

Interview Sala - English version - **ONGEEIKT**

‘When I’m the weakest, I find this place where I’m happiest’

This is the journey of Sala, who grew up in a religious family in Jemen, where she studied medicine though she wanted to go to an school of Art. She had a couple of stressful jobs in her home country. Then she got a scholarship in the Netherlands to study, but she could not find a job after she finished studying . After applying for asylum she now is now living in a camp for refugees in Assen. She joined a group of women from the camp to go to the weekly Grenzeloos Creatief activities in Eemland – and then got the offer to take part in the program Discover and Developplaces.

After her graduation in 2012 Sala had several jobs, such as a doctor for refugees within the country with non-governmental and humanitarian organizations. When she got promoted to manage a big health project, she was given a lot of responsibility and she was pressured from the government and other parties. In addition to deterioration of the security situation in the country that gave her a lot of stress. Because Sala had the most stable job in the family she had to support them. That put extra pressure on her. She wanted more freedom, to go out, wear other clothes and be more involved with art. She liked to draw since she was a child. She tried to keep a sketchbook with her and drew her surroundings, but she did not have a lot of time or confidence to do it.

Independend

Her study gave her general knowledge, but she didn’t know what specialty she wanted to do – and she didn’t want to study for many years to go. In 2019 Sala got a Dutch scholarship to study Master of Public Health in Amsterdam. She was part of an international group of students. She discovered freedom and loved the different cultures, learn about new food, the party’s and wearing different clothes than she used to. Sala stopped wearing her hijab. It was a big step in her life. She was afraid to tell her family, but she eventually told them. After arguments with them, they accepted her choice.

After her scholarship she did not find a job, partly because of Corona. She went to Belgium to stay with her aunt for a while. She tells how she felt at that time: ‘Because I always wanted to be independent, I felt ashamed not being able to find a job. To make myself useful I volunteered at the Red Cross to help homeless immigrants.’

When her visa expired in September 2021, she had to decide whether to go home to Jemen or apply for asylum. ‘It was a very difficult decision for me to make. I missed my family a lot and I knew I could live in Jemen during the war, but I also wanted more freedom and to build my own life.’ Luckily her aunt understood her dilemma and she supported her to express her feelings and worries.

‘It was like a big hole, and I was afraid to jump in, I didn’t know what was waiting for me, but I jumped. Then I felt I was safe. It was a graduate process but I learned to talk, to ask for a home, a safe place. I was breaking through the fear.’

Similar experiences

‘At first I was a bit afraid to live in a camp. I didn’t know what to expect, living with other people, waiting, not knowing what the future would bring.’ Then Sala volunteered in the camp and started making friends. After a while she heard about the meetings of Grenzeloos Creatief every Wednesday morning. A group of women from the camp would gather at Eemland and do some sewing or other crafts, while talking about all sorts of things. She joined the group to meet other women from the camp. But above all, she wanted to do something good, so she helped translating. ‘It feels more satisfying and easy for me to help other people

then to do something for myself.' she explains. 'Though the women came from different countries they all had similar experiences when fled their motherland. That was comforting for me.'

When Paula from OngeEikt told Sala about the program 'Discover and Develop places' and encouraged her to participate she felt happy but also insecure. She was afraid her participation would be a disappointment for her mentor. That in the end she still did not know what she wanted to do in the future. Or she would like everything, but could not make a choice. 'I thought 'what will happen when I finish the program?' I was afraid to waste their time and take advantage of them.'

Process my feelings

Sala gained access to a larger network through OngeEikt. For example Helena arranged a meeting for Sala with a female doctor working in a health center, so she could learn if this kind of a job would suit her. She found out that you can be a GP and still have a life next to your work.

In the program she also worked with ceramic and textile. 'I was inspired by Paula's ceramic artwork. I made a female figure, because I am insecure about my own femininity. In Jemen women always have to cover their femininity and sexuality, so I struggled with my body. Back then I had a more masculine energy of presenting myself, so I could maintain myself. By making a feminine figure I tried to explore and process my feelings. And I had nice conversations about it with others.'

Sala talked with Suhela about her background and her trauma. That helped her a lot. She learned not to feel guilty not using her sketchblock enough. 'Suhela told me you don't have to capture everything you see on paper. Just by looking at it, you can capture it in your head. That felt reassuring to me. And she learned me to draw what I feel. Spontaneously. So I drew some strokes. It looked ugly, but it felt easy. I did not judge what I was drawing. It felt okay to express.'

More relaxed

Sala is still exploring her future. 'Maybe I will work in Public Health. And I can take small courses in Art. But I do not want to overwhelm myself with too many options, because I have already other overwhelming things on my way. About where am I going to live. Building new relationships. I have some confidence that I can find a job. I see several options.' One of her goals is to do more artistic work. 'I've always wanted to make art, but back home I was too busy and there was so much pressure for me. I had the fear that I lost a big part of my ability to create. Now I experience new things.'

'What I like about OngeEikt is that we help each other. I start to connect with Dutch people. On Saturdays I help entrepreneurs run the Art & Craft Shop of OngeEikt, in return for joining the program. I could not have imagined I had this chance. That places like this exist. Is this coincidence? When I'm the weakest, I find this place where I'm happiest. When you're lost, and you let it all go, expect the unexpected. With time I started to know myself. I didn't know that was going to happen. I am more relaxed. I trust new people. They reassure me and enjoy my company. I don't know my whole journey, but I am now enjoying each day. I started to read books and learn the Dutch language. Everything is unexpected but I found love and support. I still can't believe this kind of support exists.'