

Omar's Backgrounder

For many years, Arabs and Middle Eastern countries did not believe in filmmakers. They always looked down on them. However, even with that mindset, some filmmakers were fighting to reach their goal. One of these filmmakers was Omar, a 14 years old guy. Omar, who had no siblings, always believed that one day he would be a filmmaker. But things do not always happen exactly as we plan for it. Omar was born in the capital city of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. He had mixed blood, between his mom, who is half Lebanese and half Syrian, and his father, who is half Saudi and half Syrian.

Omar was very connected to Syria because of his mixed blood. He used to travel every summer to Syria to visit his mother's family. But, when the Syrian revolution started in 2011, Saudi Arabia did not allow any Saudi to visit Syria anymore. Additionally, Omar's family was facing some financial issues, so they could not travel at all. That was the day when Omar felt that he should find something like a hobby to do in the summer. He did much searching until he found out that he likes photography and videography. So, he started watching videos online and learning more about DSLRs cameras. But the shocking moment was when Omar told his father that he wanted some money to buy the camera. "Do you know how much it costs? And you will throw it away, same as you did with all the hobbies you did before!" Was Omar's father's reply. Thus, Omar decided to work in summer in order to get the money he needed, and he started working in the credit department at the Al-Yuser installment company.

At the end of that summer, Omar purchased his first camera, a Canon D500. He loved it, and he started carrying it whenever he went outside. But there was one thing that Omar did not think about: the culture and what the community thinks about the freelancers. "It was always hard to film in Saudi Arabia," says Omar, because of the Saudi mindset it was so hard to film in Saudi Arabia. "We did not even have theaters or cinemas, we used to travel, just to watch a movie." Throughout history, Saudi Arabia was culturally very similar to all middle eastern countries. Once the Wahabi movement started, the country decided to prohibit theaters and cinemas from 1983 till 2018. "So, in public areas, it used to feel as if you are carrying a gun, not a camera," says Omar.

However, that did not stop Omar from practicing his hobby. He thought about the best way to practice his hobby in public without dealing with the cultural stigma. He figured out that he could practice his hobby by volunteering with charities and nonprofit organizations. "The first step I took before I started shooting for nonprofit organizations was getting my business cards ready," says Omar. Then, after each event, he would distribute his business card to people. After a while, people realized his fantastic work, and they started asking him to shoot for weddings, graduations, parties, and many other things—that's how he started making money from photography.

One day at the age of fourteen, while Omar was hanging out with his friends, and as always, carrying his camera, one of his friends, who loved the photographs he took, asked Omar, "I have my cousin who does media production stuff; do you want me to introduce you to him?" and, of course, Omar agreed. He met the guy in a café and they talked about many things. Then, they started to build a media production group and they called it Gold Cam. They enjoyed working together until one day they transferred that group to a media production company. Omar

was the manager of the photography department at the age of fifteen. "It was not only about money but also about getting experience and building connections," says Omar. It was like a dream to him when he would, at a very young age, discuss services in meetings with adults.

In grade 11, Omar's grades were so bad, and they were going to affect his acceptance in any university. So, his parents decided to step in, they took the camera from him and told him that he would not get it back until he got better grades. Therefore, Omar studied more and he got better grades, so his parents gave him his camera but prevented him from going and shooting weddings or events for two reasons. First, they thought that if Omar started to gain money again, that he would not care about school anymore. Second, Omar had started to become famous in the photography industry, and his family thought that it was a bad reputation for the family. Thus, Omar started to think how he could still do photography without letting his parents know. He figured out that the best way was to tell them that he was going to go and play soccer, then change his clothes in the car and go and shoot weddings. That idea worked for almost six months, until one day, Omar entered a wedding and while he was taking pictures, his father entered. He never thought that him and his father would meet in one of the weddings. "It was the scariest moment in my life," Omar said.

In grade 12, and before graduation Omar's parents sat on the table with Omar and asked him, "What do you want to study?". Omar told them that he wants to apply to the TV and media program at King Saud University. They directly refused that and told him that there was no place to work in with that certificate. Plus, Omar got good grades in high school, so his parents wanted him to apply to some much better programs in better universities. They forced him to apply to the engineering program at King Fahad University for Petroleum and Minerals. Omar got the acceptance in the industrial engineering program in 2014. The university is located

next to the sea in the eastern province area. He started his orientation year, and he failed a couple of classes.

In his freshman year, a famous company wanted to do an art exhibition, so they hired Omar to organize the exhibition. Omar published a volunteer call, and he got many applications. One of these applications was for a teenage girl with cerebral palsy, which caught Omar's attention. He interviewed her and he liked her personality so he hired her in the registrar section. After they wrapped up for the event, the girl's father came to Omar and thanked him for giving her the opportunity, because usually people underestimate her abilities, and they give her easy jobs. Then, the father asked Omar if he can come next week to a doctor's global event which talks about heart and lung diseases. Omar went to the event and at the event he was coughing a lot and breathing hard, and because the event was full with doctors, they felt that there was something going wrong with his health. The doctors told the girl's father, who was the most famous pulmonary doctor in Saudi Arabia, to check Omar's health as soon as possible. Omar scheduled an appointment with him, and a couple of days before the appointment, Omar passed out and was taken to the emergency room.

The doctors checked Omar's health, and after many assessments, they diagnosed him with a very rare lung disease called Pulmonary Veno-Occlusive Disease (PVOD). They told him that he should get a double lungs transplant as soon as possible or he would pass away. Omar's story started to spread between the nonprofit organizations which he worked with. Many people with disabilities and doctors talked about his story too and submitted a letter to the royal court, asking them to treat Omar. Suddenly, Omar got a call from the palace, telling him that prince Mohammed Bin Salman decided to foot the bill for his surgery in the United States. In early 2016, Omar came with his family to North Carolina to have the transplant surgery done. He

had his surgery done at Duke University hospital in August 2016. Then, he discussed with the doctors on how he could start applying to schools and what programs may fit his new situation. They told him that engineering would not fit him anymore because he could not work in any factories or the sun. So, Omar applied to some film programs in the states.

When Omar came back to Saudi Arabia after staying for a year in the US, he was accepted into the film program at Arizona State University. He participated in the Colors of Saudi Arabia exhibition before leaving, and he met a couple of directors and producers who cheered him on to travel and start his dream. Unfortunately, Omar had a car accident, and he was about to be paralyzed. But, he recovered from that accident, and he applied for the student visa. In the spring of 2018, Omar started in the film program at ASU. He immediately tried to produce a couple of videos. He loved producing videos.

In his first movie production for the Ethics and Survey Film & TV class, Omar got sick and figured out that he had a cancerous tumor in his throat. So, he started his chemotherapy sessions, but that did not stop him from producing his film. At the end of the semester, Omar made the film with some help from his friends, and they called it Sugar. In fall 2018, Omar produced a short film called On The Edge, which tells a story of a girl who leaves her school and scholarship in order to say goodbye to her sick sister. Additionally, he produced a music video for the Penny Fusion band called These Days. Later, he was a first assistant camera for a short movie called Day One. Omar also started a group called Walomar, which contains only Arab members to produce media in Arizona.

In 2019, Omar was invited by the organization of the Colors of Saudi Arabia exhibition, and they asked him to make a tour for the honor guests. One of the guests was Christoph Roth, a VFX producer at Disney who recently worked on the Lion King 2019 and Game of Thrones

2012. They both had a good time, and when Mr. Roth learned about Omar's story and health, he told him that one day Omar would be such a success story that everyone would talk about him. This year, Omar worked on a couple of projects. He produced two music videos, Massage Situation and Watching the Seasons. And he produced a short movie that he wrote and directed called Me Without You. In the fall semester, he produced a documentary about refugees in Arizona called Purpose and a music video called The Mother We Share. During production, Omar was facing rejection in his lungs, and the hospital told him that he would need another transplant surgery.

In January 2020, Omar's lungs failed, and the hospital put him on the list for another lung transplant surgery. On January 10, he had the surgery, and in February, the hospital discharged Omar. Omar did not go to any class at the beginning of the spring semester because of his low immune system. However, because of the pandemic of COVID-19, all schools moved to online classes. Omar was able to catch up with all the classes which he missed. He produced a short documentary about COVID-19 called We Survive Together. Currently, Omar is working on three films as capstones for his graduation, which will be the end of this year.