

AUGUST 2017

An exclusive magazine serving the residents of Lyme and Old Lyme

# LYME & OLD LYME

## NEIGHBORS

Meet the  
*Hamou Family*



**INSIDE AUGUST 2017:**

**RESIDENT FEATURE:** | PAGES 4, 5 & 6

**CALENDAR OF EVENTS:** | PAGES 8, 9, 10 & 11

**COVER PHOTO BY CHRIS DEVLIN**  
OF DEVLIN PHOTOGRAPHY



Best Version Media

# Meet the Hamou Family

By Cameron Cooke | Professional photo by Chris Devlin of Devlin Photography



This month's feature story is not just about the family on the cover. It's also about the people who helped bring them here, and the community-- our community-- which has welcomed them into the fold. Their story has become part of our story, and the lessons we can learn from this family are every bit as powerful as the lessons they learn from us.

Hani Hamou and his wife Yaldiz moved here a little over a year ago with their children Darin (18), Kamber (17), and Mohamed (12). The family is slowly getting accustomed to life in small town New England. They love the area, and for Yaldiz it is the silence that she cherishes. "Not a lot of voices and noise," she says, when describing what she likes about the town. It's not surprising that this is what she mentions, because the prior chapter of their lives was filled with chaos. The Hamous are Syrian, and their children were born and raised in Aleppo. But four years ago they fled their home in Syria, and they haven't been back since.

Hani and Yaldiz married when Hani was 22 and Yaldiz was 17. Hani was in the Army and when he went back for a break, he went to Aleppo and he went to someone else's marriage celebration. It was there that Hani first saw Yaldiz, and fell in love with her right then and there. They were married in a restaurant with lots of friends and family, in a very big party with 5 singers. There were more than 700 people there, and the party was still going at 5am when Yaldiz and Hani left to go home. Hani was the first born and it is traditional to have a big party when the first son is married.

The Hamous loved their life in Aleppo; Hani had a nice job, the schools were good, and they had a nice home. Yaldiz had lived in Aleppo her whole life, and to this day she still misses the handmade ice-cream sprinkled with pistachio that she used to eat. But they couldn't stay, and when Kamber was 14, Darin was 15, and Mohamed was 8, they



left Syria for Turkey. The next several years of their lives were not great. The conditions in Turkey were difficult; it was very crowded and people did not treat refugees kindly.

But a things were about to change. IRIS (Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services) located in New Haven matched the Hamous with a group in Old Lyme, and on May 24th, 2016, the family left Turkey for America. This was the first time all of them had been to an airport and on an airplane, and to them everything here looked very... big.

Donna Lavoie-Gonci, a member of Christ the King Church, describes her involvement with the Hamou family as "an unforgettable adventure into the unknown." She says, "When this effort started in earnest at the beginning of last year, our refugee resettlement committee met multiple times in the months prior to 'our' family arriving in the US trying to actively prepare to the best of our abilities for their arrival. We took full advantage of the extensive informational and educational resources shared by IRIS and, yet, somehow I am not sure we could have ever predicted the extraordinary year plus that has unfolded since the Hamou family arrived in New York a little over a year ago." She notes the unique way in which this family greeted the mountain

of obstacles that faced them here in their new world. "What stands out in sharp relief is the incredibly resilient, patient, open, generous, kind and good humored spirit with which the family embraced each new step and challenge." These challenges ranged from the mundane-- filling out endless amounts of paperwork, visiting doctors and dentists, getting registered and enrolled in school, to the monumental-- learning English, actually going to school after years of no formal education, adapting to a totally new culture, finding jobs and becoming independent... The list is endless, and these aren't things one can do overnight. The Hamous know this; they come from a world where daily struggle is the rule rather than the exception. But now, for the first time in years, their struggle is not a burden, but a blessing. They are not fighting for survival anymore; they are striving for a better life. And in doing so they have impacted the lives of many, "They have shown incredible grace, courage and heart in taking on this new life," Lavoie-Gonci says, "and they have opened their hearts to us in the process. We thought we were doing a good thing...instead we were rewarded with a gift that will continue to give: their friendship as full members of our community."

And the Hamous have made incredible strides since they've arrived. They're learning English, learning the customs of our country, and at the same time are keeping some Syrian traditions alive as well. Yaldiz works at Essex Meadows-- she loves it there and notes how very kind the residents and staff are to her. When she's not working she loves to cook and to help Hani with things in order to take care of her children.

Hani got a job at Mohegan Sun. He enjoys learning about the town and driving around to figure out

*continued»»»*



all of the roads and places. Sometimes Hani still thinks he is dreaming that he is here in America, and he shared that he is scared a bit of the future because this is a new life and he lived for 40 years in Syria and America is so different. He has a lot of experience working in cafes, and he says that if he could have any job, he would want to open a cafe that serves Arabic food and coffee.

The Hamou children are thriving in their new environment. Darin, 18, loves school, and though it has been hard learning English, it is getting easier. Her favorite class is math and she took Algebra I this year. Next year she will take Geometry and loves her teacher, Mrs. Viscio, who has helped her to learn English and to keep up in her classes this year. Darin made honors both semesters at LOLHS this year. She notes how she didn't like math before she started at LOLHS, but after working with Mrs. Viscio, she loves it. Both Darin and Kamber went to the Winter Ball this year, and Darin went to a friend's house before the ball, did her makeup with the girls and then danced with them at the ball. It was a fun night, and she would love to be a hairdresser and beautician when she finishes school.

Kamber, 17, loves being back in school- there were no educational programs to attend in Turkey, and he finds it a blessing to be able to

study after not being allowed to go to school for four years. He too has worked hard learning the English language, and he made high honors both semesters at LOLHS. He is very proud of what he has accomplished, and is very thankful for his teacher, Mrs. Viscio, who has worked very hard with him and Darin and has been very kind. The first time he met her he needed a translator to communicate but this past week when they went to the zoo, he was able to just talk with her and share stories. His favorite subject in school is math and he is looking forward to Biology, but is a little bit nervous about it. Kamber did not like math much before he came here, but loves it now, and he would like to work in Computer Engineering when he finishes school.

Mohamed, 12, calls these "the best days of my life." He loves school, soccer, doing homework, and playing on the Xbox. He swims and plays soccer with his friends, and he played with the Lyme Old Lyme club team this year. Mohamed had never been to school before he started in Old Lyme, and at first he was scared because he didn't know anyone. This June he received the Student of the Month Award at Lyme school and he also graduated from there. He will be attending the Middle School with his friends in the fall, and is looking forward to learning stuff like more math and English and activities like art.

One story he wanted to share was when he met his new friends at the school on Field day last May because they were excited to meet someone else from a different country speaking another language and they welcomed him into their school. Mohamed would like to be a professional soccer player when he finishes school.

The Hamou family is incredibly thankful for everyone who has helped them, especially Donna Gonci, Steve Jungkeit, Faye Richardson, Mark and Cookie Staves, Father Joe, Allison Hine, Pamela, Angela, McGlinchey.



**Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share?**

Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at [ccooke@bestversionmedia.com](mailto:ccooke@bestversionmedia.com).

In April last year a committee of volunteers from three churches in Old Lyme – First Congregational, Christ the King and Saint Anne's Episcopal – applied to IRIS (Integrated Refugee and Immigration Services) to cosponsor a refugee family. IRIS, the largest of three refugee resettlement organizations in Connecticut, was expanding its program to partner with community groups to welcome new refugees.

It took a lot of planning to demonstrate that we could provide affordable housing, medical care, a good education for kids and entry level jobs for adults, but we met IRIS' criteria and just before midnight on May 24th, 2016, a small delegation from our committee sat in a dark parking lot in New Haven, waiting for the family that would soon become an integral part of our lives. We knew little about them – only that they had fled their home in Syria almost five years earlier and that by the time they reached us they would have been travelling for over twenty-four hours. We expected an exhausted and anxious family, but when the van door opened out bounced five energetic people, with smiles as big as the sun. Although the Hamous spoke three languages, English wasn't one of them, and it was significant that the first words from Hani's mouth – the ones he had memorized – were "Thank you! We want to work!!"

And work they have!! Over the summer, with the help of a small army of volunteers (by now our numbers had grown to sixty-eight,) the family into dove into English, endured dozens and dozens of doctor, dentist and eye appointments, braved their first ever swimming lessons and, thanks to generous scholarships, met new friends at soccer and tennis camps. By the end of July Hani was working full time in Old Saybrook and studying

hard to take the Connecticut driver's exam. By September the kids were enrolled in school for the first time in five years. By November Hani had his license and took over driving for the family, and in February Yaldiz started a full time at a job she loves.

From the first day this wonderful family has been enthusiastic, full of fun, and eager for every new experience America has to offer, and to a person we volunteers agree that we've received more from Hamous than we've given. Seeing the joy on their faces when they saw Long Island Sound for the first time made us think again about the beautiful place we call home. We laughed like kids when we couldn't master even the simplest steps in a circle dance Hani and Mohamed were trying to teach us. While we introduced them to hamburgers, Yaldiz and Darin cooked delicious, beautiful Syrian dishes from scratch! Seeing how proud Hani and Yaldiz were when Mohamed was picked as the Student of the Month at Lyme School, and when Kamber was awarded a certificate for academic achievement at Lyme/Old Lyme high school, reminded us how lucky we are to live in a place where all kids have the right to a good education.

Even though our committee's official responsibility as co-sponsors ended in April – the family is fully independent and paying their own way – we are still in regular touch. The difference is that our relationship is now one of friend to friend, neighbor to neighbor. You could say it is a dream come true.

~ Faye Richardson