

Regional

Music student shares dream for native country

One of the greatest satisfactions for those who work in higher education is when they witness just how the college experience can transform students' lives.

An excellent case in point can be found in Rebin Ali, who fled his war-torn native country and is now a violin student at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Born in Sulaimanuyah, Kurdistan, Iraq, he and his family witnessed the horrors of the armed conflict. In happier times, he recalls his family always surrounding themselves with music.

"Since I was a child I have always seen my cousins playing instruments, so by the time I was 13 I realized that I wanted to play music," Ali said. "And I got my start with my violin and I just started playing without any teaching." Violin, it seems, is a very popular instrument in Kurdistan.

"We use the violin a really completely different way in Middle Eastern music," he explained. "We use quarter tones and many scales that do not exist in classical music. So it is the same instrument, but the way we play it and use it is a completely different world." Ali's journey from Kurdistan to SIUE demonstrates the sometimes-unexpected benefits from higher education.

"This is actually a great thing that happened in my life," he said. "There was a music workshop in my city in Kurdistan, which was held by an American organization called American Voices, and they do cultural integration through music in particular.

They go to countries all over the world, especially countries that have just emerged from dictatorship or political issues and they try to give them an opportunity – a chance – and give them music and try to introduce American culture."

During that workshop in 2009 he met



Rebin Ali at play.

Courtesy of Nelson Keply

Mark Thayer, a violin teacher who used to work with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

"He saw the potential in me, so he offered that it would be a good idea for me to come to the U.S. and study music and English," Ali said. "Mark started this program in 2008 and every year he was taking two students back to the U.S. from Kurdistan. So that is basically how I ended up here." Because of the war, he said that he could not study music in Kurdistan.

"I didn't have any type of music teacher until I was 18 and I had not practiced any classical music," he said. He then started learning about classical music and practicing it with Thayer. "The thing is I now have the chance to do what I dreamed of and I really want to take this back and give the same opportunity to people who have the same desire. And that is why I had to leave there. Because I had so much I wanted to do, but I did not have the right environment. When I got here everything became so real. I could touch it. I could do it. I could actually perform and play with a really amazing orchestra."

Despite being so grateful to this country for the opportunities that were given to him, Ali wants to go back to Kurdistan and pass on the knowledge and skills he learned here.

"When I think about it, there are so many great musicians here and I think I could just be a tiny bit among so many other amazing people," he said. "If I go back I could start a revolution because I am living in this environment and really seeing how classical music is taught in this country and what the successful ways of teaching are. When you see an American orchestra it is very amazing and advanced. And when I see this, it excites me so much because I want to go back after I get my master's, and I

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

want to start teaching the way I want and the way I have learned and open up a private school myself. That way I can start from the very beginning and try to do things in a new way." He stills remembers his first experience with the St. Louis Youth Orchestra.

"The very first rehearsal was my first time sitting in a symphony orchestra and it overwhelmed me so much to the point where I thought I couldn't do it," he said.

"I was so shocked by all this sound around me and all these talented people around me. And I became really depressed for a long time. But when I started thinking about it and realized this was my opportunity and I am around all these amazing people I need to just work and catch up. When we played the last part my heart was going like a thousand beats. Twenty minutes afterwards I still wasn't myself. I was so shocked. I really felt the impact of music." But his native country is still his greatest love.

"My country does not need a soloist at this point, it needs a teacher," Ali said.

"I need to start from the beginning and rebuild the education system. If I can go back and start with just one student and expand from there, in 30 years I could have a full orchestra of amazing trained musicians. So that is my goal."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.