



# from Baghdad to Buffalo

Story: Eileen C. Herbert '04

Photos: Tom Wolf '86 and Hussam AlMukhtar

In many ways, **Hussam AlMukhtar** is just like any other Canisius College student. He attends classes, studies, lives in a residence hall and enjoys spending time with his friends. But AlMukhtar's life is anything but ordinary. He is an Iraqi displaced by war.

"Iraq became unsafe for my family," said AlMukhtar. "Militia groups were targeting professional people and 99 percent of my family have professional careers."

AlMukhtar's grandfather is a consultant to the ministry of industry, an uncle is head of the Arab Lawyers Network in London, a cousin was the Iraqi ambassador to the United Nations, and another cousin was Iraq's minister of trade. "Our name is well-known in Iraq," explained AlMukhtar.

In addition, the family's efforts to work with independent American journalists resulted in a series of threats toward the AlMukhtars. In 2006, the family fled Baghdad for Syria but AlMukhtar opted to stay to finish his bachelor's degree. Shortly thereafter, four of his best friends were brutally murdered by a militia group.

"I had no idea that my friends were killed," he recalled. "The next day when I went to class, everyone poked me and touched me to see if I was real. They heard I too had been killed and thought I was a ghost. I realized then that I had no choice but to join my family in Syria."

AlMukhtar found a job in Syria as an outreach worker in the United Nations Public Information Office. Through his work, he learned about the Iraqi Student Project (ISP). Created by American peace activists Gabe Huck and Theresa Kubasak, the organization helps Iraqi students complete their studies in the United States. Universities waive the cost of tuition and fees and local support groups pay for the students' additional expenses. In keeping with the Jesuit mission, Rev. Charles Currie, S.J.,

president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), encouraged Jesuit universities to help Iraqi students. The Catholic peace organization Pax Christi USA contributes to AlMukhtar's living expenses.

"I experienced the hospitality and humanness of the Iraqi people in Baghdad and Mosul while on a peacekeeping mission in 2003," said **Bill Marx '62** of Pax Christi. "So I was delighted to hear that Canisius had invited an Iraqi refugee to attend the college and happy to offer support through Pax Christi."

AlMukhtar's fluent English made him a good candidate for the ISP. His Iraqi education in telecommunications engineering made him a good match for Canisius' Communication Studies Program. Still, AlMukhtar found the ISP concept difficult to grasp.

"Why would these universities do this for me and why would people take care of me?" he wondered. "I applied but until I received the call from the American Embassy to pick up my visa, I didn't believe it was real." AlMukhtar knew nothing about Canisius College or Buffalo. "I Googled it," he added.

AlMukhtar was among the first group of Iraqi students sent to the U.S. by the Iraqi Student Project in fall 2008. His youngest brother came through the ISP in 2009, and his oldest brother studies in the United States on a Fulbright Scholarship. "Now all of my mom's sons are here," said AlMukhtar, who speaks with his mother regularly via Skype.

AlMukhtar experienced many differences when he came to the U.S.; among them were the academic differences, particularly the college's writing requirements. "We had very difficult tests in Iraq but never had to write papers," said AlMukhtar, who noted that the syllabus for his political science class included a 40-page writing assignment. "It was terrifying," he said.



As an outreach worker for the United Nations, Hussam AlMukhtar often met with Iraqis to prepare them for visits from UN officials.

With the guidance of **Jonathan M. DiCicco, PhD**, assistant professor of political science and the instructor of the course, AlMukhtar learned the mechanics of how to successfully complete writing assignments. He also credits Communication Studies Professors **Melissa B. Wanzer, EdD** and **Barbara J. Irwin, PhD**, for helping him adjust to academic life at Canisius. In turn, they note that AlMukhtar is an asset to the department.

"As a CEEP (Canisius Earning Excellence Program) student, Hussam helps with our Web site and our alumni survey," said Irwin. "He writes alumni profiles and designed our alumni newsletter. He is very creative and is proficient with numerous software applications."

But it is the entire campus community that benefits from international students such as AlMukhtar.

"Hussam enriches our activities, events and classrooms by sharing his cultural perspective and life experiences," said **Jerome L. Neuner, PhD**, associate vice president for academic affairs. Neuner was instrumental in bringing AlMukhtar to Canisius. "He joins other Arab and Muslim students here who expand our students' understanding of the larger world, especially the recent history of Iraq and the Middle East."

Campion Hall, which houses both American and international students, is AlMukhtar's home-away-from-home. "It is nice to be with other international students who are going through the same things that I am, such as missing home and family, and adapting to a different culture," he said. "We've become one another's family. We live, study and watch TV together, and we annoy each other, as well!"

They also cook dinner together. Among AlMukhtar's favorite American foods are "pancakes, pancakes and pancakes." He also likes hot dogs but doesn't understand Buffalo's taste for chicken wings; nor does his mother.

"When I told my mom I was going to a festival to eat all different kinds of chicken wings, she said, 'I don't know why they eat chicken

wings, but ok, just be careful!"

AlMukhtar also does his best to embrace Buffalo's winter weather, as Iraq's winter is similar to fall in Western New York. "I went ice skating and wore three hats, two coats and three pairs of pants," he said. "I was huge."

Although he is half a world away from Iraq, its future and his fellow Iraqis are never far from his mind. He recalled, "Life in Iraq before the invasion was different than most would imagine. Our extended family was all together. We would have family gatherings of 30 and 40 people. We had social clubs and a night life that was wonderful. You could walk down the street at 4 a.m. and it was 100 percent safe. We received a food allowance and education was free. You could live a good life there."

It is with a sense of sadness that AlMukhtar compared those earlier times with a now war-torn Iraq. "Iraqis are still without water and only have electricity for one hour every two days," he said. "It is unsafe for my family to return, so they will stay in Syria."

AlMukhtar's hope is to join his family in Syria after he earns his degree. He plans to continue his work with the United Nations or another humanitarian agency. "I want to work on behalf of the Iraqi people," he said. "If I could help just one person, it would be worth it. Right now, I feel like I am doing nothing and because of that I sometimes can't sleep at night."

AlMukhtar said he also lies awake thinking about the debt of gratitude he owes Canisius College, Bill Marx and PAX Christi. "Mr. Bill told me that I was a gift from God but it is I who owe him so much," said AlMukhtar. "And Canisius College, when I hear or see the name, I am speechless. I am so thankful for the generosity extended to me but I also feel like such a burden."

AlMukhtar would like to somehow pay back his support groups and Canisius College. "I will figure this all out," he said. "I will find a way. And then, I will be able to sleep." ■