

Show notes:

If you are interested in refugee sponsorship, email refugee@mcco.ca for an automated reply with lots of resources or visit: <https://mcccanada.ca/learn/what/refugees>

Read about how former sponsored refugees are making an impact during the pandemic.

<https://mcccanada.ca/stories/resettled-refugees-support-front-lines-during-covid-19>

Maysoun: Too many things happened in my life just showing me that God has a plan for me and for my girls. Certain things in this life has no explanation, we just need to accept it and go with it and be grateful for it.

VO: *You are now listening to UNDERCURRENTS. My name is Ken Ogasawara and I'm part of the Community Engagement team at Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario. This podcast is an ongoing experiment to find a new way to tell the stories coming from our community of program participants, staff, partners and others.*

Undercurrents is brought to you by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances. Inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Kindred supports welcoming communities for newcomers through products, service relationships, and partnerships. This episode is about miracles.

When I was 17 years old, my best friend Mike and I experienced a miracle. Maybe. We were driving back in the middle of the night from a concert - Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, if you must know. The circumstances were unusual, which made it even more fun for me and Mike, the concert was in Buffalo, NY and it was the middle of a school week!

I have no idea how both sets of parents were OK with this.

Mike was driving and I was beside him in the passenger seat and we were tired. It was close to 2 in the morning by the time we had crossed the border back into Ontario. We both fell asleep going 110 km per hour on the QEW just outside Hamilton. I awoke first and grabbed the wheel just before we hit the concrete median in the middle of the highway. Mike woke up and grabbed the wheel back and we fishtailed, then spun wildly across four lanes of mercifully empty highway before crashing into one of those gigantic highway light posts.

We were stuck. We were shocked. We were unhurt. This was 1998 and we didn't have a cell phone to call for help. We staggered out of the car and took in the damage. Suddenly a woman appeared. I assume she had pulled up behind us but I don't actually remember seeing her car. She asked if we were OK, and said she had called 911 for us. And before we knew it, she had disappeared into the night. Mike and I were both stunned by the accident and not really aware of what was going on, but we did catch her name: Angela.

Now, I'm not suggesting that this was a supernatural event. This was simply a woman who just happened to be driving at 2am on a lonely stretch of highway, who just happened to have a cell phone in 1998, and who just happened to have a name that literally means 'angel'. But truly miraculous or not, the point is, against all odds, she came through for us. She helped two strangers in a moment of crisis.

This episode is about Maysoun, someone who also has experience with miracles, with ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

[music break]

Maysoun: I read a lot, my mom was a teacher, my dad was a journalist, we are only three children. We live in comfort and we focus a lot on education, reading and that wasn't the case, you know, with lots of children.

[music break]

VO: *Maysoun grew up in a small town in a country that will remain nameless for security reasons.*

Maysoun: It wasn't a happy childhood, my parents belonged to different denominations, actually different religions though even my dad wasn't religious, but we considered as an outcast people, me and my siblings. I faced lots of discrimination from the family, from people around me. I was called names. I was bullied. We've been treated as a strangers all the time.

Maysoun: I'd go from school to my place, my place to school study have a very few friends, surprisingly, very few friends. I don't like to leave our house at all. I always wanted to listen to opera in a very early age, watch the documentaries and read books, which was very abnormal for teenagers. Because I used even to hear, you're complicated, you have mental problem and I'm like, I don't think so. I just enjoy these things.

I continued through high school and I said, "Hmm, I want to become a journalist." "Okay. Why do you want to become a journalist?" I said, "I want to advocate for people who has no voices."

And I graduated from highschool, I lived in a student dorm, I studied journalism.

Maysoun: It was very interesting time during university years, suddenly I have lots of friends, very outgoing. I start flourishing outside of my own soil. My own soil, where I was born was very toxic, when I moved outside of it, it's just, things had changed for me, I start exploring myself. So I become one of the leaders in the university, my voice was well heard by my colleagues, caused lots of troubles with the authorities. I was arrested a few times too from secret police. They investigated me several times when I was a student.

[music break]

VO: *During her last year of university, Maysoun met her future husband who was a fellow activist, and after two years they were married. A year after that, she gave birth to their daughter. Life was good.*

But one day, everything changed.

Maysoun: I remember he came to me saying early morning, "I'm going to work, do you want anything?" I said, "No." He got his laptop and he left and I didn't see him for over a year since then.

[music break]

VO: *A police officer whom Maysoun's husband had bribed often while detained, had tipped him off that his friends had been arrested and he was next. He fled the country immediately.*

Maysoun: So he phoned me, of course, 24 hours had passed, I didn't see him and he phoned me it was unknown number, actually, no ID and he said, "That's what happened. I'm trying to find a way to go to any country." Before that he used to go to China for business. So his Chinese visa was still valid. So he said, "Okay, I'll go to China now, I don't have to wait."

VO: *He spent a couple months in China. He was determined to come back but Maysoun knew it would be impossible.*

Maysoun: So I told him, "No, you cannot come back, things are really bad." I said, "Why you don't go to Europe, join your cousins and uncles and we can go there, seek refuge." He said, "I don't want to be a refugee, I love my country."

It was really scary the whole situation, the unknown, you didn't know what to expect. So I was living in an actual fear.

VO: *During this time, Maysoun discovered she was pregnant and eventually gave birth to their second daughter. Maysoun was essentially a single mother of two very young children, facing down harassment from the police, and just trying to survive. Finally, out of desperation, they decided to meet up in a neighboring country close to Maysoun. It had been exactly one year since had fled home.*

Maysoun: We spent about five days there, so with the agreement that when he returned to China, he will arrange the situation for me and the girls and we will go join him there and after that, we will go to Austria. That was the major plan.

VO: *Maysoun flew back home and waited... and waited...*

Maysoun: What happened with you? What happened with you? He said, "Yeah. Yeah. Just it's a matter of time, my Chinese visa is going to expire I have to go to a place called Macau." It's not an actual country, but it is a country it belong to China, but it has its own system and I'm like, "Okay." There is a Chinese embassy there and I'm going to extend my visa. I said "Sounds good!".

VO: *It was in Macau that disaster struck. Maysoun's husband was checking out of a hotel he had stayed at for his brief visit to extend his visa. He left his baggage at the front desk and went to use the washroom. When he came out, all of his belongings were gone. His passport, his ID, all of his money. He couldn't return to mainland China. He was stateless and homeless in a matter of seconds. Maysoun knew then that she and her girls had to get to Macau to join her husband.*

Maysoun: The plan was to go there in a very secretive way. So I didn't tell anybody. I didn't tell the family members, no one. I just told my mom, my in-laws and that's it. The cousins, siblings, nobody knows anything. So we booked the air flight, at the airport where I started the story the officer said, "No, you cannot leave the country." Why? So I said, "How much do you want?" Of course, at that time in my pocket, I had \$3,600 US dollars. The 600 was separated, I put it in a different, it was in my pocket. The 3000 was in my purse. So I told him, "How much do you want? Just let me go through." He said, "How much do you have?" I'm like, "Okay, I only have this \$3,000." He took it and he allow me to go through. I was thinking all the time, like he's going to call someone and they will arrest me, he will just take the money and they will arrest me and that's it.

So I was sitting, my heart I thought it was going to explode. My brain was really in a horrible pain and when I ride the airplane, I sat, I wasn't able to cry. I was just like, "Oh, please, please, please, please. I hope you have goodness in your heart. Don't, don't, don't. The moment the airplane start moving, I start like feeling okay. I will make it. I will be alive. I will survive. When the airplane flew, I start crying, I held my girls I said, "We're good. We're out. We're out."

[music break]

VO: *As of June 2021 over 82 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are over 26 million refugees who have had to flee their country, and around half of that 26 million are children under the age of 18. Every year only about 1% of refugees are successfully resettled to another country.*

The pandemic has made this situation worse. While Canada had not officially lowered the limit of refugees able to resettle to Canada, border restrictions and pandemic protocol meant that in reality, refugee resettlement slowed to a trickle. That means more waiting and uncertainty for refugees, who can remain in exile for years at a time. Maysoun was about to begin her own period of waiting in Macau.

VO: *They lived in an apartment provided by the government of Macau. But they were not allowed to work or travel. Their passports were confiscated. Every month they had to visit the immigration office and reapply for another monthly visa. They ended up living in this state of limbo for five years.*

Maysoun: Of course my husband was in trauma, like severe trauma. Suddenly he lost everything, he found himself useless. He didn't know what to do, where to go. So he barely came home. So I was all by my own with the girls. So I remember I opened the fridge, the fridge was empty, no money. I didn't know what to do, and it was dinner time.

The girls came, they said, "Mom, we're hungry." I was like, "Okay, don't worry. I'm going to make some food for you." I was thinking, oh, and mind you at that time I was atheist. Yes. I spent most of my life atheist. Yes, I have to admit I was a really strong atheist. After all this drama and tragedy, how on earth I will find God? I was like, "No way."

Maysoun: I sat there and I started crying and I remember, I look to the sky said, "I always deny you. I always neglect you. I always rejected you, if you are exist and you are the God send food for these two girls, I don't want anything. If you are an actual God send food for these girls." Imagine yourself in this situation, challenging God as if you're telling him, "Make it rain burger and food." It's crazy, but I was so desperate, husband wasn't there, I didn't see him for two days, the fridge was empty. I was like, "Oh my gosh, what should I do?" All the responsibility is on me and I'm trying to manage everything. I didn't know what to do.

I'm like, "Yeah, if you are the God and you will send the food, I promise I will follow you. You're going to be my Lord and I will never argue. If you are exist, show me that you are exist." Honestly, like come on man, it's crazy. I shouldn't do that. But here is the thing. Five minutes later, I receive a phone call from Sister Shinjin in Mother Teresa Missionaries of Charity.

VO: *Maysoun had been volunteering at Mother Teresa Missionaries of Charity and at a number of other charities, there was childcare, and it was her way of doing something, being useful, to combat the agony of loneliness and uncertainty. So, it was in this moment of despair, with hungry children and an empty fridge, that Maysoun got a call from Sister Shinjin.*

Maysoun: She said, "Maysoun, are you okay?" When she asked me this question, I start crying. She said, "Maysoun, what happened?" I said, "Oh my gosh, why did you call me?" She said, "I don't know." She said, "There was a voice in my ear saying, call Maysoun, call Maysoun. Maysoun, Maysoun, Maysoun." They pronounced my name very nicely in Chinese, they pronounce it exactly the way how it should be.-She said, "I kept hearing your name in my ear, Maysoun, Maysoun, Maysoun." She said "I don't know why, but I called you, are you okay?" I said, "I'm coming." She said, "Yeah, come."

VO: *When Maysoun got to Mother Teresa Missionaries of Charity, she found out that that very night when Maysoun was staring at an empty fridge and empty stomachs, a rich businessman had held a wedding feast for his daughter. As is always the case at wedding feasts, there was more than enough and the dozens of boxes of unopened fine dining was sent to Mother Teresa Missionaries of Charity.*

Maysoun: The food was in big boxes, never opened. You know when I say Chinese luxurious food, you know what I'm talking about. A certain type of soup, the lobster, you know? Never opened!

Maysoun: That time, that moment when I challenged God, Sister Shinjin called me to say they have this food from the banquet that never touch, and she didn't know why she called me. She didn't know, I need the food that we were starving, literally. So when I went there, I saw the food, I couldn't stop crying and she said, tell me what's happening. So I explained to her, I said, "This is the case, this is the situation and I challenged God." All sisters started crying, they said, "You challenged?" I said, "I challenged him. I'm a believer now." I said, "I have nothing to say." Every time I remember, I said, "How on earth I denied him for how long?" Since I was born, probably. Too painful you know.

Maysoun: But yeah, as if he was telling me, "Hey, you're my daughter, of course I can provide food, are you kidding me? This is like easy." Everything, you know what? I return home with the most luxurious food you can ever imagine. The fridge was full, the big size fridge, the boxes of food, oh my goodness. Even the girls said, "Wow, you got this food." I said, "Yeah." Especially seafood, we are seafood lover actually. So it was amazing.

VO: *The miracle of the wedding feast was a significant event in Maysoun's life; it brought her to faith which, in turn, brought her into a strong community: a Bible study group. This group would have a significant impact in the lives of Maysoun and her family. But first, they had to overcome another shock.*

Maysoun: After two and a half years they said, "We will grant you the residency just wait, in three months we will do that."

VO: *They had been waiting to be eligible to claim residency in Macau which could mean the opportunity to work again, and end the monthly visa applications and the constant feeling of being in limbo. This was a big deal.*

Maysoun: After three months, they called my husband, he went there thinking we will get our residency, it was a letter of deportation. We receive instead of our residency a letter of deportation with a 15 days time to appeal.

It was really shocking, it was Thursday, I remember the day very well. So I was so helpless and hopeless and I didn't know what to do and we start thinking how to leave the country, they will deport us and we cannot hire a lawyer, we have no money to hire a lawyer though. So on Friday, I remember at 7:00 PM, I contacted my friend and I told her that's what happened and she was really in shock. "How come?" I said, "I have no idea."

So what she did, she said, "I'm going to contact one of the nuns in Hong Kong." She used to know some lawyers here, let's see what's going to happen, but probably she's not going to be here, she always leave early on Friday. I said, "Okay." She said, "Probably it's going to skip till Monday." I'm like, "Okay." 7:30 I receive a phone call from my friend telling me miraculously, the sister stayed in the office, for 25 years she never stayed in the office and that day she decided to stay, and she feels that she needs to stay and she knew about my story because I was the one who made all this connection, my friends. So she said, "Okay, I'll call a lawyer who was

responsible for the human rights trafficking in Macau. He's very helpful, see how he's going to be able to help."

Maysoun: So after my friends phone call, they phoned me right away from the office, they said, "Come now with all the documents you have." We met with him, God bless him. He owned a law firm, maybe the biggest law firm in Macau, and he volunteered to appeal and to do everything for us until we find a third safe country. So he communicated with UNHCR, appealed for the case, he did everything free of charge. He said, "I just want to do it because this is the right thing to do."

VO: *Essentially, this lawyer was trying to buy time for Maysoun and her family until the UNHCR could find some random country to take them in. The problem was that this wait list was 10 years long and not even the best lawyer in Macau could delay their deportation for that long. That is when one UNHCR official recommended they might as well try resettling through something called private sponsorship.*

Maysoun: He said, "There are two countries in the world, do something called private sponsorship, Canada and Australia."

VO: *If you are a Canadian listening to this, you may be familiar with the idea of privately sponsoring a refugee. For decades, Canada was the ONLY country in the world where citizens could sponsor and support refugees. And though this comes dangerously close to pride, I have to note here that way back in 1974, MCC was the one to negotiate this unprecedented partnership between the federal government and private citizens, in response to the epic flood of refugees emerging out of the Vietnam War.*

Private sponsorship was a long shot, but Maysoun had to try.

Maysoun: All what you need to do is to find a church and the church would be responsible for you for one year, and they will bring you to a safe haven." I was like, "Okay. I don't know what to do but I will try." So I told my friends in ladies' Bible study, and mind you we were all women. Women's power, man. Women's power. So I told them, this is the case they said, "Okay, let's conduct a very strong email, write your story and we will spread the email all over the world." The friends in ladies' Bible study, they are from all over the world. They are from United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, England, China, Singapore, Philippines, like literally it's from everywhere. So I wrote the letter and they did like email it, they spread it everywhere.

VO: *Here is the beginning of Maysoun's second miracle.*

Maysoun: We received a response from two churches, one in Kitchener, Ontario.

VO: *She's laughing because of my shocked reaction as I sat listening to her from my home in Kitchener.*

Maysoun: Yes. Never heard of Kitchener at that time, and one in Winnipeg. The one in Kitchener, Ontario at that time they had no experience at all with their sponsorship. They didn't know where to start, where to go. But they really wanted to help!

VO: *In the end, the church from Winnipeg which had sponsored refugees before, were the ones to sponsor Maysoun and her family.*

Maysoun: They know what they're doing, they are an expert. Like we just wanted to be out, just be safe.

VO: *It turns out, the woman in Winnipeg who received Maysoun's story and urged her church to sponsor Maysoun and her family, was also a missionary in Macau who happened to be home in Winnipeg at the time. After the wheels were in motion to sponsor Maysoun and her family, this woman came back to Macau. Maysoun's friend Linda wanted to introduce this Canadian woman to Maysoun.*

Maysoun: So she said "This friend came back from Canada, I want you to meet with her, she's been very helpful." So I was like, "Oh my gosh, that's awesome, someone really willing to help." Okay, Make a connection now my friend. A year before I was in area called Hunkasi it's a red market in Macau. Macau, of course, I know it like my palm. I can go there as a local. They have clothing factories.

So I saw a white lady with her daughter and she was looking for the jean for her daughter at men's Jean factory, because I know everything in Macau, everything. I stopped there, I was like, "Oh my gosh, she's wasting her time, poor woman. She's not going to find Jean for her daughter, should I intervene? Maybe she will think I'm weirdo. You know what? I'm going to intervene." So I said, "Hey, excuse me." She said, "Yeah." I said, "Are you looking for jean for your daughter? I think that's what you're doing." She said, "Oh, yeah." I said, "Well, you're not going to find it here, this is for men. You need to go down the street, you will see a big place, they hang the jean from the roof and they have the best jean in Macau, it's all for females." She said, "Oh my gosh, thank you, thank you. Bye-bye, see you." That's it, I didn't see her again.

So now you're asking why Maysoun is saying this story, now you will know. My friend from England arranged for a meeting for the Canadian woman who got the story and help us to find a sponsor. My friend opened the door, the lady entered the house. I looked at her, she looked at me. She said, "you" I said, "you".

And my friend said, "What's going on? Do you know each other?" She said, "Yeah." She was the one who helped me to find jean for my daughter a year before.

And we started crying, and she said, "You helped me in something very, very simple to find a jean for my daughter, without knowing who I am." Just, I said, "Oh my gosh, it's like a movie. If I will tell someone about that, nobody would believe it."

VO: *The miracle of the jeans was followed up by yet another victory.*

Maysoun: For the first time in Macau history, The lawyer won the case against the government.

VO: *This was the lawyer working to delay Maysoun and her family's deportation. He had somehow, against all odds, won them the right to stay in Macau.*

Maysoun: And we were like "now what, are we going to stay in Macau?" So the government said we respect what the judge decided but we disagree with him because the judge said, "we have to stay, we need to be resettled, we need to get our residency"

So the government said, "No, they can stay the way they are now, no permanent residency, no rights to study at university, no rights to travel and no rights to work." I was like, "What for? Why? Ok?"

VO: *Despite the government's unwillingness to let them resettle in Macau, their miraculous court victory removed the threat of immediate deportation, and they were able to pursue private sponsorship to Canada.*

Maysoun: We received the approval to come to Canada after another two and a half years, we completed exact five years in Macau. We arrived to Winnipeg, Manitoba on December 13th, 2012. We left Macau, it was 25 plus, it was here minus 45 and it was the happiest day in my life.

[music break]

VO: *Fast forward nine years and Maysoun and her family have settled deep roots into Winnipeg, finding and growing a community that has embraced her. Maysoun has also endured tragedy, her husband with whom she had been through so much, was killed in a tragic accident last year. The outpouring of grief and support from their community was immense, as the two of them had become pillars in their community.*

VO: *Today, Maysoun is as busy as ever, serving on countless boards, running camps for newcomer youth, working tirelessly to build a community in which all feel truly welcome. This work is a passion for Maysoun, especially as somebody who did not feel welcome in her own hometown, who was forced to leave her home country.*

Maysoun: So settlement is the biggest challenge because it's not only bringing refugees, resettle them, provide them with monthly support and that's it and teach them how to ride the bus and how to go to school. No, it's about how to feel that you belong to this society, how to feel welcome in this society. How to establish a relationship within the community, not your ethnic community, no, the wide range community. I found this challenging for many people because especially people who come through community sponsorship, for example, because they will stick within their own community. To build the bridge with local people like Canadian born people, to understand the culture, it takes courage. People are afraid sometimes to share their thoughts or even if they want to share their thoughts, they don't have a proper language.

Maysoun: So these barriers are really challenging, but they're also solvable. You cannot say, "Oh, we cannot solve it." We can. But it takes time and it needs lots of support and collaboration from different sides. In many cases I hear from, let's say government level, "Oh, there are refugees or resettled refugees, they're very successful. They are working. They own their houses. They're making money. They're establishing their life. They're happy."

It's not about you're making money, it's about, do you feel you are part of this country? Do you belong to this society? So our main focus through our organization is to help them to understand the better way of adjustment that they are acceptable here, that they are welcome here and there is a way for them to integrate in a healthy way and feel that they belong to, not an outcast as I used to feel in my country, my original country, I have to be specific because Canada is my country now and I belong to

[music break]

VO: *For many refugees who have lived in uncertainty for years and whose hearts have ached in vain to return home, finding a new community, a new home to love in Canada, is an extraordinary, unbelievable process, given the long odds.*

Maysoun's story is not unique. The challenges she and her family faced are faced by millions every day, and many are in even more dire situations with even greater odds against them. In fact, you could safely say that not a single refugee is resettled without miracles happening along the way. Every day, desperate prayers are answered, and random strangers step up in a big way. But here's the thing: When Maysoun challenged God on that fateful, hungry night years ago, and received a wedding banquet in response, it was a miracle... for her. But the rich businessman who had sent the leftovers to Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity, probably had no idea that he was a part of someone else's life-changing event.

It's strange to think but we often don't recognize our part in somebody else's miracle. Regular people doing what they think are normal things, but making an enormous impact in someone's life, without ever knowing it.

It could be you. Maybe you give somebody a second chance, maybe you introduce someone who's down on their luck to a friend who's hiring, maybe you hear a podcast episode about refugee resettlement and think...hmm... what if...

If you feel moved to do your small part in making a miracle happen, please reach out to us at podcast@mcco.ca . My colleagues in the migration and resettlement team would be happy to connect with you, your church, or community group about sponsoring a refugee. Right now there's a special government program called the Blended Visa Office Referred program that cuts the cost of year's sponsorship nearly in half and supports the most vulnerable refugees, and with the gradual reopening of borders, the need for sponsor groups becomes more urgent. You can learn more about it in the show notes.

[music break]

VO: I want to thank Maysoun for sharing her story with me and for her tireless efforts to make her community more welcoming.

Thank you to my colleagues Moses Moini, Stephanie Schreuders, Peggy Pickett who support hundreds of sponsors and newcomers in Ontario every year.

And thank you to Angela, if that is your real name, for coming to the rescue of two scared teenagers who had crashed their car on the QEW in 1998.

This episode was mixed by Francois Goudreault Jr, Original and theme music by Brian MacMillan, and artwork by Jesse Bergen. Special thanks to producer Christen Kong for her invaluable editorial feedback.

If you have any miraculous stories from your life you'd like to share, please write to us at podcast@mcco.ca. Also, we really cherish your feedback as it will help us continue this podcast so if you have any kind words or constructive criticism, please send it to podcast@mcco.ca. My name is Ken Ogasawara, thanks for listening to Undercurrents, have a great rest of your day.