

# How community college was one refugee's key to 'a new life'

by [Yasmin Bendaas](#)



Nour Alsakhita completing a final exam at Forsyth Tech. Yasmin Bendaas/EducationNC

Seven students sat in the final summer class of Bio 112 at Forsyth Tech. After a round of presentations, they awaited their release into the mid-July heat and the fate of their final grades.

But biology instructor Craig Moretz had one last lesson to give.

“All of you know how to do something,” he said before asking each student to state their career goals.

Radiologist, one said. Marine biologist, said another. Computer scientist. Electrical engineer. Dentist. Zoologist. Geneticist.

“Guys, your journey’s just beginning,” Moretz said. “And don’t let anybody tell you you can’t do something. ... I’m just trying to get you thinking. Think about your futures.”



Students listen to final presentations in their Bio 112 course. Yasmin Bendaas/EducationNC

For one student, 22-year-old Nour Alsakhita, the future had been all she could think about. In many ways, the future was all she had.

When Alsakhita was 15 years old, her family fled from Syria to Turkey, where they awaited their United Nations resettlement as refugees. They are among the [5.6 million Syrian refugees](#) who have poured into Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and other nearby countries since 2011. Six and a half million people have been forced to move within Syria as a result of the ongoing civil war, and more than half a million Syrians — and counting — have lost their lives.

Alsakhita remembered living in Turkey as a struggle. Her family had never lived outside Syria. They had to learn Turkish, a completely foreign language. Her parents had a hard time finding work, and the three daughters faced difficulty finding schools that were a fit for refugees who don't speak Turkish. Her whole family missed home.

But Alsakhita's past life lay in crumbles at the foot of a street in Damascus. She had seen a picture taken by a neighbor who had returned to their former home — the complex of flats reduced to a pile of rubble. There was no home to return to, even if they wanted to.

So Alsakhita finished high school in Turkey. And after two years of interviews, screenings, and background checks in Istanbul, Alsakhita, her mother and father, and her two younger sisters were told they would board a plane headed for North Carolina — a place they'd never heard of.

Alsakhita finally arrived with her family in the United States on June 1, 2015. A local church group helped settle them into an apartment in Winston-Salem. The following month, she enrolled in classes at Forsyth Tech, taking basic college courses in the morning and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the evening.

“So I was studying the whole time,” Alsakhita said. “And it was hard.”

In Syria, Alsakhita's father was a professor, and she had a great education in the country's bustling capital city. Now in the United States, her biggest barrier to school was struggling to communicate in English.

"I cried every day for one year," she said. "It was so hard, and I was so lost. But you know, I found myself, and advisers helped me there, and professors."



Nour Alsakhita and her classmate in Bio 112. Yasmin Bendaas/EducationNC

Alsakhita met her adviser, Gloria Maldonado Rivera, during a walk-in meeting at the Student Success Center. Rivera radically changed Alsakhita's experience at Forsyth Tech.

"We did a plan for six semesters together," Alsakhita said. "And we worked really hard, and she supported me a lot. She was like my second mom."

Alsakhita would go on to meet with Rivera every semester, as often as needed. Rivera helped her get a more manageable course load while she worked on her English. As a Puerto Rican and prior ESL learner herself, Rivera understood what Alsakhita was going through.

“I think she is an exceptional case in how quickly she learned the language,” Rivera said. But other traits also led to Alsakhita’s success.

“I mean, she is just so focused, so determined, so positive, even through all the challenges she had to overcome before coming here,” Rivera said. “And then being here, navigating the system, and all those things. I mean she never gave up.”

Alsakhita finished her Associate of Science degree on target for the 2019 goal set with Rivera. Though it took her four years, she did extremely well in her final science courses, making dean’s list.

“She just appreciated having the opportunity to get her education and keep moving forward,” Rivera said. “Sometimes, you know, we have everything and we don’t appreciate it. But she really has maximized everything that she has.”



Nour Alsakhita with biology instructor Craig Moretz. Yasmin Bendaas/EducationNC

Moretz, her instructor in organismal biology, described her as “one of the top.”

“She would be in the top 10 percent, easy. And maybe even top five,” he said.

For Moretz, students with diverse backgrounds like Alsakhita make his job especially fulfilling.

“One of the reasons I’m at this school is because of the diversity here,” he said of Forsyth Tech. “I’ve had students from 14 years old all the way to 84 years old in my classroom. I’ve had students at this point in time from 43 different countries around the world.”

Yes — he’s kept count.

Creating an inclusive environment in his classrooms is one of Moretz's priorities. He's modified wording on his tests to make questions as clear as possible, encourages students to raise their hands when they have a question, and provides advice on next steps after community college.

"I try to open their eyes to those possibilities," Moretz said. "I think all the good instructors try to open the eyes of their students to see a world beyond their wildest dreams."

Because of instructors like Moretz, Alsakhita said, the kindness of Forsyth Tech is something she will miss when she takes her next steps as a transfer student in biology at UNC Charlotte this fall, following her childhood dream of becoming a dentist.

"I'm going to miss the kindness of the school. But to be honest, I'm so excited," she said of her move to Charlotte. "It's a new world. A new life. A big change, you know."