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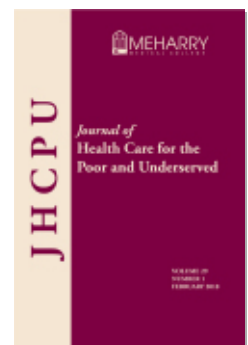
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From Syrian Refugee to Dishwasher to Heart Doctor: The Inspirational Story of Hero and Humanitarian Dr. Heval Kelli

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Abstract: It has been said that those with the least are often the ones with the most to give. This proved to be true for a Syrian refugee turned cardiologist who provides care in communities that are poor and underserved including refugees, immigrants, minorities, those of low socioeconomic status, and other vulnerable populations. Dr. Heval Kelli is the epitome of a kind-hearted, humble, genuine hero, through his dedication to serving humanity. Between providing health care to those in need, educating future generations of doctors, mentoring high school students, and advocating for the less fortunate, his life is truly his message to the world.

Key words: Refugees, immigrants, community health, health equity.

Who knew that a little Syrian refugee boy with glasses and an inquisitive mind would eventually become a heart doctor in the USA? Dr. Heval Mohamed Kelli's story is quite remarkable and inspired me from the moment I saw his work with the Refugee Coffee Company and the Clarkston Community Health Center.

Dr. Kelli and his brother were born in Kobane, Syria to Kurdish parents. He was deeply affected when, as a child, he saw his father, a civil lawyer, being tortured in the middle of the night then taken to jail for refusing to work with the government of Syria. When he was 12 years old and his brother was seven years old, his family paid smugglers to get them out of Syria and they ended up living in Germany in a refugee community for the next six years. Life was not easy, in part because the family knew they knew they were in Germany only temporarily and that they had no promise for a future there.

Two weeks after September 11, 2001—the date of the historic terrorist attacks by hijacked planes on the World Trade Center in New York, the U.S. Pentagon in suburban Washington, D.C., and a third flight aborted in Pennsylvania—18-year old Heval Mohamed Kelli was able to relocate on asylum status with his family to Clarkston, Georgia. He arrived in the United States unable to speak any English; since his father was not able to work due to poor health, the young man took a job washing dishes and cleaning bathrooms at a local restaurant 30–40 hours per week. He would take two buses and a train to get to work since this was his only opportunity to help his family

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Dr. Heval Mohamed Kelli

move forward. This restaurant happened to be a few miles away from Emory University, where he would see local college students pursuing their dreams of education while hoping he too could one day obtain a college degree. Dr. Kelli reflects, “Being a refugee, I lost everything every time we moved, so I pursued higher education because I knew that no matter what happens, I will never lose my knowledge. Medicine was a like a language to me and gives me the power to communicate with people while healing them. Being around Emory University was a constant reminder to keep working hard until I achieved my goal.”

Living in Clarkston, where the majority of people were in the same socioeconomic situation, made it difficult to know what path to take to become a doctor from the starting point of a recent refugee. As a refugee now living in the United States, Heval and his family lived in a small apartment where he and his brother shared one bedroom, where they would take turns sleeping on the single bed while the other one slept on the floor. Heval’s brother Mohammad was fortunate enough to receive a full scholarship to attend a private high school, Pace Academy. As luck would have it, his brother’s classmate’s father, Dr. Omar Lattouf, was a doctor and Emory School of Medicine Professor and later became Heval’s mentor. Dr. Lattouf, a cardiothoracic surgeon at Emory, saw Heval Mohamed Kelli’s potential and took him under his wing. Heval pursued his undergraduate studies and graduated from Georgia State University, then went on to medical school and graduated from Morehouse School of Medicine in 2012. After completing medical school, he went on to complete his internal medicine residency at Emory, where he received recognition as resident of the year as well as honorable

distinctions in social and inpatient medicine. Currently, he is a Katz Foundation Fellow in Preventive cardiology at Emory.

Despite being busy with his medical endeavors as a cardiology fellow, Dr. Kelli makes time to give back to the community in myriad ways. He provides health care to refugees, immigrants, and underserved populations in his daily work, and helps provide care at a free clinic (the Clarkston Community Health Center) on weekends. He knows what it is like to not speak the primary language of a community and to feel that even basic needs such as health care are inaccessible, so he volunteers his time to help ensure even the most vulnerable populations receive health care.

Due to these life experiences, Dr. Kelli is a steadfast advocate for serving communities in need and mentoring and educating future generations. He is a co-founder of several non-profit organizations focused on medicine and education. These include You4Education and the Young Physician Initiative, which is a program that provides a positive and engaging mentorship experience to prepare high school students in their journey toward becoming a doctor in the future.¹ Both programs began started in Dr. Kelli's former high school, a school many immigrants and refugees attend, most of whom may not otherwise have a mentor. U-Beyond is another initiative that Dr. Kelli co-founded with his mentor Dr. Lattouf and local community leaders, aimed at "providing an environment for a positive and engaging mentoring experience between the youth and schools and communities to help youth develop personal skills and career opportunities."²

You4Prevent is an initiative that Dr. Kelli co-founded to help people to take charge of their health through education about heart disease and empowerment of other people to provide health education in their communities. As if all of this does not keep Dr. Kelli busy enough, he is the co-founder and president of the Kurdish American Medical Association, an organization focused on connecting Kurdish American doctors with medical and college students who are Kurdish or of Kurdish descent.

Dr. Kelli's research involves using mobile health technologies to bring health education to underserved areas and also focuses on the impact of socioeconomic status on cardiovascular health and the role of disparity in oxidative stress and inflammatory markers. Through a National Institute of Health (NIH) funded grant, he studies the impact of neighborhood features and socioeconomic status on cardiovascular risk factors. His background living in a poor neighborhood was the motivation to study the impact of the areas in which people live on cardiovascular disease, and led to a publication entitled "Association Between Living in Food Deserts and Cardiovascular Risks."³

Dr. Kelli's pure heart and his dedication to serving humanity surely make him a hero, but he will be the first to say he is not one, but instead an average person. His humility makes him even more endearing, and he empowers each person he encounters to believe they have greatness in them and unlimited possibilities and capabilities in life. He interacts with all the children he encounters as lovingly as he would his own, and works tirelessly day in and day out to ensure that children have better opportunities for the future than they may have otherwise.

When I first connected with Dr. Kelli, we realized our mutual love of serving refugees and underserved populations, and immediately got to work determining how we

could collaborate. In speaking to him about the needs in the community in Clarkston and among all the refugees, immigrants, and underserved populations in the area, we identified many needs, and Dr. Kelli's passion for the work he does became abundantly clear. He finds inspiration in the lives of the prophets who have been leaders through their examples of service to others rather than through words alone. While some may not have had the same opportunities, he is working to change that. "I feel inspired that I gained the skills and platform to be able to serve my community. I started a pilot program that provides pre-medical education to high school seniors with the motivation to inspire them to choose a career in medicine. I was inspired when I returned to speak at the STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] conference at my former high school. I realized the power of being present in underserved communities." A decade after arriving to the U.S. as a refugee, Dr. Kelli is already making a profound impact not only on those in his community, but inspiring people around the world to serve and to pursue their dreams.

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