

STUDENT PROFILE:
PASS STUDENT, WAEL ISLEEM (D'18)



A Life-Changing Journey

PENN DENTAL MEDICINE'S Program for Advance Standing Students (PASS), designed for graduates of foreign dental schools who want to practice in the United States, will have graduated 888 students from 83 countries over its history when the Class of 2018 earns their DMDs this spring. The PASS students, who join the second-year DMD class each January, arrive at Penn Dental Medicine with unique personal histories. While many of their stories are inspiring, few are more harrowing than that of Wael Isleem, D'18, who came to the United States from Aleppo, Syria in 2013, in the midst of his country's deadly civil war.

Wael, 29, a Syrian native who had wanted to be a dentist since his middle school years, had invested five years of his life as a student at Aleppo University School of Dentistry — earning a degree in dentistry and then pursuing post-graduate work in periodontics — when frequent, violent clashes in the region closed his school. Wael's parents, brothers, and sisters urged him to leave Syria as soon as possible in order to complete his education in a safe environment.

Although leaving his family behind was difficult, "I knew the U.S. was the best destination for me," Wael says. "I also knew that it would be much easier for a single man travelling alone to get out of the country." (Soon afterward, Wael's family also relocated, to a stable location in the Middle East.)

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CROSSING TO A BETTER FUTURE

Wael hired a private taxi for the first leg of his trip, which lasted seven hours and took him through a series of security checkpoints en route to the Syria-Lebanon border. At each, armed soldiers questioned him closely, but allowed him to proceed. When he reached the border, however, he was held overnight, and felt sure he would be forced to go back.

"The Syrian regime was trying to keep residents with medical backgrounds in the country," he says, remembering a tense and sleepless night. "I was concerned that I might never get across to Lebanon. If I didn't get out of Syria, I had no idea what my future would be."

Morning came and, after more questioning, Wael was at last permitted to cross the border into Lebanon. From there, he was able to catch a flight to Jordan, and soon afterward, he came to the United States.

A FRIENDLY RECEPTION

A family friend in North Carolina gave him a place to stay and helped him find a position as a dental assistant, where he worked while applying to dental schools. Friends in Syria and the United States had spoken highly of Penn, and Wael was thrilled to be granted an interview for the PASS program in 2016, where he met Dr. Uri Hangorsky, Director of PASS, and Dr. Heywood Koch, Clinical Associate Professor of Restorative Dentistry "They were so friendly and really wanted to get to know me," he says.

He has been impressed by his fellow students as well. "From the first day, I looked around and thought, 'I am sitting with well-educated people from all over the world who are eager to learn,'" he remembers.

Wael immediately felt at home in Philadelphia, where the old buildings and the city's storied past reminded him of his history-rich homeland. He has also made a home at Penn Dental Medicine.

"It's a great environment," he says. "Even though I am from another country, I never felt out of place here. It's comfortable for everyone." Wael has become involved in CAD/CAM research and testing materials for implants and crowns. And among his community service activities through Penn Dental Medicine, he has particularly enjoyed making a number of trips to the Amish community in Lancaster County, where he has been able to experience a new culture with unique dental needs.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

"I really appreciate the comprehensive approach to dentistry here," says Wael, who will graduate this spring and hopes to pursue post-graduate work in periodontics and prosthodontics. "We look at the big picture of managing oral health. We are not only fixing a problem, we are asking how and why it happened, so that we can prevent it in the future."

"This has been a life-changing journey," he says of his escape from Syria. "Dentistry is my passion, and I am so grateful to continue my education here at Penn."