

Lifestyle

TUESDAY, JUNE 13, 2017

50 years after Loving:
Interracial couples
still face strife

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Kuwaitis shop at a market during the Holy Month of Ramadan in downtown Kuwait City yesterday. For Muslims across the world, the beginning of the ninth month in the Muslim lunar calendar which marks the start of Ramadan is a time for spiritual reflection, prayers and fasting. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Ali Kassem carries his surfboard out of the water on a beach in the town of Jiyeh.



Ali Kassem, holding his surfboard on a beach in the town of Jiyeh.

'Surf Syria': A refugee in Lebanon finds a dream at sea

Ali Kassem had never seen the sea before he fled his home in Syria for Lebanon, but now he's a regular in the waves and dreams of his own surf school. Dressed in a purple wet suit, the 17-year-old confidently coats his board with wax and smears sunscreen on his face before dashing into the sea. He disappears behind one wave and another until his small figure is barely visible from the beach at all, as though he were headed for the horizon. "When I'm on my board, I feel free. I feel like I'm in another life," the teenager says shyly at a beach in Jiyeh, 30 kilometers (20 miles) south of Beirut.

Kassem is from Aleppo city, though he says he remembers little from his childhood in Syria. His father has worked in Jiyeh for the past 25 years, and after Syria's conflict erupted in March 2011, he decided to bring his family to Lebanon as well. Kassem has two brothers and three sisters, but speaks little about his family and his life before he became a refugee. A third brother died in the conflict, "killed in Aleppo at the beginning of the war," he says, without giving more details. His life now is dominated by surfing. "Surfing is like an art. It allows me to express my personality," he says, his eyes sparkling in his tanned face. "I become someone else. I have more confidence in myself."

A makeshift board

Kassem's entry into surfing came through Ali el-Amine, who became his mentor after meeting him in 2015. At the sandy Jiyeh beach, a popular spot for surfers, Amine spotted Kassem trying his luck in the waves with a makeshift board. "He was trying to surf with a piece of polystyrene he had cut into a plank shape," says the 34-year-old, who runs a surf

school in Jiyeh. "He was very thin and wearing nothing but shorts. I was afraid he would drown," he says.

But after watching for a few minutes, Amine's fears began to recede. "He knew exactly what he was doing," he says. Kassem had spent long hours observing surfers in the water at Jiyeh before deciding to try himself. "I didn't know this sport existed. The first time I saw the surfers, I wanted to try it," he says with a smile. Amine decided to take Kassem under his wing, offering him a spot at his surf school and giving him a wet suit and board "on the condition he was good in class and behaved with his parents". And two years later, the guidance has borne fruit, says Amine, who considers Kassem like "a son". "He's better than some people who have been surfing for years," he says.

'Surf Syria'

Kassem has stuck with the sport, convinced it can help him "build a better life". During the summer, he works at Amine's school, repairing boards, welcoming customers and helping during lessons. The job provides income that helps his family, along with his father's wages and support from the UN refugee agency. "My family really support me in surfing. They have no problem with it," he says. "Right now I'm teaching my younger brother how to surf, and I'm going to teach my younger sister as well." But, while Kassem says he has become used to life in Lebanon, he still dreams of returning home. His ultimate goal is "to become the first professional surfer in Syria and open a surf school in Latakia when the war is over".

Latakia is a popular seaside destination, and a government stronghold that has been largely



spared the worst ravages of Syria's conflict, which has killed over 320,000 people. The International Surfing Association does not so far count a Syrian surf school among its members, and to help Kassem achieve his goal, Amine has set up a campaign on the GoFundMe crowdfunding platform. The school project might still be far off, but Kassem already has a name for it: "It will be called Surf Syria," he says. — AFP

A picture shows 17-year-old Syrian refugee Ali Kassem surfing off the shore of the town of Jiyeh, south of the Lebanese capital Beirut.



Ali Kassem waxes his surfboard before going surfing on a beach in the town of Jiyeh.



Ali Kassem surfing off the shore of the town of Jiyeh.



Ali Kassem carries his surfboard on a beach in the town of Jiyeh.—AFP photos