

Neighbor Profiles – a series of interview-based stories about members of the PPUABA
By Patti Veconi

Joumana Jaber, Underhill Avenue resident
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Joumana Jaber has the most inviting gaze and one of those voices that is so honeyed and euphonic, it was lucky that our conversation was being recorded because I nearly became hypnotized. Her life has been full of travel and culture, so I asked her to start with some history of what first brought her to Brooklyn. The warmth with which she spoke of her native Lebanon was much more than simply national pride; it was a complete expression of having integrated living the first twelve years of her life in a country under siege with who she is now. *“The thing is, my childhood was full of bombs. The Israeli aggression on Lebanon was real, and my mom’s family was living in Bay Ridge, so they sponsored us when the fighting became really intense.”* Before immigrating, Joumana’s childhood included running across the street to a neighbor’s shelter *“where every family kept a stack of mattresses and a bag of potatoes and onions – and sometimes we were there for four or five days.”*

Making the journey at the time she remembers *“as being exciting – it was my first time going on an airplane,”* but it wasn’t simple. Like many immigrant stories, the one Joumana’s family lived involved many challenges, beginning with the fact that the American Embassy in Beirut was closed at the time. *“We had to go live in Syria while processing our immigration papers, and then from Syria to Cairo, then to Amsterdam and finally to New York... and I still remember the ride from Kennedy in my aunt’s station wagon and seeing the Verrazano Bridge – I just fell*

in love with New York, especially with New York at night.” Joumana’s already silky voice got even lovelier as she leaned into that memory, “New York at night means the world to me – every time I travel – seeing it again, it’s always new, always a new feeling.”

Joumana describes her family’s experience of coming to America as immigrants – particularly for her parents – one in which *“You have to forget your previous life – who you were – and you just have to put food on the table... but America means a lot to me, gave me safety, gave me my life, gave us who we are, but also is a place where we stay true to our roots.”* She spoke frankly about the difficulty of being an Arab Muslim in America and her ability to keep a balanced perspective of the cultures she straddles, *“It’s like you are split between two worlds – two worlds that you absolutely love – two worlds that you are constantly defending... But immigrants are resilient.”*

Joumana is a deeply political person, speaking her truth always and not necessarily compartmentalizing those politics when they overlap into other areas of her life. *“It’s part of who we are as Arabs. We grow up with politics. We grow up with a passport, a suitcase and a degree in political science.”* But much more than just talking about politics, she takes action. Working as a group media manager with a large firm has been Joumana’s professional career, but she has also integrated her passion for helping immigrants, refugees and those displaced by violence around the world with the resources available to her through her company, raising awareness as well as tens of thousands of dollars over the years for various groups. One project is with Syrian refugees funding a school in Jordan. The company partners with a city organization for an annual day out of the office to work in one of the five boroughs cleaning schools, parks and shelters, visiting nursing homes and more. The day ends with an employee raffle from which proceeds go to different charities – for Joumana’s team, this is the Syrian school. Because the company has offices around the world, this has become an international project, building awareness while doing meaningful work for others. During the height of the pandemic when an explosion in Beirut killed 171 people, Joumana helped to organize support for hundreds of Lebanese families through an organization called Menelab Charity raising \$10,000 herself. She was featured in a story about that work in the non-partisan digital news platform “The City.”

One of Joumana’s other passions is travel. I knew this not only because scheduling our visit for this article meant squeezing in an early morning appointment some hours before she was scheduled to leave on another one of her trips, but also because the only other time we had ever spoken was after a recent return from a trip she had made to Africa. This was some years ago at a neighbor’s party and I don’t remember her exact words at the time, but I very much remember her telling me that it was the most important place in the world to go. Today, she is no less fervent on the subject. *“Oh yes, it grounds you. The first time I went my life wasn’t as comfortable as it is now... and I remembered what my mom would always tell me: ‘education, education, education’ and traveling is an education, a ticket to life. So I took her strength and advice and*

working through tumult in my own life I went to Africa and that place gave me inner peace.” That journey brought her back to America with what became the first project she pursued through the resources available with her company, which was Feed the Children. They built seven schools with clean water. She has since returned several times to Africa with another trip planned for next year with her daughter. More broadly, she describes all of her travels through the simple action of having a morning cup of coffee. *“You know how when you wake up in the morning and you make that first delicious cup of coffee? No matter where you sit – at a café or on your stoop or at a window somewhere – wherever I travel I get up early and have that first cup of coffee somewhere and I watch people, and then you always remember that moment – you’re never the same – you always connect that city with that cup of coffee. I just love how life starts in the morning.”* Remember how I started this by saying her voice could hypnotize? This was the point in our conversation where it struck me that I was speaking to a kind of life artist: someone who sees and experiences the world through a deeply emotional lens and who can then express those memories in a very beautiful way.

Joumana came to Underhill Avenue and Prospect Heights through her husband, Dan Deverell, with whom she shares a blended family of four children. She has now been here twelve years and she speaks very fondly of her Underhill Avenue block and the closeness of her neighbors there – with particular appreciation for the many countries and cultures represented and how *“We all come from different parts of the world and I love them dearly.”*

Our conversation ambled on to cooking, children, reading, home decorating, the souls in these old brownstones... our gray hair... it was one of those conversations I was sorry to see end, but left feeling we will pick right back up on at the next opportunity.

If you have a PPUABA neighbor you would like to nominate for our Neighbor Profiles series, please send your suggestion to ppuaba.webmaster@gmail.com.