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Boston City Hall art exhibit shows 'The Faces of Syrian Refugees'

Boston photographer Michael Cohen is premiering his exhibit in his home city before it travels across the country.

By Kristin Toussaint (/profile/kristin-toussaint) Published : June 08, 2017



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When you think of Syrian refugees, what comes to mind?

Maybe you think of the little boy from Aleppo (<http://www.metro.us/news/video-of-small-boy-saved-from-aleppo-rubble-sparks-social-media-storm/Lmiph---BjbpDG3VTjxIW6x1VwEGpA>), heartbreakingly photographed sitting in an ambulance, his body caked with dirt and blood. Maybe you picture the boats (http://www.metro.us/news/boat-with-91-migrants-many-children-runs-aground-in-cyprus/Lmiqc---WT7XSU9_u32LtsiHDPmhiQ), stuffed to capacity and sinking, (<http://www.metro.us/news/at-least-42-migrants-drown-as-boats-capsize-off-greek-islands/zspav---UOrSGJ7WxEz1g>) as Syrians try to escape to Greece and some semblance of safety.

Michael Cohen, a photographer born and raised in Boston, wants to show a different side of Syrian refugees. His exhibit, "The Faces of Syrian Refugees," is now on display at Boston City Hall throughout the month of June in honor of Immigrant Heritage Month.

Cohen said that the idea for the photography project came to him last spring as he was "ruffling with my own conscious" after watching the Syrian crisis escalate.

"I kept on thinking that the world was going to step in and stop it, but of course the world hasn't. So I thought, 'What can I do as one person?'" he said.

Cohen had seen polls saying Americans were not interested (<http://time.com/4126371/these-5-facts-explain-americas-shameful-reaction-to-syrian-refugees/>) in the idea of Syrian refugees emigrating to the United States. When Americans think of those refugees, they see the negative images of their struggles and hardships, he said.

"So many images [of Syrian refugees] are not necessarily images we would welcome into our neighborhoods. As a photographer, I thought maybe I can do something about that," Cohen said. "Instead of showing them at their worst, I'm showing them at their best."

Since March 2011, more than 5 million Syrians have fled their homes, according to the UN Refugee Agency (<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>). Cohen's exhibit shows Syrians who have emigrated to the U.S., Canada and Europe — people who have settled into a new life, new jobs and new schools.

Cohen partnered with Dr. Dana Janbek, a researcher at Lasell College, and Amy Bracken, a freelance journalist, to create the exhibit. They found and visited 20 different refugees and asked them questions not about the crisis but about their lives.

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"Our goal was to humanize these people as individuals," Cohen said. "We asked questions like, 'What kind of cooking did you love as a child? What are some stories you remember of your grandparents?' Some of the same questions we might ask each other if we're meeting for the first or second time."

Cohen said his exhibit is "boring" compared to other photographs of Syrians, because these refugees look like ordinary people.

"But isn't that the point?" he said. "What turns out to be true is that we learn that these people are pretty much just like us."

The exhibit opened June 6 and is on display in City Hall's third floor lobby until June 30, at which point it will travel across the country. The City Hall display is the exhibit's premier, and it's an honor, Cohen said, to start the exhibit both in his hometown and as a kickoff to Immigration Heritage Month.

"The 'Faces of Syrian Refugees' exhibit is incredibly powerful and humanizes the refugee crisis in a way that is thought-provoking and leaves a lasting impact," Mayor Marty Walsh said in a statement. "I encourage everyone to come visit this exhibit over the course of Immigrant Heritage Month, and experience the story of each individual featured in the photos."
