

## **Building Bridges Club, Staples High School, Westport CT**



For Immediate Release:  
March 22, 2017

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### **Building Bridges Club Hosts Community Forum & Fundraiser for Syrian Refugees on April 1<sup>st</sup> 3:00-5:30 pm**

***US Representative Jim Himes, Westport First Selectman Jim Marpe, and  
Westport-sponsored refugees speak. Proceeds go to IICONN and Nu Day Syria***

3:00 Documentary Film ~ 4:15 Expert Panel Discussion; Q&A ~ \$10 suggested donation

WESTPORT, CT-- Building Bridges Club of Staples High School will host an event with a documentary film followed by a panel discussion and audience Q&A, at the Staples auditorium on Saturday, April 1st from 3:00 to 5:30 pm. This informative discussion by various experts will shed light on the current refugee situation and provide opportunities to help Syrian refugees during one of the largest humanitarian crises in modern history.

Kion Bruno founded the club to "build bridges of understanding" between Americans and Middle Easterners through highlighting similarities between our community and those in the Middle East. In this way he hopes to temper xenophobia and false portrayals. Kion is the grandson of two Iranian immigrants. His grandfather worked his way up in America to become a renowned microbiologist.

Kion and his club members are determined to make a difference by helping the cause of refugees through a unifying, town-wide event. "We are proud that the Staples Building Bridges Club is fulfilling its mission by sponsoring an event that unites our community. By bringing together important government leaders, refugee families, refugee support agencies, high school students, and many members of the local community we hope to help victims of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. This will be an incredible learning moment for Westport and a great show of unity for a tremendously important cause."

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As Westport's First Selectman Jim Marpe echoed, "Westport has always welcomed citizens from all over the world and we will continue to do so now and into the future. Westport is a place where we live by values that embrace equality, inclusiveness, open-mindedness, respect for each other, and support for the basic rights and dignities of all people... This discussion and fundraiser is one way that Westporters can become involved and demonstrate support for those experiencing untold horror and personal tragedy."

The program will start at 3:00 pm with the award-winning documentary, "Salam Neighbor," produced by two Westport Greens Farms Academy grads, Chris Temple and Zach Ingrasci. These were the first filmmakers ever allowed by the UN to live in a refugee camp. They put faces on the immense tragedy where a generation of traumatized children is growing up without schools or hope. Chris and Zach chronicled daily lives in a Jordanian refugee camp close to the Syrian border where families are re-terrorized by the sounds of bombings. There are about 85,000 people languishing in this one camp alone, waiting in tents for an average of 17 years.

At 4:15 pm the panel speakers, with discussion moderated by Kion, will include two area refugees. Mohamed is a Syrian refugee who arrived with his family this past summer. They are co-sponsored by a coalition of 9 Westport churches, synagogues and Muslim residents in partnership with IRIS - International Refugee and Immigration Services in New Haven. Of the over 10 million displaced Syrian refugees, he is one of only about 13,000 admitted to the U.S. last year. CT is a leader in community co-sponsorships for refugees.

This coalition known as "WIRS," for Westport Interfaith Refugee Settlement, is represented on the panel by volunteer coordinator John McGeehan. WIRS rallies over 100 volunteers throughout surrounding towns, who become immediate family to their co-sponsored refugees in the daily tasks of English tutoring, transportation, job training, financial support and whatever's required to get them to independence. The bright young couple with elementary age children has witnessed tragedies and the death of family, friends and neighbors. Their application to the U.S. was rigorously vetted repeatedly over the 5 years while they were exiled in Egypt.

Panelist Dr. Ali Majeed is an earlier Westport-hosted Iraqi refugee. He is another example of a success story going on to recently become an orthodontist in the NY metro area. – continued -

The next panelists are from two non-profit organizations who will be the recipients of the volunteers and funds which Building Bridges hopes to raise through the event. Claudia Connor is President and CEO of the International Institute of Connecticut in Bridgeport operating for nearly 100 years. IICONN, together with IRIS, are two of the state's three charitable immigration and refugee agencies that work with the U.S. State Dept. to settle the vast majority of refugees in our area who do not have host sponsors. Each offers a range of rewarding volunteer and donation opportunities to help families from many countries arriving to CT with nothing. Some Westport residents and faith communities are already working with IICONN refugees in areas such as tutoring, mentoring, apartment furnishings and job searches.

Megan Laney is the volunteer representative of the international refugee aid organization called Nu Day Syria. She is a teacher in Fairfield who was studying Arabic in Syria when the revolution broke out and she had to be emergency evacuated. Nu Day Syria is a New England based non-profit which focuses support on the millions of Syrian women and children at risk.

Panelists representing CT's bi-partisan government leaders in support of immigrants and refugees are U.S. Representative Jim Himes, Westport 1<sup>st</sup> Selectman Jim Marpe, and by video message U.S. Senator Chris Murphy and State Senator Jonathan Steinberg.

Speaking at a recent club meeting, Westporter Dr. Khalid Abbed, a first generation Palestinian-American, encapsulated the event organizers' message about Middle Eastern peoples, saying, *"I am from earth. My race is human. My religion is love and peace."* As longtime Westporter, "06880" blogger and Staples H.S. Coach Dan Woog concluded, ***"Kion and his organization of teenagers have already built a bridge to the Middle East. Now the rest of us must cross it."***

The Building Bridges Club hopes the whole town will turn out for the event and bring friends. If unable to attend, the public is urged to volunteer and send tax-deductible donations to the highlighted organizations, mentioning the Building Bridges Club. For information on how to help, contact [ctBBridges@gmail.com](mailto:ctBBridges@gmail.com) and these organizations: [WIRInfo@gmail.com](mailto:WIRInfo@gmail.com), [www.IICONN.org](http://www.IICONN.org), [www.NuDaySyria.net](http://www.NuDaySyria.net), and [www.IRISct.org](http://www.IRISct.org).

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