

## WORLD SCHOLAR-ATHLETE GAMES

# One Iraqi student shares 'a real story, a sad story'

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**SOUTH KINGSTOWN —** Omar Nadhem lost his best friend this year, and he is lucky.

Lucky because, unlike so many other Iraqi teenagers, he did not lose his friend Areeb to a bullet, or a bomb, or a piece of shrapnel. His friend has run away, fled the country with his family because his father is a doctor, and a doctor in Iraq gets death threats. But here in Rhode Island, par-

ticipating in the World Scholar-Athlete Games and on his first trip to America, Omar, 17, a Shiite Kurd who goes to high school in Baghdad, feels the absence of his best friend deeply. All around him are people his age laughing, playing, having fun.

They do not have to be hunkered down in their homes by 8 p.m. They do not live in fear of death every day on the streets of

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JOURNAL PHOTO / GRETCHEN ERTL

**Senia Abderaham, right, wipes her eye after talking about life in a refugee camp in the Western Sahara at the World Scholar-Athlete Games at URI.**

# Student

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their hometown. They do not lose their best friends because their fathers are doctors. Seeing other teens happy and free, as if it is their birthright, reminds him of the toll the war has taken on his country, and of the childhood that was wrenched away.

"I have a story to tell: a real story, a sad story," Omar told a crowd of 100 of his peers from nations around the world at the University of Rhode Island yesterday, where he has come to play soccer as a part of the world games. He hopped up on a stage, grabbed a microphone, and told listeners about his friend Areeb. Told them what it's like to have the person you depended on torn away, and to grow up in fear. Told them to remember how good they have it, to appreciate the little things — like walking outside at night.

"When you go back home, I want you to know how lucky you are," he said.

"You have a life. I don't. I'll be going back to death, to rivers of red blood. I have no life. The war took my life away from me."

Omar is angry, but he is not bitter. He loves his home country, and he misses it even though he has been away for only a week.

He was afraid to come to America. He thought that everyone would ignore him, or be mean to him because he was Iraqi.

"I was so afraid that people would not be interested in me. But they are so friendly and they try to help. We don't help each other so well back home.

"I saw hope here. I can help back home," he said.

Omar asked that his picture not be taken for fear that people in his homeland would see it.

He wants to return, become a doctor someday, and help rebuild his country so that others can have the childhood that he missed. So that they can play soccer on real fields, instead of running in between cars and around bombed-out buildings.

"At the age of 16, you need that stuff," he said. "There are no winners in the war. We all lose in one way or another."

Senia Abderahaman, 18, lost her childhood as well, though she never knew it until recently. She grew up in a refugee camp in southwest Algeria, with 200,000 other refugees from Western Sahara in the largest camp in the world, a huge overflowing tent city where the food is always emergency United Nations aid and the sun beats down at up to 120 degrees.

Her family left in the 1970s, after the Spanish empire abandoned the nation, and it was swept up in war between Morocco, which claims it as its own territory, and local nationalists. Three of her uncles were killed trying to reach the camp, and her grandmother was blinded. Her grandfather was killed soon after.

She grew up in camp, knowing nothing but rows of tents. She calls herself a citizen of Western Sahara, but she has never set foot in the country.

"I've never seen the trees, the mountains, of Western Sahara. I live in a country that's not mine. The life I live is very insecure," she said.

Then, she was able to attend a school in Norway for two years, and saw what it was like for

teens there. Suddenly, her life in the refugee camp seemed limited.

"You don't realize it, especially if you were born in the camp. I never thought I was missing anything, until I went to Norway," she said. Then, she saw the way children and teenagers grew up in countries free from war and fear. She grew to want it for herself and others.

"I want them to be able to live peacefully, to live freely, to be able to lift up the flag of Western Sahara, in Western Sahara," she said.

She has never been to America before coming to Rhode Island this week to play volleyball in the games. But she will soon return. In the fall, she will attend Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts.

"I think I'm very, very, very lucky," she said.

The World Scholar-Athlete Games is a nine-day event bringing together 1,900 students from 155 countries and all 50 states, to live together and play sports at the URI campus, administered by the nonprofit Institute for International Sport. This year's theme is bringing about world peace through sports.

For students in the audience, it was eye-opening to realize what the people they play soccer and volleyball and basketball with all week will go back to when the games are over.

"It makes you feel so much for them — I teared up. You just love them in the sense that you want to be there for them, even though you don't know them. There's something about not being able to go home that is so sad. It makes you appreciate home yourself," said Ellie Gass, 16, of England.

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