



Rewriting Stories of War into Stories of Peace

The whispering stories of refugee children



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Reykjavík, Iceland



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Acknowledgement

With the grant that O.M.A.H.A.I received from Rannis “Rewriting Stories of War into Stories of Peace” was launched on June 10th 2020. The program aimed to assist asylum seeker/refugee children to take ownership of their personal development and to build capacity for meaningful social action in their communities. “Rewriting Stories of War into Stories of Peace” project was based on helping the asylum seeker/refugee children ages 10-14 to narrate, analyse and rewrite their life-stories. In this project, the children learned to voice their stories verbally in their groups, through their drawings, and also in action, through launching service projects in their neighbourhood.

“Rewriting Stories of War into Stories of Peace” was launched as a summer project in Reykjavik in June 2020 at Félagsmiðstöðin Tónabær, and as a one-school-year project at Birta stoðdeild Álftamýrarskóla in October 2020. In the summer of 2020 the project was also launched as a summer project in Hafnarfjörður at Menntasetrið við Lækinn.

Although the Grant that O.M.A.H.A.I received from Rannis was to launch the program for children ages 10-14, the program became a holistic program that included younger children and older children up to age 16. Through working on their life-story-books, the children were encouraged to tell their stories back home, their dreams, their achievements, their services and their experience of living in a new culture different than theirs. Through this program, the children were guided to develop various skills which aimed to help them to discover their capacities to move further with their stories and rewrite them into stories of hope.

It is beyond the human capacity to capture their pain, their loss, their dreams and their hopes. One cannot shrink the entire ocean and place it in a small cup. There are more stories and more voices than what have been presented here. This is but a drop from that ocean!

Introduction

In the *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework*, Member States recognize that “millions of refugees around the world [...] have no access to timely and durable solutions” and that “the success of the search for solutions depends in large measure to resolute and sustained international cooperation”. They further commit “to address the root causes” of violence and other crisis situations which continue to drive people to flee their homeland. Furthermore, the UNESCO document on education in the 21st century titled: *Learning: The Treasure Within, identified four pillars of education — Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Be, Learning to Live Together*. In addition, *Agenda 2030* commits signatories to “inter-cultural understanding, tolerance, mutual respect and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility.”

The purpose of “*Rewriting Stories of War into Stories of Peace*” project was to equip the refugee children with the capacities that will enable them to engage in meaningful social actions as they grow. Conflicts among children of different races, colors, nationalities, and religions are examples of some of the many problems that can emerge. Images that usually come to mind when the concept of power is introduced are those of control, manipulation, domination, rule, supremacy and subjugation. The aim of this project, however, was to assist the refugee children to develop a different kind of power. Moral power springs from love, justice, knowledge, understanding, keen perception, and service.

To provide the children with tools and skills, they read together selected children stories from various cultures that address universal themes such as: We have a duty to take care of Earth, Persevere in seeking our goals, Making consistent effort, Being grateful and patient, Community life, Making positive choices, having a Big Heart that Loves everyone in the World, Loving and Serving like the Sun, Helping others, and Being mindful.

The story books

Breezes of Confirmation, prepared by the William Mmutle Masetlha Foundation in Zambia, tells the story of Musonda, a young girl who has just turned 13, and her older cousin Rose, who has come to visit Musonda’s family for the school holidays.

<https://www.devlp.org/sample/exerting-effort-sample>

Glimmerings of Hope, prepared by the DL Publications Foundation in Colombia. The book follows the story of Kibomi, a twelve-year-old boy who embarks on a journey to find his sister in another town after his parents are killed in their small village. Each lesson includes a set of questions and activities aimed at fostering the ability to understand the forces at work in society and developing coherence between belief and action.

<https://www.devlp.org/sample/making-choices-sample>

Walking the Straight Path, prepared by the Badi Foundation in Macau-China, brings together twenty stories from different cultures.

<https://www.devlp.org/sample/building-unity-sample>

The goal was that with the help of reading these story-books, the refugee children would get empowered to become agents of positive social change by developing:

- The ability to critically analyze the positive and negative social forces that exert an influence on their lives, such as targeted propaganda through media.
- The ability to understand and practice spiritual qualities such as love, honesty, and humility.
- The ability to express themselves with confidence and clarity.
- A strong moral framework upon which to base their decisions and actions.
- An attitude of service expressed in action within their communities. ●

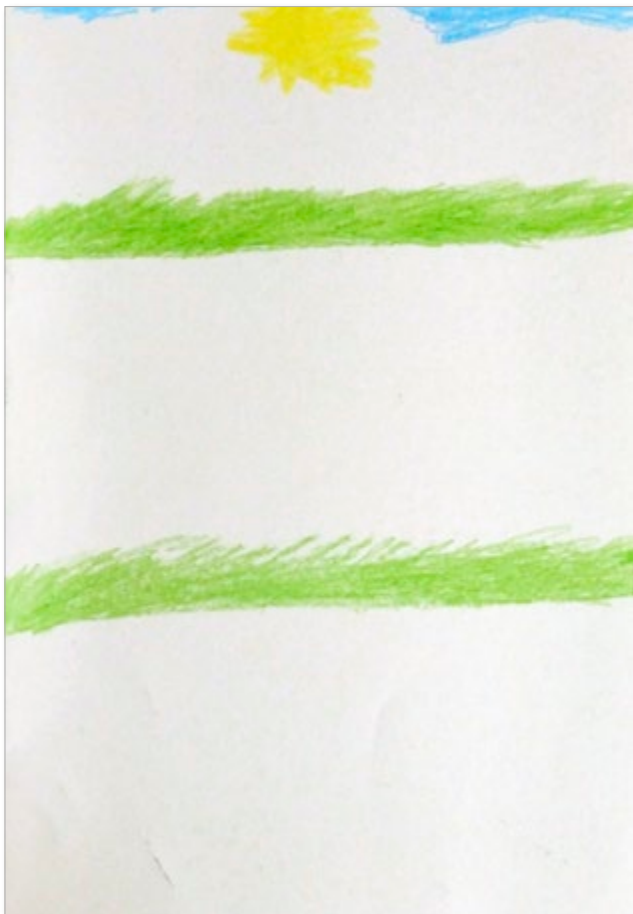
We, I and my brothers and sisters, were not allowed to go to school. Every couple of months, we had to bring a signed permission pass to be able to enter the school. Usually, we didn't get those passes, so most of the months and years we did not have access to school. We had to stay home most of the time, while other children who were the locals/nationals of that country received education. We used to see my father taken away by the police. We witnessed him for many times being beaten by the authority forces, taken away to prison. When he was released, he would need many long months to recover from the injuries that was inflicted on his body because of torture. As children, we had to take the responsibility of supporting our mother, and finding ways to provide for the household when my father was away. In the months that he was with us, before being removed again to the prison, he was just a broken person physically and emotionally. We had to continue our responsibility in taking care of my mother and the household. We didn't have much money, and we didn't know why the police keep taking our father away. We could not go to school, so we didn't have many friends. We never learned how to read and write. I was born in that country, and also all my brothers and sisters, but we were not illegible to receive the citizenship because we are from a different ethnicity and country. There is war in my country, and even my parents were



born in the host country. We are all refugees, but without any right to become citizens one day. If we are not citizens, then we don't get any rights to go to school or to work, or to live like a normal human being. I don't know what it means to be a human being. I have never experienced it, and I don't think my parents also know what it means and how it feels to be a human being. ●



I am lower than a cockroach, I am worthless. I never had any value and I don't think that am a valuable person. My mother left me and my father when I was three. She wanted to pursue her dream in being rich and independent. I believe, the day when I was born, she was very shocked. She said: "O my God, it is a baby. How come? What would I do with it?" So, you see, even my mother did not want me. She got shocked the moment I was born and she saw me with her own eyes. I am a worthless person, I am important to no one. I feel I am a cockroach in this world, even cockroaches are more valuable than me. I was born in the host country. My mother divorced my father when I was three. My father has a refugee status in the host country although he lived there for 13 years. Refugees are not eligible to get the citizenship or to work. I was never able to go to school, the school was only for the citizens. The citizens are very hostile towards refugees, so I stayed home all the time. I didn't have friends. The only times that I managed to go to school, were those days that an

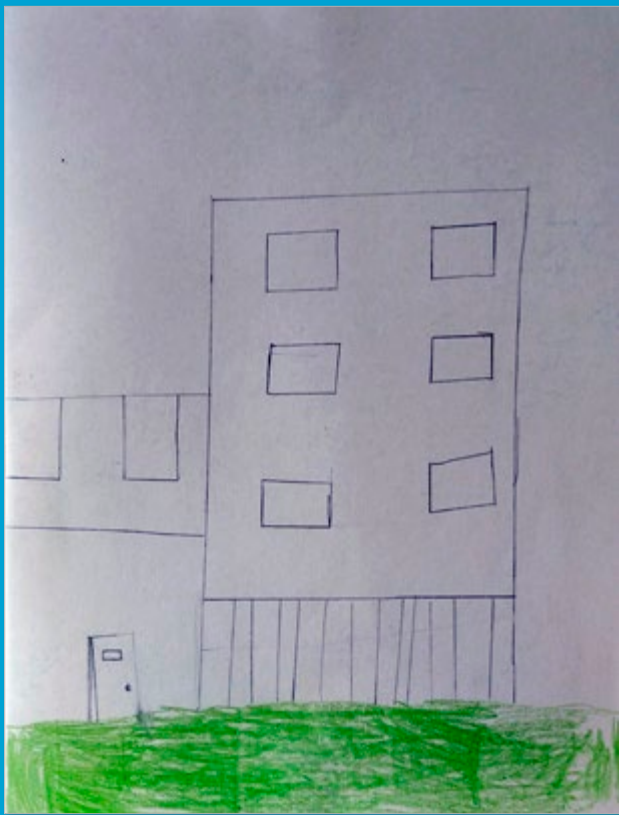


NGO would invite me to attend some language classes, usually it was me with a couple of girls. I was the only boy in that classroom. They never wanted to talk to me or play with me. The language classes were very basic, most of the times it did not go beyond teaching us the alphabets, over and over, even when I was to be in grade 6. My father could never get a proper job, he was all the time volunteering in NGO's to help other refugees like himself. We never had enough money to buy the necessities, but I was grateful not to lose my father too. I never felt safe since I was born, I always feel that I am on the verge of losing someone or something. I don't know what it means to be secure, I don't know how it feels to be secure. I have never experience this feeling that I hear people talk about: be secure. One of the main laws in the host country is that the police has a full right to catch, take away any refugee from the streets without even needing a reason to do so. So, it was not safe for me or my father to go out because then we might end up in prison. Being a refugee by itself is a crime. How it feels to be a human and not a criminal? I don't know. My only crime is that I was not a citizen or a local from the host country, but this is enough crime to cross me outside the human list. I was never eligible to have a place that accepts me, even my mother, she was not happy to have me for nine months in her. I feel wherever I am, that place is not meant for me, it is for someone who is valuable and is a human being. ●

When the war started I was very young, I never managed to go to school again. We are from a different minority ethnicity than the majority of people who are living in my country. They don't include teaching our language in the schools. We are forced to learn only the majority population language. At home, I speak my language with my family. When the war started, we lost our home, my father had to leave to a neighbouring country and we were left alone with my mother. We didn't have money and we didn't have a house. We were in the street. Everything was changed over night, houses were destroyed, dead bodies everywhere, schools were closed and people were angry, scared and confused. Then we had to go to a neighbouring village to stay with my grandparents. Their house was very small and we all had to stay inside the house most of the time because it was not safe to go outside the house. There were not toilets in the house, so we had to go outside if we had to use a toilet. In the village, many people had to evacuate their houses and leave for the fear of the war. My mother tried to find the owners of those houses to rent it



from them, but they all refused. After many trials, my mother found a neglected broken place which was like a very small room or studio. It had nothing, no kitchen and no toilet, only broken walls and a broken roof. But my mother decided to take me and my sisters to live in this place because my grandparent's house was really small and we were many children. We used to go to my grandparent's house only if we had to. The most scary feeling was when night would fall. This place was completely broken, so my mother would stay awake the entire night to protect me and my sisters in case someone would attack us. We would not dare to go to toilet during night, because then we had to walk a long distance to reach the toilet. I was so frightened to lose my mother or one of my sisters. We didn't have friends because we didn't go to school but also because we belonged to the minority ethnicity. It was not safe to go out because either we would be killed by the hand of people who hated us or we would be killed by a bomb falling on us from the sky. We didn't have money, and most of the time we had to sleep hungry. Then one day, the owner of the house returned. My mother tried to reason with her, but the owner would not even listen to my mother. She threw all our stuff out, threw us out and went inside her house and closed the door. I never forget the image of my mother, being thrown out in the street, sitting on the ground, humiliated and devalued, tears pouring out of her eyes and hugging her children in her arms. I was also crying loud and the same my sisters. Then my mother just stood up, and we went back to my grandparent's house. Until one day, my father managed to cross the border from the neighbouring country back to our country. He returned to take us with him because it was not any more safe for us to stay in our country. Then, a new page started in our life as refugees. Also there, in the host country, we could not go to school. It was also not safe to go out. Everyone was fighting and people were attacking each other. But at least we were together as a family, and we had a toilet inside the house that we rented. I don't know what has happened to my grandparent but I miss them very much. I don't know if I ever will be able to meet them again. ●





As long as I remember, there was war in my country. Everyone is killing everyone. At any moment you can explode into pieces. At any moment, you can get killed from sky or from the ground. My mother is educated, she finished her BA from the university in my country but she was never allowed to work. My father used to love us very much, but his family hated my mother. She and her family belongs to a different religious sect than them. When my father died, his family wanted to take us away from our mother. We were very poor, because my mother did not work and we did not have any other source of income. When my father was alive, our money was from his work. Now that he died, we had no money. My mother's family are also very poor. They hated my father and they didn't want us, the children, to become part of their family. Everyone hated everyone, and we could not visit any of our relatives during the festivals because we were not welcomed anywhere. I and my sister loved going to school, because that was the only

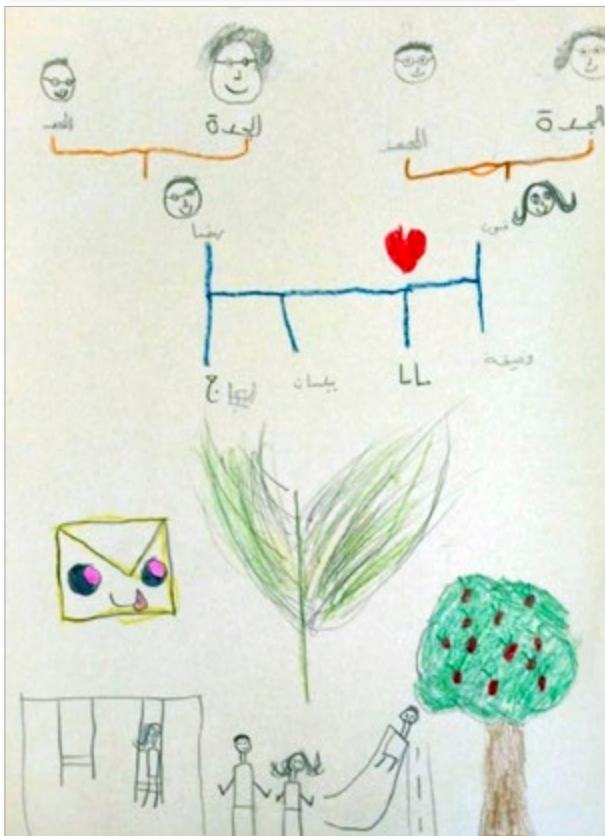
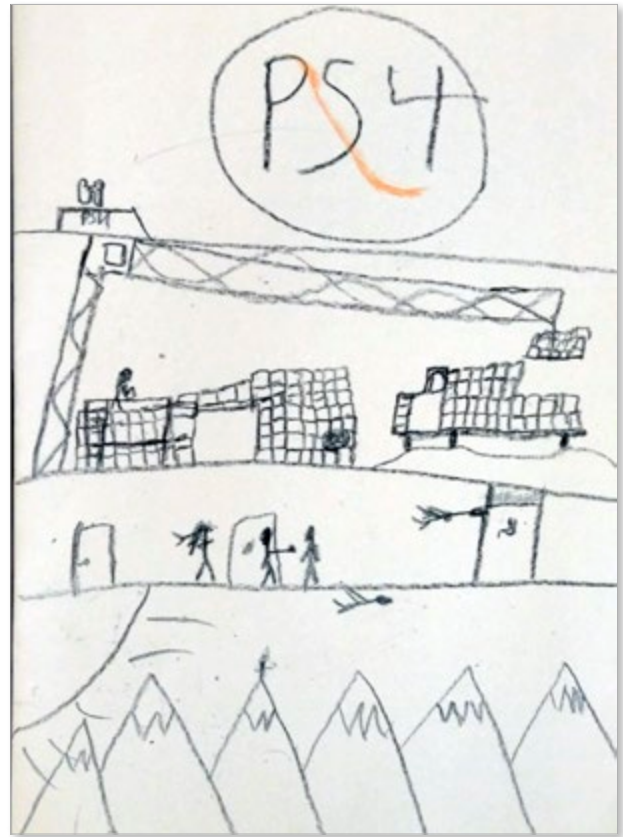
place that we could play with our friends. I miss my teachers and I miss my school. I also miss my friends. But, I don't miss my country or my relatives. Everyone hated us, because we did not belong to this group or that group. My father used to receive threats for marrying my mother, and my mother was also receiving threats for marrying my father. When my father died, no one from my mother's family stood with her to support her in her fight to keep her children. They did not love us and they did not want us part of their family. My mother was desperately searching everywhere to find a lawyer or someone who can help her to keep her daughters. But in our culture, women can't do much. We were 3 females without any protection from a man. It was very dangerous. Many times our house was attacked in the middle of the night by people who wanted to harm us. My mother was staying awake all night guarding us. I and my sister were scared all the time, we used to wake up on any sound for the fear that someone is attacking our mother. My father's family were saying that my father has died very young as a punishment from God because he married my mother. This is why they wanted her dead as a punishment for killing their son. Then we had to stop going to school, because it was not safe any more. We could get kidnapped and killed. So one day, my mother decided that we have to flee our country before we get killed and before she loses us to her in-law's family. It was a very dangerous journey, because we didn't have any male protection. I don't know what is more dangerous, to be killed in your country or outside your country? To be killed by the hands of your country men or by the hand of strangers? I trust no one, because I have never met anyone who protected me and my family from getting harmed. I can't forget the endless nights and days that I saw my mother crying. She is very lonely in this big world that everyone finds a place to live in. I can't forget her fragile voice begging for mercy. If we did not flee my country, we all would have been dead by now. I am still alive, but I know how being dead smells, looks and feels. ●



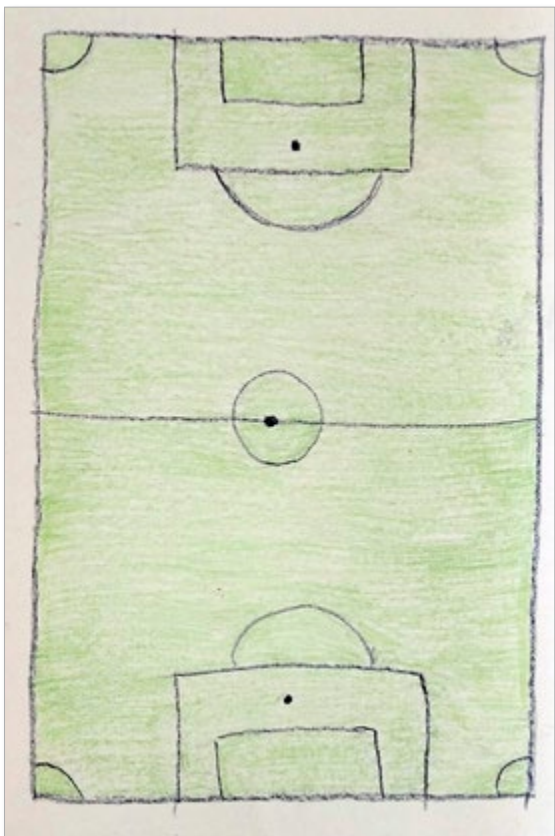
We were three best friends that we used to play together. In my family, I have my parents, and two brothers and one sister. When I lived in my country, I used to go to school. The teachers were very tough with the students. We had to learn a lot of things in a short time. My friends used to help me to study and we used to play together in the free time. Then my family had to leave my country because we could not have any future there, everyone was killing everyone. I used to go to my grandparents house. I used also to play with my cousins. I miss my friends and I hope to meet them one day. I liked to play tennis, volleyball and football. My dream is to become a football player. When I was in the third grade, I asked my father to get me a computer game. He said if you pass this year I am going to buy it for you. So, I studied very hard and I became the first in my class. One of the services that I have done when I was still living in my country, is that one day I helped my friend who was an orphan. He wanted to go to a place, and I helped him to get to that place. Now, I have many dreams, but my biggest dream is to play as one of the players at the national football team. ●



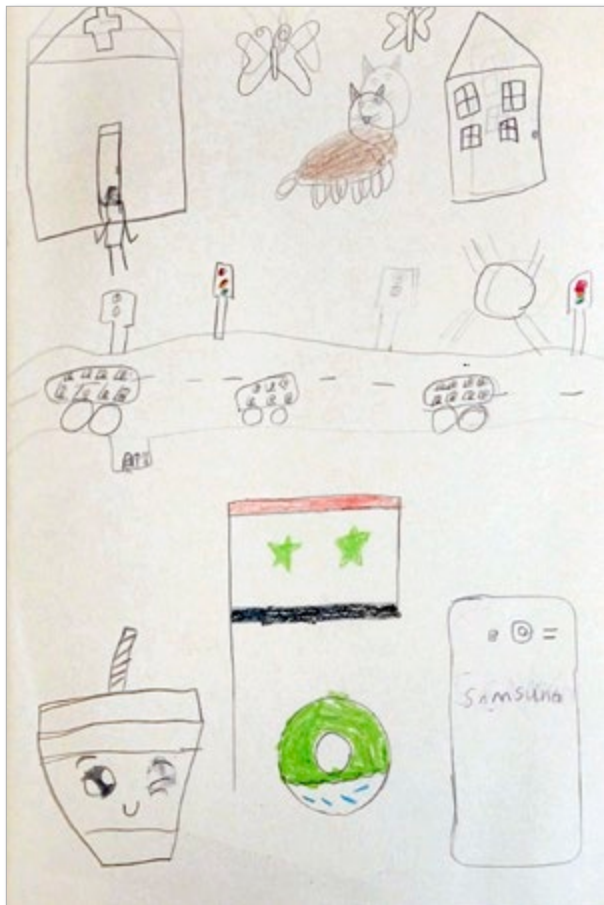
I am 11 years old. I have many brothers and sisters. I also have many friends. I like to play computer games. I miss our house in my country. It used to have 2 gardens, one was in the front of the house and other other was at its back. My hobby is to play football. I had many friends and I miss them a lot. In my country I finished the first grade in school. My dream is to become a football player. ●



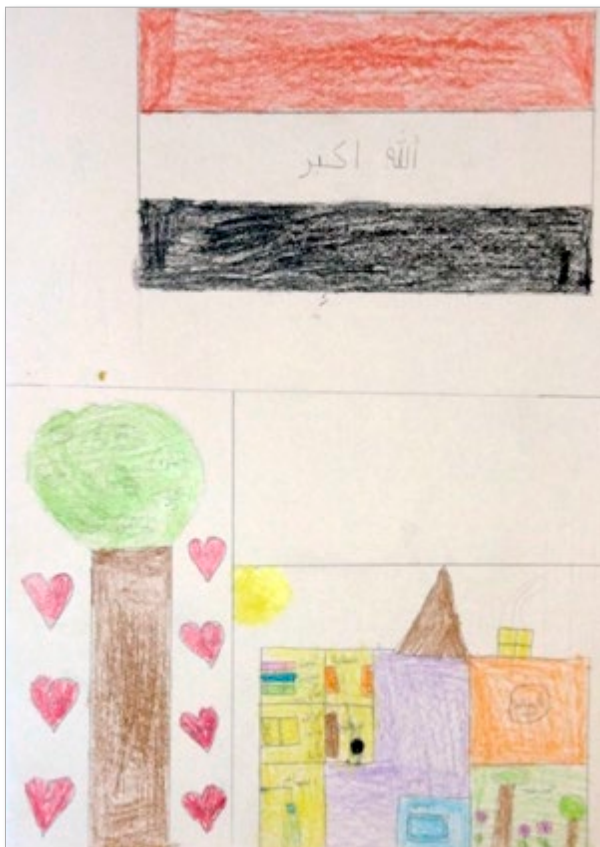
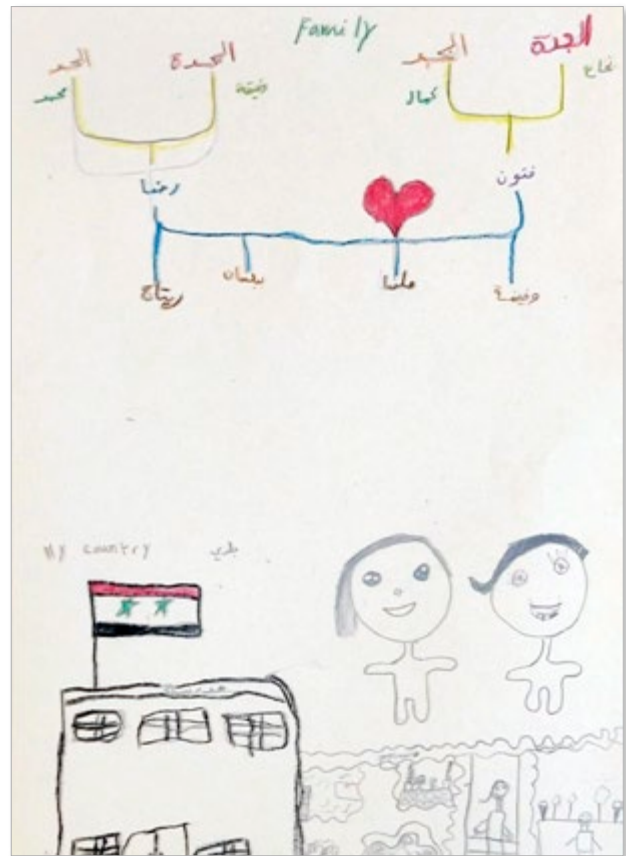
My life story started in a country different than my own country because my parents were refugees there. I used to have many friends but I did not go to school. My dream is that when I grow up I want to become a policeman. My hobby is swimming. I also like to learn karate and taekwondo. I like to do acts of service towards people and towards my family. I used always to give my place in the bus for old people to sit. My favourite place was my grandmother's house. ●

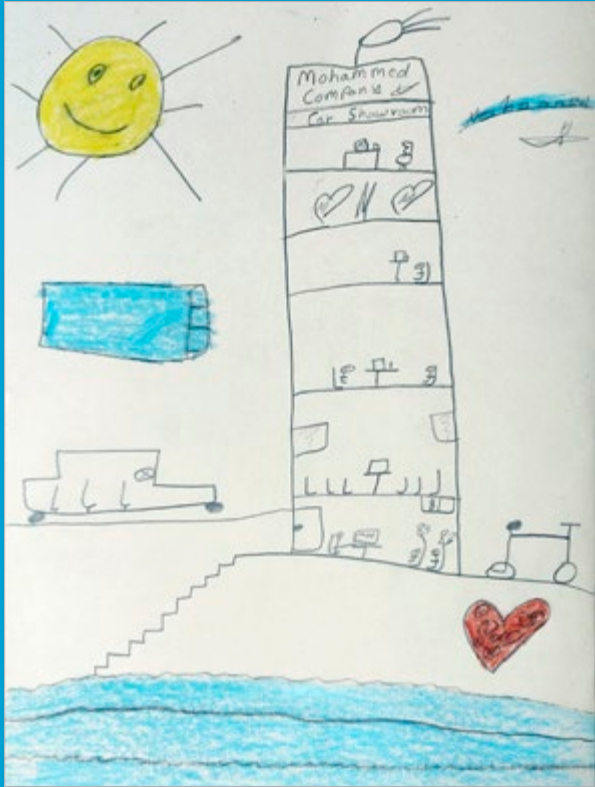


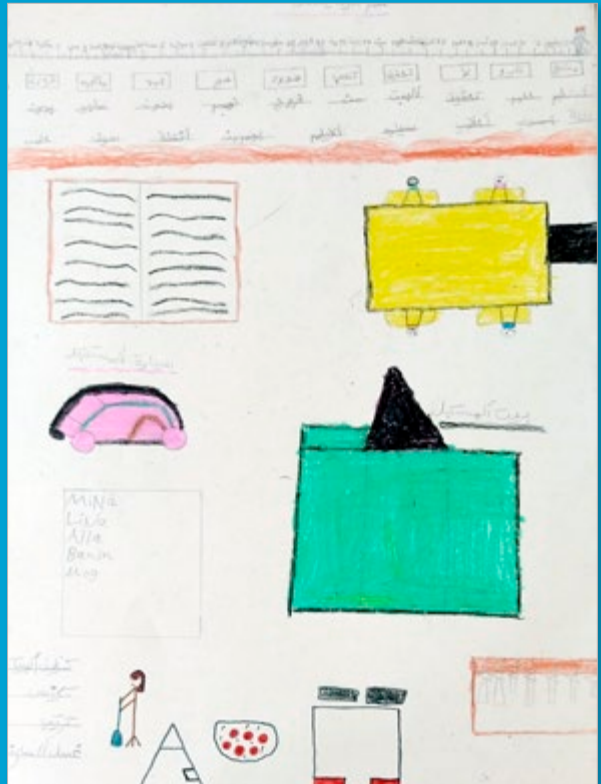
I have many brothers and sisters. My grandmother is left behind in my country, we could not bring her. I did not go to school in my country. I used to have many friends and I used to play with them. Non of my friends came to Iceland. We used to play hide and seek and other games together. My favourite place was the beach. I used to play with my friends on the beach. My family also used to come with us to the beach. My act of service is that I help my father when he comes home and he carries in his hand heavy shopping bags. I also helped an old woman to cross the road. I miss my house in my country. I remember that there was a park but it was a bit faraway from our house and I used to play there. I miss my grandmother, I miss my house, and I miss playing in that park with my friends. ●



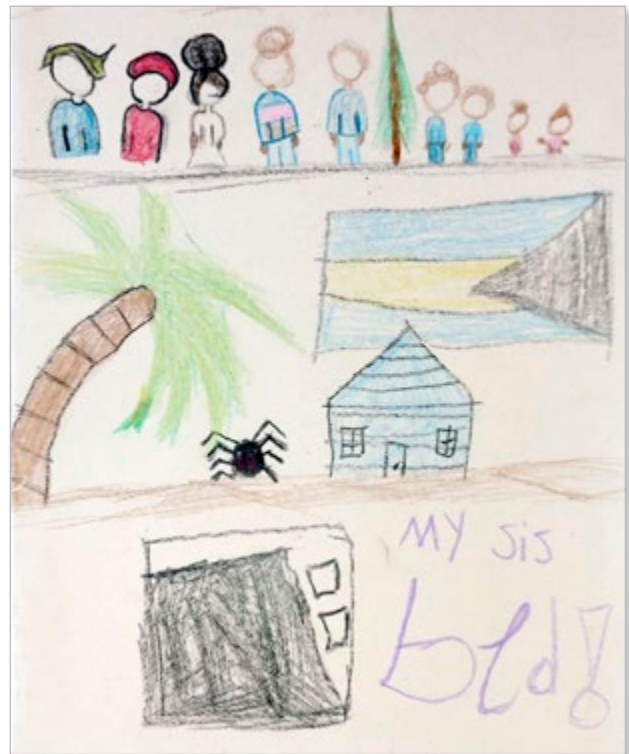
I am 10 years old. I have three brothers. I did not go to school in my country. I remember our house. It used to have a garden. My grandmother used to live with us. I miss her a lot. I had many friends and I miss them a lot. I like to play football and I want to become a football player. To become a football player I must study in school, and practice also. My act of service, one day there was an old woman who wanted to ride the bus but she fall. So, I hurried to hold her hand and help her. ●



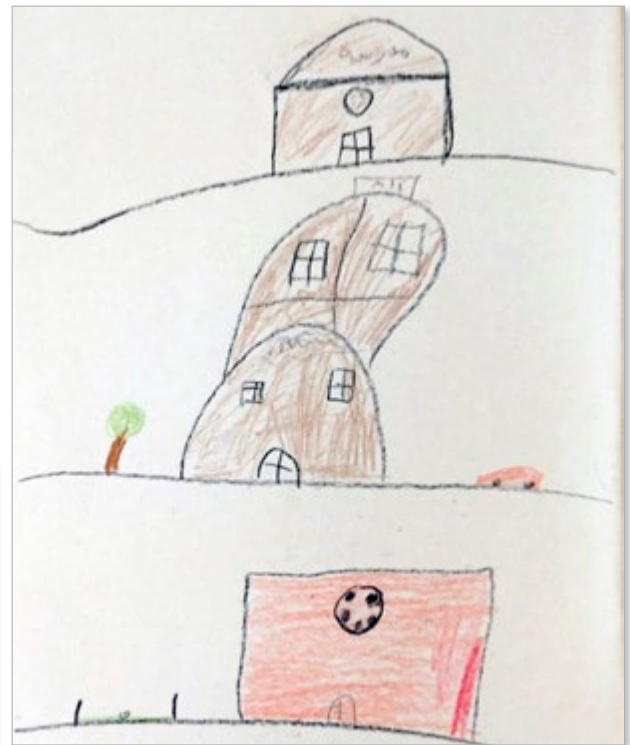
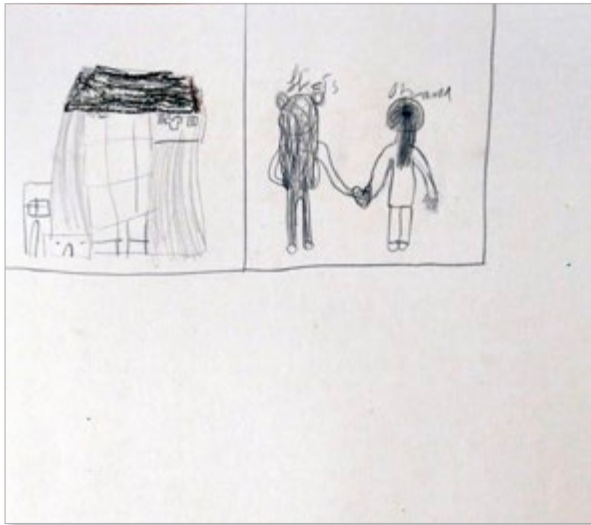




We are 10 brothers and sisters, in addition to my parents and my grandmother. I used to have many friends and I used to play with them a lot. My teacher was very kind, and I loved her very much. When I came to Iceland, I lost contact with all my friends. We used to go to a park and play there. In my neighborhood, there was a garden in front of our school and I used to play with my friends there also. I had a cat. We left our country because of the war. Now, I don't have any news about my friends. I don't know where they are. I don't know how they are. I lost contact with my friends. I feel there is no point in loving someone or becoming someone's friend, eventually we lose everyone that we love. I lost all my friends. ●



I used to go to my grandparent's house. It was the best life. Their house is the best place for me in this world. I did not have friends because we were not allowed to leave the house. There was some problems and my parents did not allow us to leave the house. I had only four friends, other children did not want to talk to me or become



my friends. My act of service was that whenever I used to see poor people in the streets who needed money, I was giving them all the money that I had in hand. When I will grow up I want to become a dentist. I must study hard to become a dentist. ●



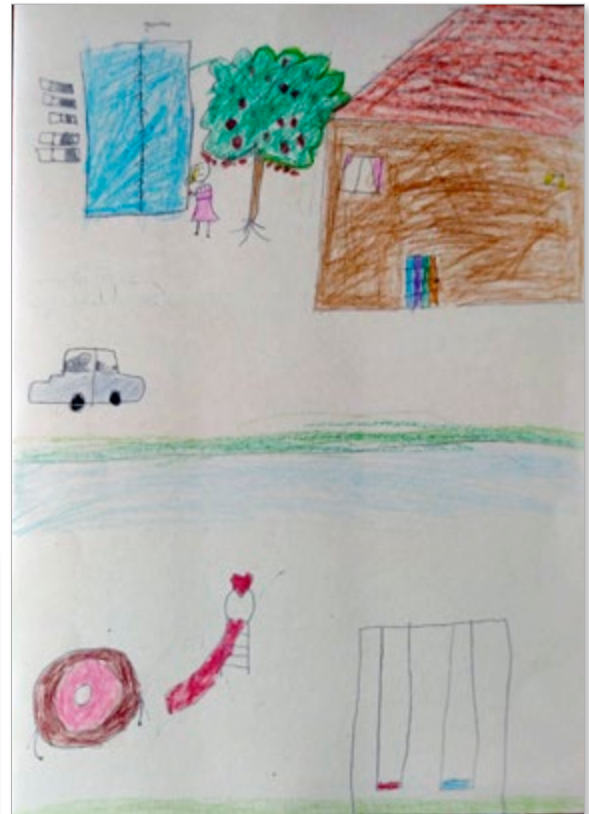
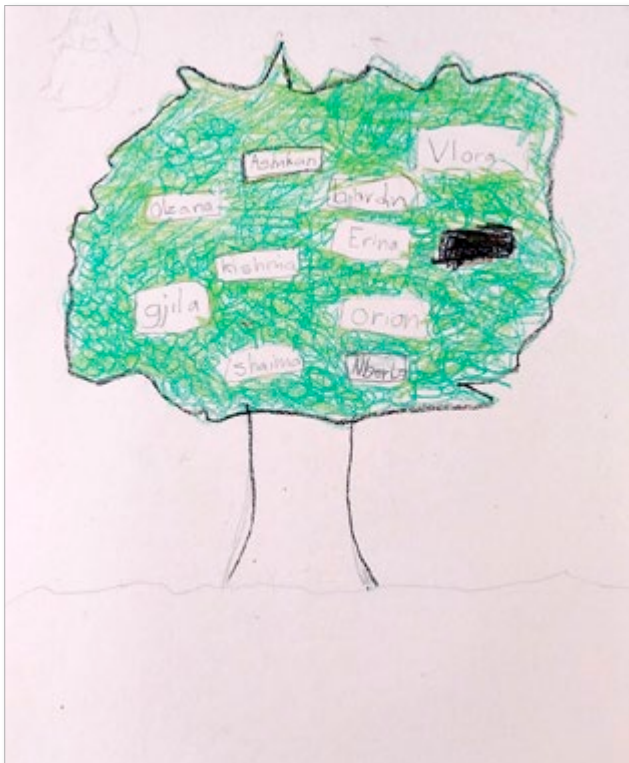
I am 12 years old. I have one elder brother, one younger brother and one younger sister. I like to play football and computer games. When I grow up I want to become a football player. To become a football player I must study well in school and practice a lot. When I was in my country, I did not go to school. My act of service is that I help my mother in anything that she wants to do. My



favourite place in my country was when I am with my brothers and cousins. We used to go out together and we used to play together. I also liked to play with my friends. I am a Youtuber, and I play games on YouTube on my channel. ●



I am 16 years old. We are 10 brothers and sisters, six sisters and four brothers. I used to play with my friends and have fun. After the school, we used to go to a computer place and play computer games. To achieve my dream I must go to school and study. I like drawing and boxing. In my country, my favourite place was my cousin's house or my friends' house. I used to like to spend my time with them. We used to go out and spend time with each other. ●



There are 13 people in my family. We are 6 brothers and four sisters. My grandmother also lives with us. In my country, we used to have a two floor house. On the ground floor, I used to live with my grandmother and my sisters. On the first floor, my parents used to live with my younger sisters and brothers. In my country, my school was very beautiful and I used to have many friends. I still remember my home-room teacher. She was very kind and loved us very much. She used to make us feel that she is a student like us. She never shouted at us. My school was a two floor building, and my classroom was near the headmaster's office. When I grow up I want to become a translator. To become a translator, I must go to school, I must study, I should not be lazy, I must travel, I must be brave, I must love everyone, and I must try hard. I like to help people and I like to help my family. I serve my family by helping them in cleaning the house. My favourite place in my country was a public garden near the capital city. It had many trees, and a play ground for children. The surrounding houses were very beautiful. But now my city is being destroyed. My dream is to learn to play football. In my country, I had two best friends. We used to go together to school and walk home together from school. But then we separated



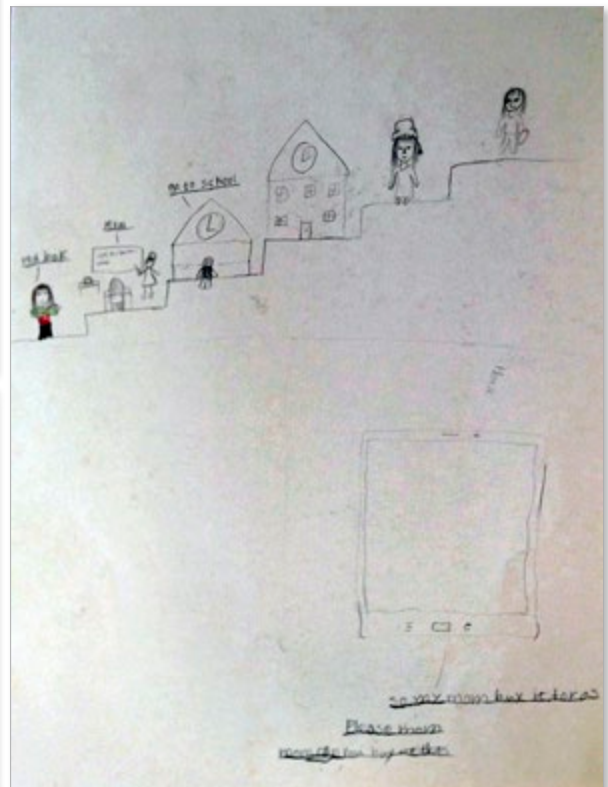
and we lost contact with each other. I miss them a lot. I wish to meet them again. I wish to go to school with them again. I wish to talk with them again. Since we separated, I don't go out with any friends. We used to laugh together, play together and do everything together. Once upon a time, I had a happy and beautiful life. I feel I lost my life, I feel lonely and sad. ●



We are two sisters in my family. I went to school in my country. My classmates were my friends. In school I used to like to write and draw. I used to like to share my thoughts with others. My favourite place was going to public parks and playing in playgrounds. There was a public park exactly in front of our house and I used to go there. We used to live in a two floor house. My grandmother lived on the first floor and we lived on the ground floor. I like to learn football, basketball, and volleyball. I like to learn any game related to balls. I have not decided yet what I want to become when I grow up. One time I want to become a doctor, another time I want



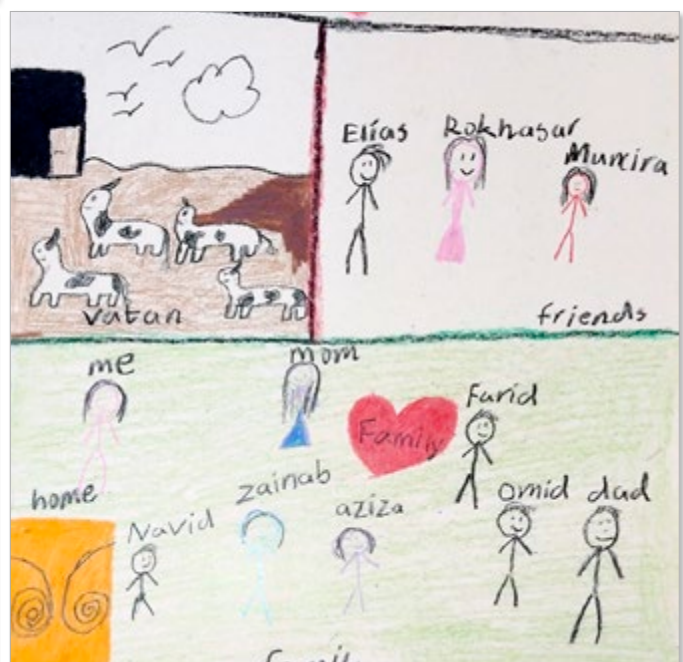
to become a teacher. I can't decide, but I know to achieve my dreams I must study, I must work, and I must earn money. All my acts of service are inside the house, because we don't leave the house much. Most of the time we just stay in the house. ●



I am 15 years old . In my country, my family used to live with my grandmother. It was me, my parents and my sister. When my father died we had to leave my country. I went to school in my country. Then I stopped going to school. I studied until grade six. In grade six there was a teacher that I loved very much. My favourite place was the playground in public parks. I used to go there with my father, mother and sister. Then we changed our house, I had to go to a new school. When I grow up I want to become a doctor. To achieve my dream I must study, I must work hard, and I must be patient. I also want to learn how to drive a car and buy my own



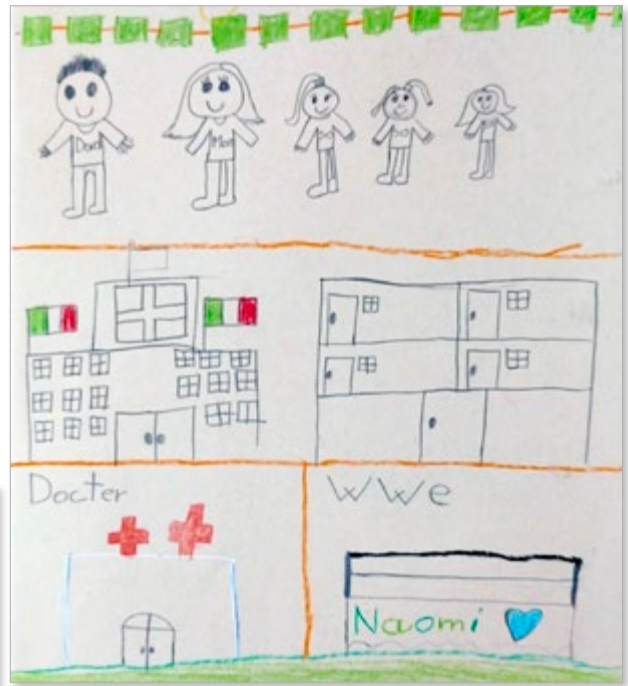
car. I must be positive and not to allow negative thoughts to affect me. It is my mother's dream that I become a doctor, so I want to make her happy and achieve this dream for her. I had one best friend in my school but she stayed behind and we left. I lost contact with her and I miss her a lot. It is very painful to lose a friend, I carry that pain in my heart wherever I go and wherever I am. ●







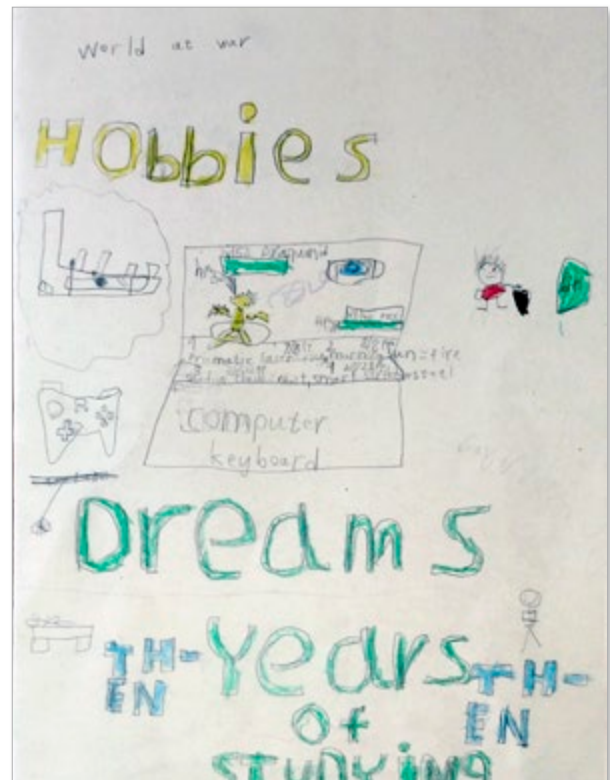
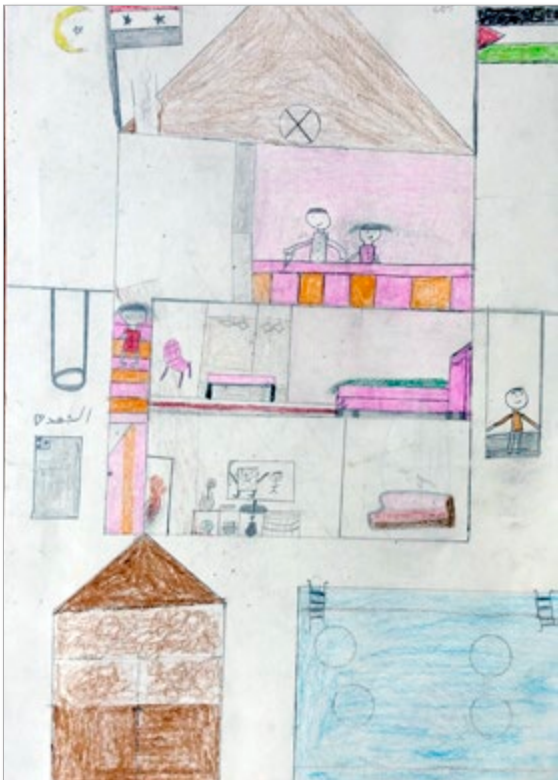
I am 10 years old. I live with my family and I have one sister who is younger than me. I want to become an artist. To become an artist, I must study, I must go to college, and I must learn how to make crafts. In the country that I was born in, when I went to school no one wanted to play with me because I had a different skin color than them. I used to feel very lonely. My classmates used to bully me, and I never had any friends. ●



I have 3 sisters and one brother. I don't remember much about my country. I was young when we left. My dream was to have my own Youtube channel. I tried to learn from those youtubers who teach about starting a Youtube channel. I want to try everything in life because in my country I had nothing. I could not go to swimming pools in my country and I did not learn swimming or anything else. We lived in a very bad situation. In the future, I want to become a vet. To achieve my dream, I must go to school and study. I can teach people how to take care of their animals on my Youtube channel. I also wish to travel and visit many places, such as Japan, waterfalls, Germany. Some of my friends are in Germany. I can serve by helping people, for example if someone is carrying a heavy bag, I can help them by carrying their bags for them. And I do acts of service, not because I want something from people, rather because I have a big heart and I love them. I don't differentiate between whom I should love and serve and whom I should not. I don't say, this is a white person or this is a black person, or beautiful and this is ugly. I want to learn everything, I want to learn how to dance bally, how to swim, and how to sing. I want to be able to do everything that I dream about. I was never able to do anything. In my country, I was just staying home. We didn't do any activities. This is why I like to

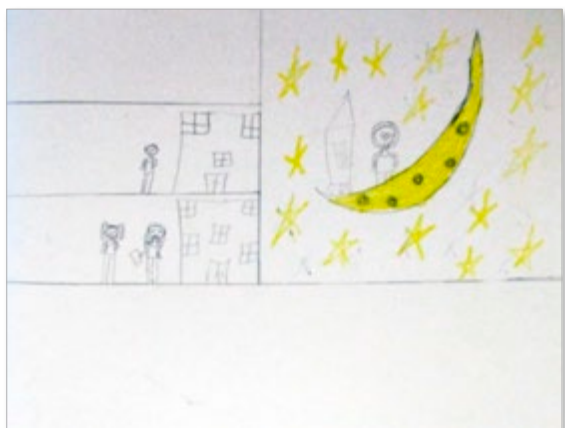


try everything, for example, drawing, cooking, dancing, and swimming. I didn't have friends and I always wished to have friends. To go to their house, play together, they respect me and I respect them, we talk with each other, and we love each other. I never had friends. ●



I have 3 sisters and one brother. I remember I used to go with my parents to a farm, and we used to make bread there. I don't remember much about my country. The first day that I went to school with my sisters, the teacher introduced herself to us. The problem was that I did not like the school. The teacher was teaching us a lot of things, but I did not understand anything. I used to feel very happy when I returned home from school. But, we did not have a toilet in the house, the toilet was outside the house, so it was very difficult for us every time we wanted to go to the toilet. We had to wear full clothes, shoes and everything every time that we had to go to the toilet. I was always asking myself, why there is no toilet in the house? I asked my mother, why the toilet is not in the house? My mother could not answer my question, she said she does not know why the toilet is outside the house. I do acts of service home, for example I wash the dishes, I clean the house, I hover, and I clean the floor. When I grow up I might become a chef or a hairdresser.

I had many friends. One of my friends used to lie a lot. There was also a friend who used to come to play with me very early in the morning, but my mother used to ask her to come later in the day as we were asleep yet. I used to play football with my friends. There was a nearby playground. We used to go there from morning to evening. All my friends left to new countries until only I and one friend were left. The day that we were travelling to Iceland, my friend could not stop crying at all, she cried and cried and cried. I told her that she will be also travelling soon, and I tried to comfort her. I told her you will go also, and you will be happy, and that we will meet again. I and my sisters used to have small teddy-bears. We used to play with them, eat with them, go out with them. I used to love



our teddy-bears as my own friends. When the day came to travel to Iceland, I asked my mother if we can take the teddy-bears with us, but my mother said no. She said we don't have enough space to take the teddy-bears with us. So, I had to leave my teddy-bears behind the same way that I left my friends behind. ●



