



Carolyn Suda and Mariela Shaker in one of Monmouth College's practice rooms.

Starting Over

Fleeing war-torn Syria with the hope of a better life, violinist Mariela Shaker found much more: a second mother.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN • PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID ELLIS

ONE AUGUST EVENING IN 2013, professor Carolyn Suda was walking across the quad at Monmouth College, a small liberal arts school in Illinois. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a young, dark-haired woman carrying a violin case. “We’re a small school, and I know everyone, so I thought, *Who is that?*” recalls Carolyn. “Then I realized, *Oh my God, it’s Mariela!*”

Carolyn ran up and embraced Mariela, whom she’d never met. “Something happened when I saw her eyes and she saw mine. The connection was immediate.”

Not long before, Mariela Shaker, then 23, was teaching violin in her hometown of Aleppo, Syria. Mariela had to dart through rubble-filled streets with bombs detonating nearby to get to her students. But in March 2013, Carolyn, who directs

the college’s chamber orchestra, saw Mariela performing on a YouTube video sent to her by the head of the school’s international recruitment department. That’s when she made it her mission to bring Mariela to the United States.

After watching Mariela play two difficult pieces with admirable skill, “I could tell that her affinity for the violin would be an asset to our orchestra,” says Carolyn. “I was aware, too, of the tragedy occurring in her country—we all felt so powerless and knew we wanted to help her.”

Violent explosions and daily power outages were Mariela’s reality. The daughter of an English teacher father and a mother who worked as a medical lab assistant, Mariela dreamed of becoming a professional musician before the Syrian civil war, which began four years ago. By the time Carolyn and Mariela began emailing, Aleppo was quickly becoming ground zero in the conflict, which has claimed 250,000 lives. “I would be in the classroom and a bomb would go off 100 feet away, and we’d have to dive under a table,” Mariela remembers.





Mariela treasures her green card and acceptance letter.

Mariela now lives in Chicago, over 3 hours away, but visits Carolyn and the Monmouth campus.

"My house was randomly bombed two or three times—windows shattered, door blown in."

The two women emailed for weeks and grew close. Because Mariela was so talented, Monmouth offered her a scholarship; Carolyn helped her acquire a student visa. Finally, in July, Mariela, her mom, Salwa, and brother Karam took a bus from Aleppo to Beirut. "It was the first day of Ramadan, and no one was allowed food or water. It was incredibly hot, with no air conditioning," Mariela recalls. "We hit 40 or 50 checkpoints, and the

soldiers were so suspicious of my violin case that I often had to open it to prove there was no gun." The 185-mile trip took 17 hours.

SAYING GOODBYE

The trio then waited at the Beirut airport, talking until Mariela's flight was called. Confident until then, Mariela turned to her mother and said, "I don't know if I should take this risk."

"I'm not worried about you at all," Salwa replied. "Be strong—you will do great."

So Mariela hugged her mom one last time and flew to the U.S. alone. Two days later, three buses traveling the same route out of Aleppo came under fire. Mariela heard that several civilians were killed.

After they met on campus, Mariela and Carolyn quickly became inseparable. "Our bond was enormous right away," says Carolyn. "I admired her so much. Here's this girl who doesn't know if she'll ever see her parents again—she has to make it. She

“Mariela never says, ‘Poor me.’ She realizes that life is a beautiful blessing of joy and pain...and she chooses joy.”

doesn't assume for one minute that anything will happen for her."

Mariela threw herself into her studies, and Carolyn was there to help her acclimate. She became the orchestra concertmaster—the person who is the lead violinist and assistant conductor—and practiced 8 hours a day. In the evenings, Carolyn helped her with her English and schoolwork, or took her on long walks along Lake Michigan. Mariela spent holidays with Carolyn and her husband, David, a retired humanities professor, who has likewise been a mentor to Mariela. (The couple also has an adult daughter, Annie, a professional cellist who lives in Los Angeles.) Mariela, now 25, has learned to love much about American life, although she's not a fan of turkey, stuffing or ham. "I really miss my mom's kibbe—ground meat with wheat and spices," she says, "but I do like Chinese fried rice with vegetables."

Throughout her two years in the United States, Carolyn says, Mariela has remained fiercely self-sufficient, refusing to let the couple help her monetarily. More



Above, from left: Mariela celebrating her first birthday in 1991, with her mom, brother and grandmother Janet Tarakji; graduation day in 2015, with hugs from surrogate parents Carolyn and David Suda; Mariela's first solo recital was at the Syriac Orthodox Church in Aleppo in 2007.



WHERE MARIELA IS FROM

Only a few years ago, Aleppo, a once-beautiful city called "the Jewel of Syria," was a major industrial center. Aleppo was pulled into the civil war in 2012, and government and rebel forces have been shelling one another ever since, causing tens of thousands to flee the city. In Syria, 11 million have had to leave their homes, and over 4 million have sought refuge in other countries.



important to Mariela is Carolyn's love and encouragement. "Carolyn has always been there for me and is always willing to help. She cares so much," says Mariela. "Every day, I worry about my parents, as well as my brother," she says. (Karam emigrated to Greece on a rubber boat in October 2015, and, as of this writing, is in a refugee camp in the Netherlands.) That Mariela stays focused on her music amazes Carolyn. "Despite the adversity she's faced, she never says, 'Poor me,'" Carolyn says. "She realizes that life is a beautiful blessing of joy and pain...and she chooses joy."

Carolyn's maternal presence has also been a source of comfort to Mariela's parents in Aleppo, where they live without water, electricity or Internet. After Mariela's spring 2014 recital, Carolyn spoke on the phone with Salwa and told her how beautifully Mariela had played. In a solemn voice, Salwa told Carolyn, "You are Mariela's mother now."

Carolyn was stunned. "It was one of the most emotionally powerful moments," she says. "I felt deeply sad for her as a mother, and also aware of how much a part of Mariela's life I had become. I said, 'I will never replace you; one day the two of you will be back together.'"

HER NEW LIFE

In 2014, Mariela was granted asylum in the U.S. She's now working toward her Master of Music Performance at DePaul University. (She chose a Chicago program in part to stay close to the Sudas.)

The reality is that Mariela may never see her biological family again. It's nearly impossible to get a visa to come to the U.S. But she hopes her story will inspire young people struggling in Syria to never give up. Last year, Mariela played at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, for World Refugee Day. Her

performance was dedicated to the roughly 4 million Syrians who have fled since the conflict's start. Now, when she's not studying or working to support herself in Chicago, she fundraises for the Syrian-American Medical Society to bring healthcare to refugee camps. The group hopes to send Mariela and other artists around the world to settlements to teach young people the healing power of music and art. "These children have been exposed to a lot of violence," says Mariela. "We need to live in peace. We have seen enough horror."

Mariela is making the most of her opportunities, and Carolyn is grateful for her surrogate daughter. "We are from different worlds, but we're kindred spirits," she says. "I always want to be a part of her life."

Mariela wouldn't have it any other way. "She gave me care and warmth, and she has believed in me from the beginning. I could not have survived my new life without her being by my side," she says.

WANT TO HELP?

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is the leading international agency providing lifesaving assistance and protection to refugees and others forced to flee their homes due to war and conflict. Visit unhcr.org to learn more.