



By Ala Alkhatib

When I'm asked, "Where are you from?" I don't know what to say. I usually respond with, "Do you mean originally? Or, where was I born? Or, where I currently reside?"

I was born in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). However, I do not consider that my home country. Originally, I am from Palestine, what is now called Israel.

My parents, grandparents and every great-grandparent was born and raised in Palestine.

My parents and grandparents were forced to leave their country so I continue to claim Palestine as my home country.

I grew up in the UAE until age 12, and then moved

to Chicago in the summer of 2000. I love that I was exposed to so many cultures.

But I really want to have and engage in my own. As I was growing up, I didn't truly realize what I was missing. On the other hand, when my family and I migrated to the United States, I felt like an alien for the first time in my life.

Perhaps, it was because the UAE people spoke the same language – Arabic. Here in the United States, everything (including the language) was different.

Throughout our lives, the constant struggle to find the right place to live was challenging. Both my parents grew up in the town of Beit Iksa in Palestine.

In 1948 when Israel was created, most of my extended family had to leave Palestine. My father was 16 and my mother was 6. They started a journey



with their own families to find a new place to call "home."

My mother and her family moved to Jordan, and my father and his family moved to Syria. Both of those countries share borders with Palestine.

My grandparents tried to find new professions to support their families. They opened and closed businesses, and worked in the military. One even became a real estate agent.

All the children continued their education. Both families struggled financially for some time but eventually became more economically stable.

In time, their second homes became their new countries.

In 1974, destiny united my parents in marriage. My father had finished his education and become a teacher. He lived in Syria so my mother had to move there.

A year later, my father got an opportunity to teach in the UAE, a country in the Gulf region of the Middle East. At the time, any Palestinian who was given the chance to move to the Gulf didn't think twice about it.

At the time, the UAE wasn't as advanced in the luxuries of life other western countries. When it rained heavily, schools closed and most people stayed home because the streets and schools flooded due to inadequate sewer systems.

Most schools had open playgrounds used for assemblies and gym classes because the weather was mild except for the hot summers. In comparison to other Arab countries the climate was amazing. The heaviest garment that I owned was a sweater, something that would be sufficient for Chicago's fall season.

Few people spent summers in the UAE. For us and other Palestinians, summer was a time to visit our homeland.

As a child, there wasn't anything that I asked for that wasn't given to me. My siblings and I were all spoiled, from the oldest to the youngest.

We even had gum, chips and/or candy delivered right to our door through a service provided by a nearby shop that sold a variety of things from bread to tissue paper.

Although the service was meant for mothers who couldn't go to the store for essentials, my siblings and I saw it as an opportunity to buy all the junk food we wanted

with my father's money.

UAE schools were the best part for me. Boys and girls went to separate schools, except for those who attended private schools. I was always excited to get there because I loved my classes in art, music and gym as well as those in math, science, Arabic and English.

I did well in English, although we only learned the common words such as "car," "house," and "door." Still, it felt like an enormous accomplishment.

Our neighborhood was filled with friends that felt like family. Most of our neighbors were "foreigners" just like us. Achieving citizenship was not easy because only those with ancestors were UAE citizens. To be privileged, you had to know someone of high rank.

When my dad used to tell me about the United States, I imagined it with humungous trees that were at least fifteen feet tall to an inch. That made me think that U.S. residents lived mostly in forests.

After we moved to the United States, I began to realize how my family had protected my childhood and the fantasies that exist only in a family's fairy tale existence.

In my teens, I had to grow up and no longer eat all the candy I could get. Perhaps that was one of the major causes for my struggle to adopt a new homeland.

My identity, who I am and where I come from, was not my choice, or that of my family. For the timebeing, I will say that I'm from many places, although Palestine is in my heart.



Her family provides constant support for Ala.