber found a safe haven at Montclair State University after she and her family fled Syria amid fears of persecution.
Photo by Mike Peters / Montclair State University

It's difficult to reconcile the fashionably dressed blonde woman nursing a coffee in Starbucks with the horrifying story she's telling. "First a university friend of my son's was killed," she says quietly, in heavily accented English. "Then my husband was kidnapped."

Jumana Jaber, an award-winning artist and designer, and assistant professor of art at Montclair State University, is describing the circumstances that led her family to flee Syria.

Jaber's husband, Nazih Alhajari, a sculptor and dean of the art school at Alkalamon University in Damascus, where the couple taught, was released by his captors after eight hours. He had managed to reach his university assistant, who was a member of the same ethnic group as the kidnappers. The assistant negotiated his release. Alhajari didn't tell his wife about the ordeal. "But the assistant told me," Jaber says. "He wanted to protect us. He said, 'Get out. Go far from this area.'"

Jaber didn't need persuading. The escalating ethnic violence meant that no one in the family—indeed, no one in the country—was safe. Jaber had been threatened after an exhibit of her work offended some local people who found it too "liberal," and it drew the unwanted attention of religious extremists. (Jaber and Alhajari are Druze, one of the many religious minority groups in Syria.)

Jaber's salvation was the **Scholar Rescue Fund** (SRF), part of the nonprofit Institute for International Education. The IIE has a long history of rescuing scholars in danger, dating from its founding in 1919 and its first rescue of scholars fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution. In 2002, the SRF was formally launched as an entity within IIE. Its mission: to serve the international scholarly community in danger. To date, 653 scholars from 55 countries have received fellowships through SRF from 350 universities around the world. "Ten years ago, most of our scholars were coming from sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia," says Sarah Willcox, director of the SRF. But today, about 80 percent come from the Middle East, with Syria and Iraq most represented by far." The SRF is supported by individual and foundation grants, as well as funds from the U.S. State Department.

The Garden State has played an important role in this global safety net. "New Jersey has been an incredible haven for scholars," says Willcox. "Montclair State University has hosted six rescue-fund scholars, the most in the state. The Rutgers universities have also been consistent hosts—they've offered fellowships to four rescue scholars so far." Other participating New Jersey institutions include Princeton University, New Jersey City University, the Institute for Advanced Study and the Institute of Semitic Studies.

"I really believe any university worth the name doesn't exist as an isolated institution," says Montclair State president Susan Cole. "A university is a member of an international scholarly community. In the most difficult and worst of times, universities have been a vital connection between and among peoples and nations. When there are thousands of scientists and scholars who've lost their academic homes through war and oppression or natural disasters—and consequently lost their ability to teach and learn in their academic disciplines—of course the role of a university is to reach out and help." To date, MSU has hosted scholars from Syria, Iran, Iraq and Rwanda.

Cole has gone beyond hosting scholars; she's made it her mission to persuade other universities in the state to host them, too. To that end, she put together a dinner of New Jersey college and university presidents and provosts, urging them to participate in SRF. "I told them that if each university took one scholar, and we all collaborated, we could turn the Garden State into the rescue state," she declares.

The fellowship grants are for \$25,000, which the host institution is required to match. The fellowships are for one year, renewable for a second year.

Jaber came to MSU in 2013. Her SRF fellowship ended last year, but the university offered her a position in the art department. "I love New Jersey," she says. "Since coming here, I've changed my view of the United States. In Syria, the government blames all the country's problems on the U.S., but when I came here, I realized the people are very friendly, very helpful, and there's equality among everyone." Jaber says she doesn't even miss Syrian food. "You can find everything in New Jersey. All you need is to have strong English, and you'll feel at home."

One of Jaber's countrymen, a Damascus attorney we will call Abboud (he prefers not to give his real name), is currently on an SRF fellowship at Rutgers School of Law, where he specializes in intellectual property, e-commerce and business law. Abboud also left Syria amid fears for his life. "I spent eight years in the U.K. and got my master's and PhD. there," he says. "When I went back to Syria, I had to do my mandatory military service." Two months after he joined the army, civil war broke out in Syria. That was March 2011. Abboud's one-year military stint was extended to more than three. During that time, he was able to get his wife and children safely settled in Canada, but could not secure a visa for himself. When his military service finally ended, he joined the faculty of Damascus University School of Law and applied to the Scholar Rescue Fund.

"Things were bad," he says. "It's a stupid and useless war. It's not like you have to do wrong things to get hurt. One day I was coming to my office, and five minutes before I arrived a mortar shell hit the corridor. The school has been hit eight times by mortar shells. Four students have been killed. Just going to your job, getting on with your life, is very dangerous."

Like Jaber, Abboud is grateful to the SRF and to his new associates. "All my colleagues at Rutgers have been very helpful and supportive, and I've been able to resume my research," he says. "In fact, this is the first reasonably productive year I've had in the past five years. I've managed to publish two articles and get two accepted. I wasn't able to write for the last four years in Syria."

"In the most difficult and worst of times, universities have been a vital connection between and among peoples and nations."
—Susan Cole

As much as Jaber and Abboud are grateful to be in New Jersey, their shared dream is to return to Syria someday. Abboud wants to help rebuild the educational system there. He worries about his former colleagues "and their kids, their future. We had huge plans for the future, but everything went up in the air. At the moment, there's no light at the end of the tunnel."

Jaber dreams of returning to Damascus, where she and her husband had bought an old building they had planned to renovate and turn into an art gallery and coffee shop. "For now, that dream is gone," she says. "I can't think about going back now. It's dangerous, chaotic."

While Jaber no longer has immediate concerns for her family's safety, there are other issues. Her husband is still learning English and hasn't been able to find work. Her older son, a musician, is also struggling to make a place for himself here. Her younger son, Sam, is thriving. He was able to transfer from his Syrian university to Montclair State. After receiving his undergraduate degree in computer science, he was able to find a good job.

"The Scholar Rescue Fund does a lot of good, but there are a lot of complications, too," says Marina Cunningham, who holds a PhD. in Slavic languages and literature and is the recently retired executive director of the Global Education Center at MSU. Cunningham, who was responsible for administering the program at the university, explains: "It's not like bringing a Fulbright scholar from Norway to campus. There are a lot of issues involving customs, housing, family." For the first year, she says, "they're so disoriented, they barely know where they are."

Cunningham says the expectation is for the scholars to find work here after their fellowship runs out. Unfortunately, "it's almost impossible to find a faculty job," she says. "Plus, of course, they want to go back home. When you lose your country, you lose part of your life. SRF is difficult, but no matter what, it's a million times better here for the scholars who receive the fellowships."

Neda Soltani is a former New Jersey rescue scholar who managed to navigate those difficulties and emerge with a new life. A junior professor in English literature in Tehran, Iran, she was forced to flee her country after becoming the victim of mistaken identity, an ordeal she documented in her e-book, *My Stolen Face*. (The book's opening lines: "Only twelve days ago, I was a respected university lecturer, head of a college with over twelve hundred students, and my own academic staff...And now I dare not even show up in my office. Now I have to run for my life.")

After fleeing to Germany, Soltani reached the United States in 2012 under the auspices of the SRF. She received a fellowship to MSU and remembers her year in Jersey fondly. "Everyone was very positive and helpful, and I only wish I could have stayed longer," she says. "My host family was wonderful, and through them I got to know many other people in town. I still miss Thanksgiving and Easter celebrations, having bagels for breakfast—everything bagels were my favorite. The list of things I miss about New Jersey is very long."

Soltani left Montclair State in early 2013 after she was granted asylum and permanent residence in Germany. Now a research assistant and working on another PhD. dissertation (Germany does not recognize the previous degree she earned) at the Free University of Berlin, she also works for SRF, trying to convince more German institutions to accept rescue scholars.

Given the current talk about closing America's borders to immigrants, the SRF's Willcox would like to set the record straight on the scholars her organization has brought to the United States. "It's a mistake to believe that scholars come here thinking it's a pass to asylum," says Willcox. "For most people, asylum is a last resort. I don't think I've met one scholar who says he or she doesn't want to go home. They desperately want to go home."

But until they can, New Jersey has been a welcoming haven for scholars in danger.

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