

She's in a wheelchair, but young Syrian refugee withstands long journey

By Philip Oltermann, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.15.16

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Nujeen Mustafa, a refugee from Syria in a wheelchair, moves toward the Croatian village of Tovarnik, close to the official Serbia-Croatia border, on September 16, 2015. STR/AFP/Getty Images

Nujeen Mustafa lives in the quiet German town of Wesseling, where the streets are lined with neatly trimmed hedges and rows of parked cars. It is the kind of boring suburb that most 17-year-olds can't wait to escape. Nujeen is no ordinary teen, though.

A year ago, Nujeen made a 3,500-mile journey from Syria to Germany in a bulky wheelchair. Her adventure involved dodging masked Islamic extremist fighters, navigating Mediterranean waters and fending off packs of wild dogs. Now the wheelchair is folded up on the porch of the apartment Nujeen shares with two sisters and four nieces.

Nujeen was born on New Year's Day 1999 in Manbij in Syria. She is the youngest in a Kurdish family of 11 and is very proud to be a Kurd. The Kurds are an ethnic group in the Middle East with its own language and culture.

Book Describes Her Journey

This pride has shaped Nujeen's view on Syria's collapse into a civil war. The country's population split into those who support President Bashar al-Assad and those who oppose him. According to Nujeen, the Kurds in Syria could not trust either group. She wrote this in a book about her life called "Nujeen: One Girl's Incredible Journey from War-torn Syria in a Wheelchair." The memoir was co-written with journalist Christine Lamb.

More than a year ago, the Islamic State set up its headquarters in Razza, less than 100 miles from Manbij. The Islamic State is an extremist group that wants to start its own country under Islamic law. Its fighters have taken over parts of Syria, and Iraq is also partly under its control. Nujeen and her siblings knew that as Kurds they would be in danger from the group, so they decided to flee Syria.

For Nujeen, the journey was particularly hard, because she has grown up with a condition known as "tetra-spasticity." She sits in a wheelchair because she cannot control her legs. "They kick up when I am speaking, my ankles turn inwards, my toes point downwards, my heels point up, and I can't walk," she says. "I am forever stuck on tiptoes."

Nujeen learned to make up for it with an exceptional curiosity. In Syria, she watched nonstop satellite TV: Disney cartoons, science documentaries, football matches. But it was discovering the Internet that changed Nujeen's life. "I would go on to YouTube and look up the most famous pieces of music in the world, or the most famous museums," she says.

Her English Comes In Handy

She also learned English by watching American TV shows. This turned out to be very useful as she and her siblings journeyed north to escape the Syrian war. They made their way from Turkey to Greece, then through Macedonia to Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. Nujeen's parents stayed in Turkey.

Germany had always been the final destination for Nujeen and her siblings. On September 21, 2015, Nujeen was pushed across the Austrian-German border. She became one of just over a million refugees who entered the country that year.

Last October, she started attending a school for children with disabilities. Although at first it was difficult and unfamiliar, she has quickly become fluent in German. She has also started to make friends at school, even though the children in her class are two years younger. Recently, she says, she has even started dreaming of them rather than the war.

Attending A University Is In Her Plans

Nujeen's long-term plan is to become an astronaut. "But if it doesn't work out, I still have my imagination," she says. She has recently developed an interest in geography and biology, and is determined to go on to university in Germany.

Nujeen has applied for asylum in Germany. Asylum status would protect her as a refugee and allow her to stay in the country. Almost a year after arriving in Germany, Nujeen is still waiting to find out if she will be able to stay permanently.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel recently announced that all refugees who arrived last year would be registered by the end of September. For Nujeen, time is running out. She has only three

months, until she turns 18, to apply for her parents to be reunited with her in Germany.

An Upbeat Attitude

She is optimistic, though. In an email, she explains that she has become "a waiting expert."

Most of Nujeen's family and friends have left Syria, but Nujeen still follows the news of what is going on at home. That's mostly because she can't avoid hearing about it.

"It's horrible what's happening in the world now," she says. "One of my basic rules is that no one is born evil or bad, and I think watching the news will make the basics of this principle shake.

"We need a major, major thing to restore our faith in humanity now, but I still have hope," Nujeen adds. "When you keep hope, you are pretty much in a good situation."

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the section "Book Describes Her Journey" that BEST explains why Nujeen's family finally decided to leave their home.
- 2 Which sentence from the section "Her English Comes In Handy" BEST supports the idea that Nujeen knew what place she wanted to end up in after she left Syria?
- (A) They made their way from Turkey to Greece, then through Macedonia to Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria.
- (B) Germany had always been the final destination for Nujeen and her siblings.
- (C) Last October, she started attending a school for children with disabilities.
- (D) Recently, she says, she has even started dreaming of them rather than the war.
- 3 Which of the following sentences develops the idea that Nujeen wanted to share her story with the world?
- (A) Her adventure involved dodging masked Islamic extremist fighters, navigating Mediterranean waters and fending off packs of wild dogs.
- (B) She wrote this in a book about her life called "Nujeen: One Girl's Incredible Journey from War-torn Syria in a Wheelchair."
- (C) "I would go on to YouTube and look up the most famous pieces of music in the world, or the most famous museums," she says.
- (D) "One of my basic rules is that no one is born evil or bad, and I think watching the news will make the basics of this principle shake."
- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Her English Comes In Handy."

She also learned English by watching American TV shows. This turned out to be very useful as she and her siblings journeyed north to escape the Syrian war. They made their way from Turkey to Greece, then through Macedonia to Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. Nujeen's parents stayed in Turkey.

How does the paragraph BEST develop the idea that Nujeen's journey out of Syria was challenging?

- (A) It indicates that Nujeen was forced to use English on some parts of her journey.
- (B) It shows that Nujeen made the journey with her siblings but without her parents.
- (C) It highlights multiple countries that Nujeen had to travel across as part of her journey.
- (D) It explains that Nujeen started her journey by traveling north to escape the war in Syria.