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**Refugee from Iraq becomes US citizen**

RICHMOND, Wash. (AP) — It was a momentous day — one Mushtaq Jihad had waited years for and he was ready.

He wore a neatly pressed black suit with a blue shirt and matching striped tie. He showed up a half-hour early, among the first in his group to pass through security and head to check-in.

In the auditorium, he took his seat a few rows from the front and listened intently as officials talked of the honor and privilege of U.S. citizenship.

When the time came, he raised his right hand and declared an oath. He recited the Pledge of Allegiance. He walked across the stage to a congratulatory round of applause.

Afterward, the 45-year-old seemed pleased and relieved. His eyes were misty and a smile spread across his face.

He'd entered the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) field office in Seattle last Monday as an Iraqi refugee — a man who'd lost nearly everything he had in a flood of war, pain and suffering.

He left as an American, through and through.

It took him so long to reach that moment that he would have been forgiven for losing faith or giving up.

But Jihad is not one to give up. He is one to stand tall, with an inner steel that's seen him through so much.

"Yes, I'm happy," he told the Herald after the ceremony, clutching his citizenship certificate and nodding his head. "Yes."

'Every kind of torture'

The Herald has been following Jihad's story for several years, starting in January 2014 when the community came together to raise money to buy him a new prosthetic leg.

By then, he'd already been in Richland more than half a decade. He and his wife, Adela Hamza, who had her own naturalization ceremony in Pasco earlier this month, came to the Tri-Cities in 2008 as refugees.

They'd met in Baghdad, and the first years of their life together were happy. Jihad had an electrical supply store; Hamza was a bank manager.

They married in 2000 and began to build a family. Daughter Fatima came along in 2002, followed by daughter Zahraa two years later.

The war slowed Jihad's business for a time, but things eventually picked back up and the young father opened more stores and expanded his inventory.

However, that prosperity put a target on his back. In Iraq's wartime landscape, armed groups began kidnapping businessmen for ransom.

In April 2005, Jihad was snatched while heading home from one of his stores. "They used every kind of torture, hitting (me) with wires and with electricity," he later wrote in a narrative of his experiences.

He eventually was able to escape, groping his way with swollen eyes across the ground, up some pipes and out a window.

The case went to court. It "stayed in (the highest criminal court) for a long time, from 2005 to 2007, (and) during that time I was getting lots of death threats that stated that if I do not drop the case I will get killed," he wrote.

In April 2007, he nearly was killed. His life changed forever.

Jihad and Hamza had welcomed their third child, a baby boy, about a week before. The infant had jaundice, and on the morning of April 4, Jihad scooped him up for a trip to the doctor.

He stepped outside with the baby in his arms. Then, "I heard the bomb and saw nothing but a big cloud of dust in my face," he wrote.

A neighbor later explained what happened next: Jihad tried to get up, but fell. His right leg was gone.

"I talked to (the attackers) and said, 'Leave the baby, why do you want to kill the baby?' (They) held the baby's body and throw it in front of me to show me that he is dead," Jihad wrote.

The young father was shot several times. He was left in a dumpster, with the body of his infant son.

Hamza was able to escape with the couple's two daughters, thanks to help from neighbors.

Jihad eventually was rescued by American troops. He spent two months in the hospital.

When he was well enough, he and his wife and girls fled Iraq.

Another blow

The family entered the U.S. as refugees, settling in Richland with help from the local office of World Relief. By then, another daughter, Farah, had joined the family. A fourth girl, Sarah, would follow in 2012.

The transition to a new country, culture and language wasn't easy.

"The first few years, it was hard for us to get used to everything new. The kids had hard time in school, they could not speak English in school so no one talked to them, they used to cry after school," Jihad wrote.

But, "little by little, we got used to life. We always had very nice neighbor who treated us like family, and the kids learned English and they are doing very well in school."

Jihad tackled lingering injuries from the attack, undergoing multiple surgeries to remove bullets and shrapnel and repair damage. He didn't get much of a reprieve. In fall 2013, he began feeling sick.

Eventually a diagnosis came: leukemia.

Jihad spent weeks in the hospital and started chemotherapy. He remains in treatment now.

Meanwhile, another stress was building. Jihad and Hamza applied for citizenship in 2013, not long before Jihad learned he had cancer.

They were fingerprinted and even visited at home by officials. But then weeks turned into months turned into years, with little word on their cases.

Tom Roach, a Pasco immigration attorney who took on Jihad and Hamza as clients pro bono, said the long time frame was unusual — citizenship cases typically take three to four months.

While the couple waited, Jihad lost his Supplemental Security Income benefits. That happened because he hit a seven-year limit for refugees.

Despite his injuries and illness, Jihad has pushed himself to work, holding jobs at places from 7-Eleven to Apollo Mechanical. The benefits were needed because of his high medical costs, he said.

A while back, he moved to the Seattle area, renting a small apartment and driving hours upon hours each day for Uber and Lyft, sending money back home to his family.

It was his best option for supporting his wife and daughters, he said.

In February, the Herald wrote about his life there — about the pile of blankets he used as a bed, about his long days and nights on the road, about how he missed his girls.

"I almost lost now 15 pounds for myself again. No eat good. Sometime no sleep good. Sometime I'm sad, I cry," he told the Herald at the time.

But, "when I see my picture of my kids, (I think), 'No, I'm try, I'm try, I'm try.'"

'All's well that ends well'

A while ago, Seattle attorney Jay Gairson took on Jihad's case.

While a USCIS spokeswoman said the agency can't comment on individual cases for privacy reasons, Gairson said Jihad's request for a name change and an interpreter error were the root of the long delay.

Jihad asked to change his often-misunderstood name as part of his citizenship application. That triggered an additional background review, which revealed a couple of minor discrepancies between the account in Jihad's refugee interview and later public statements he made about his ordeal in Iraq, Gairson said.

The main difference was that the refugee interview interpreter left out some details about how Jihad's son died.

That raised questions, Gairson said. However, those questions could have been addressed more quickly, he said.

"The delay (in the case) was unreasonably long and caused Mushtaq and his family great economic and emotional hardship," Gairson said.

Jihad's case finally picked up speed after he joined a class-action lawsuit against the federal government over long immigration case delays, filed by Northwest Immigrant Rights Project and the ACLU.

Soon after, Jihad and Hamza were scheduled for naturalization interviews. The sessions were long and grueling, the couple and their attorneys said — Hamza's lasted about half a day and Jihad's all day.

But citizenship quickly followed. The USCIS field office director in Yakima made a trip to Roach's Pasco office on May 10 to administer Hamza's oath.

On May 22, Mushtaq raised his right hand and pledged to "absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty..." in the auditorium in Seattle.

Roach said Jihad "is the type of person we want as a U.S. citizen."

The delay was unfortunate, "but, as Shakespeare said, 'All's well that ends well.' Mushtaq and Adela can now move on with their lives, raising their family and (continuing) their pursuit of the American Dream," Roach said.

Gairson said delaying immigration cases like Jihad's "comes at the cost of our humanity as Americans."

"I'm proud to be an American and appreciate the difficulty of the work done by (the Department of Homeland Security, of which USCIS is part), but there is no reasonable or rational excuse for excessive delays," Gairson said.

"While Mushtaq and his family are now citizens, the process of healing from their bureaucratic leukemia will take many more years. I wish them the best of luck as new citizens of this great nation," he said.

Gairson was on hand as Jihad became a citizen. After the ceremony, the two men embraced.

Jihad thanked Gairson, calling him "my brother."

Gairson smiled. "You are one of my favorite clients," he told Jihad. "You are one of the nicest people I've ever met."

'One day, I pay back everything'

Nearly 40 other immigrants became naturalized citizens alongside Jihad.

Tammy Miller, a USCIS section chief, led the ceremony. She spoke of the nation's immigrant heritage.

"America is grateful for the many strengths that you bring her," she told Jihad and the others. "... Like my ancestors before me, you come from near and far, drawn by the freedom and privileges this nation offers. United States citizenship is a privilege, and you may take great pride today in your decision to become a United States citizen."

Many of the new citizens had family members or friends on hand. Except for Gairson and a Herald reporter and photographer, Jihad was alone — Hamza and the girls couldn't make the trip across the mountains.

But that didn't stop him from celebrating. He insisted on buying a late lunch at Olive Garden, even filling up his guests' plates with more salad when he felt they hadn't eaten enough.

That's his way — attentive, sharing what he has, making sure others are OK.

He isn't one to dwell. He's forward-looking, more prone to talk about what he intends to do rather than what's been.

He'll likely stay in the Seattle area long enough to finish out his apartment lease, and then he wants to come home, he said. He misses his family, his friends and the life he built in Richland.

He had a message for the Tri-Citians who've encouraged him, supported him, raised money for him: "Thank you so much. They help me a lot," he said. "One day, I (pay) back everything for these people."

After the triumph of the ceremony and the celebratory lunch, Jihad planned to go back to his apartment to talk with his girls and to sleep.

He looked happy, but also thin and tired.

The stress of his citizenship case has been like another cancer, he said.

Perhaps now he'll be able to focus more on his health, he said. Perhaps he'll be able to take a break, take a breath.

Jihad left the restaurant with a wave and a smile — and also a plan to cross one more important thing off his list.

The next day, he met up with Gairson and headed to the courthouse to finally change his name.

Mushtaq Jihad is now Noah Adam Ibrahim. It's a name that's deeply meaningful to him.

Adam was the first man. Ibrahim, or Abraham, was a great prophet.

Noah was, too — an important figure in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, who built an ark that carried his family and the other creatures aboard through a flood.

The name means "rest, comfort."

For Jihad-now-Ibrahim, it means a fresh start, a break from the pain of the past.

"It's an American name, Arabic name. I like this name," he said. "I start new life."