

Refugee and Immigrant Experiences—Hamdi Ulukaya

By Logan Pinard

Immigrants have supported the United States since the beginning of this country. Without immigrants the United States would not exist so we have to help them out and understand their situations to the best of our abilities. I have chosen one of the many immigrants that have come to the US and have made a difference in the community and the world. Hamdi Ulukaya came to the US from Turkey in 1994 because the government had started to watch his activities as he was a Kurdish activist. Hamdi had \$3,000 in his pocket and a small bag when he reached Upstate New York. In New York he started his own feta cheese business which his Dad had advised. For two years his business struggled. “There was a creek right next to this little plant, and I would go there and cry and cry and cry. I’m like: ‘Why did I get into this? And how am I going to pay for these people? How am I going to pay for the milk?’”(Hamdi) Hamdi said in a New York Times interview. One day he got a flyer in the mail about an old yogurt factory shutting down. He decided to go check it out. Hamdi was toured around by a man named Rich and he had worked there for 20 years. He told all the stories of the factory and how his father made yogurt before him and his grandfather made cream cheese. Hamdi felt horrible that all these people were being laid off and he knew at that moment he had to buy the place. This place was the beginning of the biggest yogurt company in the US and its name was Chobani.

Today about 19% of Turkey is Kurdish. They mostly live by the borders of Turkey and have been fighting for freedom for centuries. The Kurdish are a people who live in the Middle East in the more mountainous regions of Turkey and Syria. In the early 19th century the Kurdish fought with the Turkish to overthrow the Ottoman Empire and in return they would get their own

country called Kurdistan. This dream did not come true. After the Ottoman Empire was defeated the Turkish turned on them. In the 1930s the Turkish banned the speaking of Kurdish as well as the talk of Kurdistan. They are still repressed and often subject to horrible torture. Today this still continues and now the Kurdish are being attacked by Syria as well as by Turkey. Many people, including Hamdi, have tried to stop this repression but even now the Kurdish are looked down upon. There is still hope as the Kurdish have united to fight this common foe and may one day get Kurdistan.

Hamdi wasn't done there though he continues to care for his workers and the rest of the community. In Utica, New York he learned about some refugees and how they weren't able to find jobs. Hamdi wondered why no one would take them so he decided to solve the problem by hiring them. Hamdi's workforce is now 30% refugees. Hamdi doesn't think like a normal CEO either. He believes in a strategy called the "Anti-CEO playbook". He believes that the CEO is someone who should care for the community and workers and that profit should not come before these two things. One of the things Hamdi does for his workers is a 6 week parental leave that is fully paid which is rare among major corporations like Chobani. Hamdi has also founded Tent which is an organization aimed to stop the global refugee crisis. TENT is trying to get countries across the world to start hiring refugees to stop the global refugee crisis. Even today during these trying times Hamdi is finding ways to help the community. Starting in 2020 Hamdi has been sending a truck load of yogurt to food banks desperately in need of food.

Today I think we need people like Hamdi Ulukaya to help save this world. Today we are constantly fighting in America and we've stopped listening to one another instead of helping

each other. Hamdi has done so many things for his community and I think it's about time we start following his footsteps. There are so many people today that need help. Today we are denying immigrants and refugees from coming to the land of opportunity who desperately need a home. People think that immigrants are taking up space but immigrants are the foundation of this country. If you don't give people a chance how are they to succeed? Hamdi was an immigrant and he didn't let it stop him from making a difference in his community and across America. In the immortal words of Shakespeare "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?..." We are all human beings and it's going to take all of us to make the world a better place just like Hamdi.

In Hawaii nearly one fifth of the population are immigrants. Moving away from your home is always a hard thing but moving from your country must be even harder. You might have a really different culture or you don't even speak the same language. I think it's our job as residents of Hawaii to welcome them warmly. Perhaps giving them a welcome basket or even just a simple hello would help. Little things like this can make people's day. As a kid I might not be able to vote for people to help but the little things matter so I will always try and make them feel welcome and that they have a friend no matter how different they may be. I think even though these small things may seem useless, they can change the world.

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