“You can choose freedom. You can choose to work. You can choose to collaborate with other humans. But you have to be brave enough to do it.”

— Nada Odeh

I have known Nada for roughly 4 years through the Buffalo Summer Symposium, also known as the Summer Academy for Human Rights, held annually at Erie 1 Boces. This year the seminar was held virtually, like most other events, but needless to say Nada was online with our group offering her charisma and talent as if she were with us in person. Every year since 2016 at the symposium, Nada has dedicated a session to painting; to turning art into activism. Nada has utilized art as a tool in creating change in her home country, Syria, and in her second home, America.

Nada first received her B.A. in Fine Arts at Damascus University. In 2012, Nada left Syria to spend time in Dubai and the United Emirates. In 2013, she came to America and began pursuing a M.A. in Museum Studies at Syracuse University through a scholarship program known as 100 Syrian Women 10,000 Lives. 100 Syrian Women 10,000 Lives is a scholarship awarded to Syrian women who take civic responsibility and demonstrate both leadership and academic excellence. Nada received this achievement and was able to successfully graduate in 2018 from her masters program at SU. Although she started off with small roots, she now thrives as a renowned artist, with her artwork having been exhibited in Damascus; Dubai, United Arab Emirates; New York City; Detroit; Toledo; Tiffin; Washington D.C.; Syracuse; Albany, New York; and Auburn, New York.

Nada’s relationship with art began developing as a young child, through the influence of her mother, which makes art one of her strongest tools in building awareness around the Syrian refugee crisis. She has been drawing since the age of three. She explains that her “mother was an artist herself. She was not really a practicing artist. She took classes for several years under professional teachers and artists in Syria during the 1950s. [My mother] was my very first art teacher.” While Nada watched her mother paint and create with pencils, acrylics, and watercolor she realized she, too, wanted to have an artist’s eye. “[My mother] saw that I have all this passion for art. She wanted to strengthen my performance as an artist.” This is why all throughout the summers of elementary and middle school Nada was registered in art classes. “I
spent my whole summers painting and drawing.” Art became a pivotal outlet for Nada to cope with hardships. Art is the trusted companion that aids Nada in surviving.

Born in Syria, Nada is a survivor of the Syrian refugee crisis and is now an asylum-seeker in America. She never imagined leaving the beautiful city of Damascus, and still has a strong attachment to her home-country. “I didn’t leave Syria by choice. I left it by force...Every time I close my eyes I always see myself walking in the streets of Damascus. Those memories are a part of me not wanting to feel separated from home.”

Nada is part of what she calls the “the New Syrians,” the Syrians who didn’t come to America 30 years earlier in search of prosperity, but rather the Syrians who are looking for sanctuary. “Older immigrants do not understand what we go through. Coming after the war is totally different than leaving your country and knowing that you are able to go back whenever you want, [it] makes you more able to achieve things.” New Syrians don’t have the luxury of stability or choice so even when migrating to a new country they oftentimes face mental adversity.

The war, the Syrian regime, and simply needing a safer place for her children, forced Nada to make the difficult decision to flee. Before Nada graduated from college she had multiple engagement offers from Syrian men in America, but always declined because she didn’t want to ever be too far from her home in Syria. To this day it still dawns upon Nada that she may never visit her home again.

Nada’s heart may always be in Syria, but she’s worked hard during the last seven years to embrace her new life in America and use her art as a way to communicate the refugee experience. Images of refugee camps and the pivotal experiences which make up her journey can be seen in her artwork. In her art series titled, Royalty in Refugee Camps, Nada reflects on the idea that refugees have pride and value in their home country, but when they have to resettle in a new country where their worth isn’t immediately recognized, it shakes their confidence. This phenomenon is seen in many countries across the globe. Refugees are often pitied and seen as powerless. When collecting donations for a refugee camp in Turkey Nada noted, “people were not respecting refugees” and were sending donations in extremely bad condition.
Recognizing this lack of empathy and consideration pushed Nada to take back power and create the *Royalty in Refugee Camps* art series. “I wanted to reflect the whole experience in a different way and not show the refugees as being very miserable people but as a person in their house.” Nada showcases the individual without the label of refugee. Depicting the strong sense of self they had in their home and contrasting that with the background of a refugee camp illustrates that the experiences of a refugee does not define them.

Labels can be restricting and place expectations on people. Nada’s artistic vision is continually adapting. Thus, through her art, Nada strives to break the boundaries that label us, and to teach others that humans and the life they make up cannot be shoved into boxes. Nada fights for this message through her art and through her work as an activist. America means a lot of things to Nada. It’s a place of stability for both her and her children, but, most importantly, America is now home. This is why Nada continues to act as an advocate and defender for the silenced voices in America and further works to amplify these voices. Nada doesn’t want to cap herself by only supporting other Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, but rather be open-minded and step out of the bubble of her own life.

One way she recommends doing this is by volunteering, “People underappreciate volunteering, but volunteering is a great way to be part of the community – to be able to mingle in the community.” Volunteering is a way Nada integrates into her local community and into American culture. Through volunteering she can meet new people from completely different walks of life and learn their struggles. Volunteering has forced Nada out of her comfort zone but has also enabled her to distinguish how she can better her current community, and her country America, as a whole. She is a strong ally in both the Black Lives Matter movement and the Women’s Rights movement. “You’re either a humanitarian or you are not. You can’t say I’m a humanitarian only for the Syrian crisis but then forget about other issues. I think it’s all connected.” This intersectionality in systemic prejudice, that Nada identifies, is key in constructing a more equitable society. Nada not only upholds Syrian rights but all human rights. She doesn’t want to feel limited in how she can help.
Nada tells me that she is changing everyday, that she always seems like a new person. "I change a lot. I don’t know why, I look always different. I’ll never find one photo of me that looks like the other. Sometimes I think this is a different person but the reality is, it's me. Maybe I should have gone into acting.” This fluidity that Nada has in never tying herself to one identity allows her to so deeply empathize with people from all types of backgrounds through her art. Instead of letting past experiences and present labels tell her who she is, she sheds any definition. When looking into Nada’s art we look into her eyes to see resiliency of the human spirit. Despite the circumstances a person comes with, if they continue to fight for what they believe in, they will always prevail.