



Family: Zainab Al-Baaj

Artist: Kate Brooke

At 15 years of age, Zainab Al-Baaj and her family were forced to flee their home in Basra, Iraq, just ahead of Saddam Hussein's soldiers. Their flight across the desert came so suddenly that Zainab was forced to leave her belongings, down to her shoes, behind. At the refugee camp where the family found a safe haven, Zainab met her future husband, Mohammed. The family now includes three children, Norhan, Taha and Suzanne.

Through a series of conversations with artist Kate Brooke, the stories of Zainab's life unfolded. The artist says their conversations were interspersed between Zainab's assistance to Middle Eastern and North African refugees, the core of her job as head of the MENA Hope Project at the Good Neighbor Community Center.

"This piece is primarily about Zainab's early life and her journey out of Iraq," says Kate. "It is an interactive piece, one you are invited to travel upon and to touch. Many of the objects carry text, like pages in a book; please pick up and read those objects, replacing them where you found them. If you were to visit Zainab in her home, you would remove your shoes at the door. Please remove your shoes to walk on the piece that tells her story."

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Zainab Al-Baaj and her family came to the United States from Iraq. They have made a successful adjustment by picking the best of both cultures. Mrs. Al-Baaj says the children speak Arabic at home, while they must speak and think American when they are away. "This requirement is a burden to children," she says. But she and her husband know it is important for them to remember their heritage, traditions and religion. Mike Flowers, the intern for Mrs. Al-Baaj's Stories of Home team, says: "Mrs. Al-Baaj seems like a very kind and loving person. Although I have only known her a short time, I can see in the work she does (as director of Hope MENA), that she is very selfless and devoted. She told us how she collects her loose change in a big jar and when it is full she sends it back to Iraq for needy families."

Photo: The Al-Baaj family (from left to right): Suzie, Zainab, Norhan, Taha, and Mohammed.

Photo Credit: Kate Brooke

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