

Picture this in your imagination:

You are leaving your country that you were born and raised in for over 30 years because of conflict, fighting, guns and fear. You are leaving a place that was home to you and your spouse and children so that your family will be safe. You are leaving to hopefully find a job, a space to live in, and to exist in peace.



This in fact, happened, to **Iftikar Houlani** who ended up leaving Syria in 2011 to travel 5 hours as a refugee to Lebanon to start her family's life over again. There, her husband found work for 2 years but then his job ended and they were forced to move out of their accommodations as there was no money being made to pay rent. Their only recourse was to reside in a 3 metre by 6 metre (9 foot by 20 foot) fabric tent in a refugee camp with their three children. Living in a tent in Lebanon was Iftikar and her family's reality for the next three years. In the summer, the temperature would climb to plus 40 degrees Celsius (104 F) and fall to -8 degrees Celsius (17.6 F) with snow accumulations during winter months. Iftikar's family endured the temperatures together as they waited for a chance to build a new life. That opportunity came when a United Nations worker offered them the possibility of moving to Canada. Iftikar's husband agreed to moving to Canada and they landed in Winnipeg during a blizzard on December 9th, 2016.

The biggest challenge when arriving in Portage la Prairie was speaking and communicating in English as they only spoke Arabic. The entire family has managed to learn English with the help of the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre and the children have been immersed in the language through their studies with the Portage la Prairie School Division. The Houlani children are in grades three, eight and twelve this year.

Iftikar says that she really enjoys the community of Portage la Prairie and finds that people are friendly and helpful. She speaks to other Syrian families in Winnipeg and she finds that the community of Portage la Prairie has been more welcoming to their family compared to the experience of some Syrians she is in communication with in Winnipeg. Iftikar is presently beginning to work towards her grade 12 schooling through the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre and hopes to find meaningful work helping others in our community. She wants to give back to the community of Portage la Prairie in the same way that her family was assisted and she has begun this process by volunteering as part of the Immigrant Advisory Table group. This is a group that addresses how Portage la Prairie is excelling or missing the mark in welcoming Newcomers to the community through their "lived experiences". This information is shared with the Portage la Prairie Local Immigration Partnership Council, who utilize the Newcomer's experiences to discover the gaps in the community and suggest solutions that make moving to Portage la Prairie a more inclusive and welcoming experience.

In addition to volunteering, Iftikar also enjoys hobbies and activities including; sewing, swimming at Stride Place on "Ladies' Night", going for walks and finally cooking. In fact, Iftikar is already famous for her cooking abilities and she makes some scrumptious Syrian dishes such as falafel (deep fried chickpeas) and shawarma (a wrap full of chicken and hummus and spices) as well as many other Syrian favorites.

Iftikar and her family are pleased to be in Portage la Prairie however there are many things that she misses from her home country. She misses her big family of brothers and sisters, her mother and grandmother. She hasn't seen one sister for over six years and it is her hope that one day she may come for a visit to Canada. Iftikar also wishes for a place of worship for her husband as he misses his mosque and more people who also speak Arabic in the community. Nevertheless, Iftikar is happy to be part of the Portage la Prairie community, and is calling it "home" as she has made so many great friendships in a short two-year span. She feels safe and at peace with her new life in Portage la Prairie.



From Pakistan to Portage la Prairie

A young 20-year-old, **Raahim Iqbal** made the journey from Pakistan to Winnipeg to become an International Student at the University of Manitoba in 2011. He arrived in December in the cold winter after finishing 5 years of Army Boarding School in Pakistan.

At the Army School, he learned a great deal of discipline including daily exercising at 5:30 a.m. breakfast on time or there was no food until lunch, classes all day from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and praying for 20 minutes, (shalwar qameez) five times a day. Although it was prestigious to be at such a school, it was also a very lonely time for a young man who was only 14 years of age to be so far away from his family. Many of the other young men at the school were similarly homesick for their family and friends.



Now in Manitoba, and not familiar with the country and city of Winnipeg, Raahim began his post secondary education without friends or family—very similar to his experience at the Army School. He had to figure out where to live, where to get groceries from, how to get around the city and try to make friends in a strange but opportunity filled land. He began his international studies at the University of Manitoba, but then transferred to Red River College to complete his 2-year study of Business Administration. As a full-time student, Raahim also worked part-time at various Mac's Convenience stores. He worked for a total of 5 years part-time and during this time period, the Vice President of Mac's Stores approached him to become an owner and run his own Mac's location. Raahim began thinking about it as he worked toward his "Permanent Resident" status in Canada, which he achieved in 2014.

With his permanent residency achieved, Raahim was able to go back to Pakistan and finally visit his family after not seeing them for 3 years. As of March 2019, it has been 5 years since he has visited his family.

Again, Raahim was asked to take over a Mac's Convenience store, and finally in October 2016 he decided to manage the store on Saskatchewan Avenue in Portage la Prairie for 6 months to see if he would be interested in investing in the business. In April 2017 after managing the store, he became the owner. Although the name of the store has been changed to Circle K, it is still the same convenience store and gas pumps with an addition of a roller grill with fresh hotdogs and taquitos waiting to be devoured. Raahim has found the community of Portage la Prairie to be extremely hospitable and receptive in helping him find accommodations and the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre played a major role in acclimatizing him to his new city. He attributes the great customers and welcoming community which made him want to invest in Portage la Prairie; both in business and residential properties. In fact, Raahim is so invested in the community of Portage la Prairie, he has continued his journey and became a Canadian citizen on January 10, 2019.

When asked what would be on his wish list for development and improvement in Portage la Prairie, he thought for a moment and then suggested: more Halal meats in the stores, a community centre that could be used for events and daily prayers, a good public transportation system, downtown public washrooms and a regulation sized cricket field.

Overall, Raahim is pleased to be part of the community of Portage la Prairie and looks forward to current and future customers coming into his business to say, "hello" and conversing with him and his friendly staff.

