

Isam and the chocolate factory: Syrian refugees relaunch family business in Canada

The Hadhads gave thousands of dollars to families affected by the Fort McMurray wildfires – a symbolic donation, the family said, to the country that has helped them rebuild their lives

5 Ashifa Kassam in Antigonish, Friday 12 May 2017 09.00 BST, theguardian.com

When wildfires devastated the Canadian city of Fort McMurray last year, TV images of the scorched ruins and terrified families evoked painful memories for the Hadhad family.

10 Four years earlier, they had been forced to flee their home in Damascus by the Syrian civil war. The Hadhads were left with nothing after rockets rained down on their home and destroyed the factory that housed the family chocolate-making business.

Now, resettled in a new home on Canada's east coast – where they had arrived some five months earlier as refugees – they felt they could do something to help.

15 Weeks after settling in Antigonish, a small town of 10,000 people in Nova Scotia, they had relaunched the family business, improvising in their small kitchen to recreate some of the chocolates they had once exported across the Middle East.

“Making chocolate was really getting us some revenue, so we said, why don't we help the Canadians on the other side of the country?” said Tareq Hadhad, the family's oldest son. “We are so grateful to this nation. So we were really honoured to donate our profits in the whole month of May to the wildfire relief efforts.”

20 The donation came to around a few thousands dollars, he said. It was a defining moment in a whirlwind year that saw them go from newly arrived refugees to successful business owners who now employ several Canadians.

The seeds of their journey were planted halfway around the world in 1986, when Isam Hadhad launched a chocolate-making business from his grandmother's kitchen in Damascus. Hadhad Chocolates soon grew to employ some 30 people, distributing its chocolates across the region.

25 But the war in Syria reduced much of his work to rubble. In 2012 the family ended up as refugees in Lebanon, their daily lives consumed with the question of how to rebuild their lives. “It was useless to think about going back to Syria while the war was still there,” said Isam.

Four years later, the Hadhads – Isam, his wife, Shahnaz, and their four children – found out they were among the 40,000 Syrian refugees who would be taken in by Canada within the span of some 15 months.

30 After three tense years in Lebanon, the family boarded a plane for the first time, eager to begin their new lives.

Soon after came Isam's first batch of chocolates on Canadian soil. It was a modest undertaking, cranked out in the family's new kitchen to hand out at a community potluck. But after three years away from the trade, it was a delight to be making chocolates again, he said through a translator: “I felt like I had come back to life.”

35 He soon ramped up production, making some of the same chocolates he had made in Syria along with others that incorporated Canadian flavours such as maple syrup. Word quickly spread and orders began pouring in.

40 The success came as the family was still adjusting to their new lives. “When they first arrived, they were a little shocked,” said Tareq, 25, who arrived on his own some three weeks before the rest of his family. “But they said that the first week here erased the four years of suffering they had gone through, since the war started and we lost everything.”

It took just four days for his mother to decide that she loved their new home. “I feel safe here,” said Shahnaz. “My home is safe, there’s no bombs, no sounds of planes passing by.”

45 It was Shahnaz who prompted the family venture in Canada into its first round of expansion, after she rebuked her husband for turning their kitchen into a makeshift factory. The town kicked into action, with some 50 volunteers turning up over the course of a month to build a tiny wooden shed to house the factory next to the family’s home.

In August the family held their grand opening, christening it Peace by Chocolate.

One month later, their marketing efforts received an unexpected boost; prime minister Justin Trudeau detailed the family’s story and fledgling success while speaking at the United Nations.

50 “I couldn’t believe it,” said Tareq. “We didn’t sleep for three nights – we were just replying to tweets from around the world. They started calling from all across the country to find out how they could get Peace by Chocolate.”

55 During the Christmas season, the family launched a website to capitalise on the surging demand – only to shut it down hours later. “Thousands and thousands of boxes of chocolate were ordered in a few hours,” said Tareq. After a round of hiring, they relaunched the website a month later.

Today five full-time employees help them make about 100,000 pieces of chocolate a month. Plans are currently underway to move the factory to a bigger location in Antigonish.

60 A network of Syrian refugees across the province help with distribution. The hope is to soon expand this across Canada, offering other Syrian refugees a foothold in the labour market. “What we’re most happy about is offering jobs. We didn’t take anyone’s jobs, we created jobs,” said Tareq.

65 He’s keenly aware that the family’s success has shone a spotlight on the family at a critical time. “All around the world now there is a negative environment towards refugees, towards Syrians who lost their homes and left their country,” he said. “Life is not perfect, there are Syrians across the country that couldn’t find jobs, who are struggling with the language barrier. They are trying their best to be productive in their communities.”

But that’s just one side of the story, said Tareq. “There are thousands of successes around the country. The responsibility that we have now is to share the positive things that Syrians are doing.”