

THE STORIES: SONDUS



First name: **SONDUS**

Last name: **AL-KADRI**

Age: **29**

Country of origin: **SYRIA (DAMASCUS)**

Living in **Portugal** since: **2015**

SHORT SUMMARY

Sondus, a 29-year-old Syrian woman, has remarkable strength, autonomy and determination. She escapes from Syria and arrives in Portugal by chance. Take advantage of the opportunities that arise in the best way possible, to study and be an excellent, competent and specialized dentist. Despite the war, setbacks and losses, she maintains the focus of her life and strives for it: to be a competent professional and live in peace with her daughter.

“I’M GOING TO GIVE MY DAUGHTER THREE THINGS: PEACE, LOVE AND DIGNITY”

LIFE IN SYRIA

Sondus was born in Damascus, although she lived most of her childhood and youth in Saudi Arabia, Ryad. Her father had an invitation to work in Ryad and the family moved to Saudi Arabia. She remembers spending holidays in Damascus, for 3 months, to be with her family: uncles, aunts, grandparents,

cousins. When she finished school, she returned to Syria to attend a university accompanied by her sister. In 2005 she moved to Daraa, where she started studying dental medicine.

THE CONFLICT

In March of 2011 the civil war began and one of the first cities to enter the conflict was precisely Daraa. Early on the city was surrounded, which made access to the university very difficult for people who were in the centre of Daraa. There were also no contacts with the outside world. The trips to the universities were often interrupted by military barriers and movements of troops and equipment. *“It was the first time I saw these things, it was a great shock! As our university was close to Daraa, I began to see and hear the war.”* The family told her to return immediately to Saudi Arabia because the sisters were alone in Daraa, but Sondus said she will only leave Syria when she gets her certificate. Within the university there was great tension between those in favour and those who were against President Bashar Al-Assad. The tension was so great that the Director of the university sent all the students home and closed the classes. There was a constant fear inside the university. With the conflict worsening at the doors of her home, she decided to return to Saudi Arabia. During the time she was in Daraa, Sondus marries and has a daughter. But the marriage does not work and Sondus divorced. The daughter moves to live with her husband’s family in Damascus, and since she has not a visa to go, Sondus leaves for Saudi Arabia alone.

**Make your
decisions without
fear to reach your
objectives**

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BETWEEN SYRIA, SAUDI ARABIA AND TURKEY

In 2013, she returned to Syria to meet again and live with her daughter. The girl's father, a medical surgeon, had left the country, leaving the girl with her paternal grandmother. Sondus went to live in Damascus. Four months later she gets engaged, a new boyfriend and a new perspective on life. But a month and a week later the fiancé dies in an attack. *"This was more than hard for me, I have no words to describe."* Finally in May 2013, she got the visa for her daughter and returned to Saudi Arabia. She returned to live with her mother, father and brothers. Although now in a safe place, she would like to return to Syria someday. She really wanted to be able to help her country. Back in Saudi Arabia, she cannot continue her studies, so she moves to Istanbul, Turkey, to study at the Arab International School in Istanbul, Al-Kharsa Orthodontic Clinic, where she graduated in Dental Medicine. However, she realized that staying in Turkey would not be the best place where to continue her studies. The idea of returning to Syria was now completely set aside.

ARRIVAL AND LIFE IN PORTUGAL

In Istanbul she heard about the online platform created by former President of the Portuguese Republic Dr Jorge Sampaio that made possible for "refugees" to come to Portugal to study. She gathered all the necessary documentation and applied. *"I did not know anything about Portugal, Lisbon, nor did I know the language."* She arrived in Lisbon on October 2, 2015. *"As soon as I arrived I asked to take Portuguese classes. I was told that I was going to live with a Portuguese lady who only spoke French and Portuguese and I only spoke*

**I need
to make friends
here, or I cannot
survive.**

Arabic and English. I panicked. How could I communicate with this person?": At first she was greeted by the daughter of this lady who spoke English but who was not at home all the time. So she felt the real need to learn the language. She thought this was the first step towards inclusion. She studied Portuguese at the CIAL, a language center in Lisbon, and practiced with the Portuguese family with whom she lived. "I tell all the refugees I know. The first thing to do is to learn Portuguese. Everyone says it's difficult but I say - You have to learn! If you want, you can do it!"

NEW BELONGINGS AND INCLUSION

LISBON

"I wear a headscarf, I always have my head covered, and when I'm out on the street, some people look at me strangely. I always respond with a smile. A smile always disarms. Smiling is a language of the world!" In Lisbon she felt at peace and safe. *"The people are very nice, they look at me more out of curiosity."* Thus began a master's degree in dentistry at the Faculty of Dental Medicine of Lisbon. In the university environment was very well received. She talks a lot in her colleagues' curiosity but not in any kind of rejection. *"They asked me very curious things: Do you have cars? Do you live in homes? Do you see television? I had to laugh at the questions... but I try always to answer all questions".* She thinks that in this way she helps to demystify the day-to-day life in the Arab world. In her master's degree a group of eight students called "girls of orthodontics" was created. Although informal they have regular gatherings. We do not have much time, we have to study a lot. . .

"I always tried to integrate myself, here in Portugal. I always try to talk to the

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people in my neighbourhood and in my circle of friends". She finishes her first master's degree in Lisbon. She thinks she has to go on. "I thought! And now? What do I do? I need to study more! Back to Syria I cannot anymore". She found out that she can apply for a new scholarship, but now in Porto. When she left Lisbon for Porto, the lady who hosted her did not want to receive the key of the house. She did not let Sondus to take off all her clothes, either. "This is your home in Portugal. You keep the key and you leave your clothes here so you can always come back", said the lady. Last Christmas all the (Portuguese) family gathered money to buy a ticket for Sondus to go to a Conference in the United States. "My family, my Arab friends are far away. If I do not integrate with the Portuguese, if I do not make friends here, I will not have the strength to live."

PORTO

She joins a more specialized Masters at *Cooperativa de Ensino Superior Politécnico e Universitário* in her area, Orthodontics, more specific in surgery. And she continues her studies. A new opportunity to increase her knowledge. Today in Porto she lives in a rented room, she participates regularly in her peer group activities and has a normal life within her host family. She says that she studies a lot, but tries to live a life as a Porto "citizen", even thinking that she is already well integrated. She has daily contacts with her daughter over the internet. She cannot go to visit her in Ryad, nor can her daughter come to Portugal (the visa is only for her), but the great dream is to be able to quickly build a life together.

THE FUTURE

"I am building my future and the future of my daughter. I am a single mother, I have to improve in my profession, I will do anything to make my daughter happy, with peace, and with a normal life. I just want peace. I do not want more than this, this is what I want in the future. I'm going to give my daughter three things: peace, love and dignity. "