



Student of

From Seminole High School:
Rami Mouro

the Month

Rami is on the Seminole HS Deans list, a member of the Robotics Club and planning on attending the University of Central Florida majoring in Robotics

Rotary Club of Seminole Officers 2015-2016:

| | | | |
|---|----------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| President | Tim Ingold | Sergeant at Arms | Jim Woodworth |
| President Elect | Bob Matthews | Bulletin Editor | Jeff Graves/Ruth Berry |
| Secretary | Lorie Whitney | Past President | Gerry Miller |
| Treasurer | Mike McQuilkin | | |
| District 6950 Website - www.rotary6950.org | | | |
| Website - www.seminolerotary.org | | | |
| Rotary Club of Seminole P.O. Box 3313 • Seminole, FL 33775-3313 | | | |



ROTARY 2015-2016

Club Number 4289

May 4, 2016



SEMINOLE SMOKE SIGNALS

PRAYER FOR TODAY: Loving God, grant us the strength to persevere in serving you. Amen.

PROGRAM THIS WEEK: Phyllis Stockfisch - Turning Your Vacation Photos into Magazine Quality, Taking that perfect photograph

PROGRAM LAST WEEK: Andrea Gregor, Founder of the Gregor Group, HR Consulting

PROGRAM NEXT WEEK: Chuck Oldanie
Global Collaboration with India

Upcoming Events:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| May 14th: | District Training Assembly |
| May 18 th : | Jaime Smitte - Cerebral Palsy and Augmentative communication. |
| May 25 th : | Heather Burford - Update on Seminole Fire Department and recent recognition |
| June 16 th : | Annual District Awards and Governor's Banquet |

Crisis at the doorstep

More than a million refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan streamed into the European Union last year. Most entered via Greece after a harrowing raft trip across the Aegean Sea from Turkey. Once there, they made their way north, often on foot, traveling more than 1,000 miles through the rugged mountains of the Balkan countries toward Germany.



That was the uncertain odyssey facing Muhammad Mallah Hamza, a 26-year-old ethnic Kurd, in late 2014 when he decided to leave his native Syria. The trip would lead the recent college graduate to a picturesque Austrian village – and into the arms of a local Rotary club that would allow him to begin a new life while helping others in his situation.

I meet with Mallah Hamza in a cafe in his new hometown of Feldbach in the southeastern Austrian state of Styria. The town of 5,000 people, best-known for producing white wine and pumpkinseed oil, is far removed from the chaos of the Middle East. It's the kind of place where schools and churches are well-scrubbed and bank branches and drugstores are shiny, and where the loudest sounds on the streets are bicycle bells. It's now home to around 150 refugees.

Mallah Hamza is, as they say in Austria, sympathisch – that is, immediately likable, with a calm demeanor and an easy smile that disappears only when he speaks about the situation he left in Syria. As a recent graduate of Damascus University with a degree in English literature, he explains, he was about to lose his exemption from serving in the army of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad and being forced to fight the array of rebel groups, including Islamic State (ISIS), that are opposed to Assad's rule. "I did not want to die fighting ISIS," he says.

Mallah Hamza's perilous two-month journey from Syria to Styria was routine for refugees making their way from the Middle East to the relative safety of Europe. He first crossed the Syrian border into Turkey, where human traffickers arranged passage on a 9-foot-long rubber raft bound for Greece. The tiny vessel held seven others and was barely fit for the crossing. "It rained so hard that night," Mallah Hamza says, describing the passage. "It was horrible."

Once in Greece, Mallah Hamza surrendered to police and was placed in temporary detention to begin the process of requesting asylum. Here, he says, he learned that many – perhaps even most – people in Europe do not want the refugees. "The police treated us like animals," he says. "For three days, they did not give us food or water. They wore masks and touched us with gloves as if we carried disease." From Greece, Mallah Hamza set out on a tortuous, nerve-wracking journey north. It began with a two-week trek through the woods to the Albanian frontier, where he and a fellow refugee befriended a border guard who hid them in an apartment in the capital, Tirana. From Albania, more furtive border crossings by night and plenty of bribes paid to police and hotel receptionists took them through Montenegro, Serbia, Hungary, and finally Austria, where they wound up at the Traiskirchen refugee camp, 20 miles south of Vienna. In Traiskirchen, Mallah Hamza lodged a formal application for Austrian asylum and was reassigned to a shelter in the village of Edelsbach, not far from Feldbach.

The final stop of Mallah Hamza's journey proved particularly fateful, both for him and for the Rotary Club of Feldbach. On his first morning at the shelter, he wandered into Edelsbach to get some bread and found himself face to face with 69-year-old baker Fritz Hummel. The rapport between the two men was immediate, and they struck up a close friendship. "Fritz Hummel treated me like a son," Mallah Hamza says. Hummel is just as affectionate: "He's a great kid," he says.

Hummel describes himself as "not your typical Rotary guy." Most of the 48 members of the Feldbach club are doctors or other professionals. Hummel, a Rotarian for more than 20 years, works in a bakery that was founded by his father in 1953 and is now run by his son. He's a big man with an obvious appetite for bread and pastry, but with perhaps an even bigger heart. "I traveled to Syria 40 years ago and I was treated very well there," Hummel says. "Rotary means helping people, and that's what I wanted to do."

Before the refugee crisis, Feldbach Rotarians were best-known for sponsoring the town's annual Christmas concert and raising scholarship money for local students, but the connection between Mallah Hamza and Hummel led the club to become more deeply involved in solving Austria's most pressing problem in years. The centerpiece of that effort is a program to collect donations of money and household items to help the refugees adjust. "We give them clothes, food, computers, and televisions, as well as used bicycles," Hummel says. "We also help them to meet with doctors and lawyers from the club."

The sheer number of refugees – as many as 6,000 a day entering the European Union late last year – has spurred a powerful backlash in Austria against the EU's largely open-door refugee policy. Opinion polls show that Austrians are deeply divided on the issue of accepting the refugees. A survey by researcher GfK -Austria in October revealed that 49 percent of Austrians want the inflow slowed or halted through tougher border controls.

Given the amount of apprehension and fear, the Feldbach club's role extends beyond providing material goods and services to trying to inform the general population, according to Rotarian Manfred Krasnitzer. "Rotary members are the town's opinion-makers," he says. "When people here have a more realistic idea of what is happening, they can correct their impressions."

In sketching out a role for the Feldbach club, Krasnitzer says members need to start thinking further ahead. "This means, first of all, helping the refugees to learn German," he says. "Then we need to identify skills within the refugee population and to help them to make contacts so that they can find meaningful work."

The desire to demonstrate ways to help the new arrivals sparked an ambitious plan to provide temporary housing in a former hunting lodge on the grounds of a Renaissance chateau near Feldbach. Schloss Kornberg is the family estate of Andreas von Bardeau, a count and a member of the Feldbach Rotary Club. (His wife, Anna, is a great-granddaughter of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Habsburg throne whose assassination in Sarajevo in 1914 set off World War I.)

Bardeau is an affable man in his 50s with a no-nonsense business attitude softened by a dose of aristocratic charm. "I was brought up in a house where we were taught to think 'European' and 'international,'" he says. "I wanted to show people here that the situation is calm." The Kornberg hunting lodge has a long history of welcoming refugees: The building housed displaced persons for several years after both world wars.

Through his connection to the Feldbach club and his friendship with Hummel, Bardeau got to know Mallah Hamza and eventually hired him to live in and manage the shelter, which opened in November. Mallah Hamza's ties to Rotary have also helped him obtain a long-term residence permit and a driver's license, both of which are crucial documents as he starts a new life.

The Rotary club's actions may have inspired other local groups to do more to reach out to refugees. Back in Feldbach proper, a local high school has started classes for school-age refugees who would not other-