

Bridging Understanding | Hala's story

In the *Bridging Understanding* series, McMaster students who have experienced global crisis, war or conflict share their experiences in their own words. For more on the series, please visit the [McMaster news website](#).

Warning: The topics covered by the interview subjects include grief, loss, trauma, sexual assault, aggression and sexual and gender-based violence. The content of the interviews may be triggering for some. All interview subjects reviewed and approved the material prior to publishing. Views expressed are strictly those of individual participants and are not endorsed by McMaster University. For support, please see the university's [resources page](#).

Hala: The way I want this story to start and from my perspective is I want to start with my pseudonym for this piece and I'm choosing the name Hala, which means the light around the moon. And I want to do it as a memory of Hala, who was considered family to me.

Hala got killed a year ago, exactly like this week, and so I guess that's why I'm choosing this name. I lost so many more people, but she was one of the first people that I lost. And so, I made a promise to her the day that I lost her – and a promise to my family – that Hala won't just be a number. I will always continue to say Hala's name.

I wanted to honour the memory of Hala and the 50,000 martyrs that have been killed in this genocide in the past year. None of them are numbers. Most importantly, Hala and her two daughters, who were my age, are not numbers. Her husband is not a number and her entire family that got wiped out – they're not numbers.

Hala was a vibrant life and soul that was cut too short too soon. I've always called her a bubble of joy. And that's how I will always see Hala, even though she's no longer here. Her birthday is in October and the day she got killed was in October as well. So, I guess this is a tribute to her that if nothing comes out of this interview, at least I would have done this for Hala and the 50,000 plus, plus, plus martyrs that have been killed in this genocide.

And with that being said, my name is Hala for today and you can start with your questions.

Interviewer: Tell us about your connection to Palestine.

The obvious answer is that I am Palestinian, but more importantly, I was born and raised in Gaza. I spent the majority of my life in Gaza up until I came here with my family to study and to look for a brighter future, I guess.

But I think what made all of this hit a million times more is the fact that I've been wanting to go back home. I'm a very sentimental person. Things mean a lot to me and my entire family decided to go back the entire summer of 2023, so I was in Gaza up until three weeks before October 7th.

And so, everything just ... it's like I came back, and I woke up the next day and it was a different Gaza. I woke up the next day and everything just was gone.

I guess that's where the survivor's guilt piece comes in. If this would have been September 7th, I would have been there and I would have been stuck there for God knows how many months. Or God knows if I would have even made it because every spot that I would have been in is now unrecognizable. Literally rubble and ashes and just pure air, and you can't even recognize it. And so, a lot of times, I wonder: If I was stuck there, would I have survived it?

And if I did — maybe mentally I wouldn't have.

Because even though I'm far away, I don't know if I'm mentally going to survive this or will be will ever be able to heal from this. And so that's my connection. My connection is extremely close.

How has it been for you, managing your studies during this time?

I don't have a choice, the same way the people of Gaza don't have a choice, and I have an obligation to my people.

It's been extremely hard. It's a year and a little bit in, and a part of me is in denial and there were some days that I'm like: No, just face the truth, accept it, it's gone. Get over it, do something. Use your time doing something that is

going to help or make an impact rather than just grief or trying to accept that this is happening.

But yeah, I'm still in denial. I still think of the plan I had for summer 2025. I was going to spend the entire summer again from June to September.

In 2023, I left mid-September. I came back to school and was just catching up on work.

I remember it was the first day of reading week and I had just got all my submissions in. I thought to myself: It's reading week, now I can relax. I was on my way to unpack — I went downstairs and saw the news.

My brain went on alert.

I started screaming to my mom. I was like: We've survived wars before, I've seen how it is. But something told me that this one was going to be different. I looked at my mom and I was like, I know my family; they don't renew their passports; they never want to leave. And I looked at her and I was like: Call them right now, pull any connections that you have, tell them to leave, tell them to evacuate.

Everyone that I've ever known, everyone that I've ever cared about, we were all from the north. My entire life has been in the north and it's hard to explain how deeply connected I am to this place. And so, when they put that as a red zone, it was life or death for me.

It was a very challenging time where I did not see anything in front of me except for Gaza, my family, their safety, and what's going to happen to our homeland.

Even though, which may come as a surprise, I'm an extremely career-oriented person, I am very hardworking. If you know one thing about my reputation around my friends — I don't sit down. I will chase my dreams, my goals and those opportunities. I will go above and beyond.

I don't just like to meet certain standards. I like to go above and beyond, and I think that my family was given a chance to start over again in this country to go above and beyond, to excel and not to just live an ordinary life, I guess.

And to pay it forward for that community. I've always had that sense in me that I want to pay forward to my community, whether that be my people back home or people that I thought were my community here — until I soon realized that I only had one community, which is my back home community, and not necessarily the institution that I thought was my community all along.

I had to battle all of that, but everything was secondary to me. I put everything on the side.

I everything planned out. I was like, I'm going to figure out exactly what I want to do. This is the year. This is it.

I came back from Gaza with such a positive mindset, and everything was just set aside, and I was like, yeah, this is going to end soon. It's OK right now to prioritize working and saving money so I can send it back to my family.

I prioritized making phone calls and finding a backup house I could evacuate my family to if they issue another evacuation.

I could not see anything else except Palestine.

I would sit in lectures, where the majority of my professors never even mentioned it, knowing that they have a really good population here of Muslims and Palestinians. But it seemed like I was invisible. I was wearing the keffiyeh at times, but it also seemed like I was invisible.

And if there was a mention, a lot of times it was like: "Yeah, there's conflicts." It wouldn't go beyond "This is a hard time for everyone. Please take the time for yourself."

There was never any reaching out or creating a safe space. No one said, "I recognize you as a Palestinian student on this campus." There was never that, and so I immediately went into isolation mode where I didn't even bother reaching out for help.

I didn't bother reaching out because, number one, I never felt like it was safe enough to do so and number two, it would have felt like "Yeah, we'll support you because we can't deny what you're going through because, well, it's on live television. Your family is getting slaughtered at the end of the day, but it is what it is."

So, I just had to battle through it on my own. And to answer your question: I don't know how I managed. I don't know *if* I'm managing.

It's just been like — I pushed through. I have this huge survivor's guilt that the difference between me and them is literally three weeks. It's literally just like a blink of an eye.

And so, I have an obligation that maybe I survived for a reason. And it's probably not to prioritize my school, even if it's going to cost me my future.

Not just not paying attention to school, but as well as me being vocal about this. It is going to cost me a lot of opportunities.

I kept praying and my faith is the only thing that I think kept me from going insane. I believe that everything happens for a reason and as long as I'm doing it for the right reasons, I will be able to manage at some point.

You mentioned the importance of community — could you say more about how you've found community on campus.

It seemed like people were just posting about it and that was merely it.

I just never found that support up until, which is crazy, up until the encampment started. When the encampment started, I put myself there and I was like, I owe it to my people. I literally put some job offers on the side, my courses, everything, and I was like I want to sleep in that tent. At least I want to feel what they're feeling right now. I want to be there for them.

Because a lot of times I'm calling them and what is it that I'm going to tell them? Yes, my tax dollars are funding your slaughter or yes, I'm practically paying for your slaughter. I really, I can't look them in the eye.

And so, for the first time, when the encampment happened, I was able to send photos and videos to Gaza and I would be like, "Hey, I'm doing something. Hey, there are other people here who see you."

A lot of people in the encampment were not Palestinian and not Muslim. I didn't realize that some people saw us. I do not think the institution saw me once. I was practically invisible, and the encampment was not the institution, the encampment was the community that made that encampment happen.

That's when I started connecting with those people. I saw how hardworking the SPHR members were in negotiating and how they kept fighting for it. And I guess that just gave me a glimpse of hope that I wanted to be more involved in that community and I was like, "OK, you know what, maybe I won't isolate myself so much, maybe I can see the dedication that these people have."

These people would go to work and come back and sleep the night. The people not able to stay there 24/7 would just bring in food. It was that sense of community that made me feel alive.

And you would be surprised that out of this entire year, my happiest three weeks were in that encampment. We're sleeping on the floor, literally or practically not sleeping because I would take shifts to marshal around and try to keep an eye because I know that how unsafe it could be.

Even my family was getting super worried, and they were like, Yeah, you're going to get in trouble.

And I was like — if that's what's going to happen, I'm not doing anything wrong. If that's what's going to happen, so be it. I need to be there. I need to show up and I guess just that sense of community that was there from people that were so dedicated towards the cause.

People that especially the non-Palestinians, the non-Muslims that were there. They were fighting for it.

The Jewish community that was there — I just never thought they would support us this much, and they would hear that I'm from there and come and say sorry, as if it's their fault, and try to connect with me.

After that encampment, I ended up having a lot more Jewish friends that I thought I would.

I think that's the only time that I felt that sense of community and how I kept connecting with these people and getting messages from them all the time. Seeing them on campus, them checking in, feeling that OK, maybe when they ask me how I am — unlike other people — maybe I'm able to tell them:

"Yeah, no, I'm not fine. Today, a year ago, Hala got killed."

"Yeah, I'm not fine. Today, a year ago, my house got bombed."

"Yeah, I'm not fine. I was just finding it very difficult to just, I guess, live through this and be able to balance my course work and be able to figure out what I'm going to do after you graduate and all these things. Do you have an idea to just keep me going through insanity?"

So that's the only time I think there was any sense of community in this institution.

But it was never faculty. It was never the university administration. It was never any of them. It was the people.

Is there something you wish your fellow students knew about what you're going through?

I don't know if people around me comprehend. And that's another reason why I isolated myself at the beginning. I don't know if people around me comprehend the extent of the pain and the hurt that has been caused by this. The trauma.

As much as I've always been a very positive, joyful person. You will not see me cry and nobody has seen me cry before this year. I never thought I would say the word trauma anyhow, but I realized that I have to come to terms with the fact that this is trauma, something I've always known simply by being born a Palestinian.

With my grandpa being a Nakba survivor and my parents having to live through that. I knew that there is a thing being born a Palestinian: You are born with that generational trauma that gets passed down. But this year just made it 100 times worse.

I believe at this point that I will not be able to move forward, and I will not be able to ever heal from this, and chances are I'm going to pass down a good chunk of that down to my kids as well, which in a sense hurts a lot.

Activists and supporters are always posting things online, and this one example happened two or three months ago. I already knew that in February my house was for sure gone. It was in a red zone.

I had no news about it up until February and that's it. Not a lot of news comes out of my area because they've been in my area since the first week and I haven't heard a thing about my neighbours, not anything.

I saw this random TikTok video posted by one of the students at McMaster that I met at the encampment. And I click on it, and I look at it and I was like — That's my neighbourhood. I literally just paused and was like, Holy crap — that's my neighbourhood.

And the only reason I recognized where my house would have been in the video, if it was still standing, was because my neighbour's house was the only one partially standing, and they had a really unique yellow house. I looked at it and I was like, That's my neighbourhood.

And I replied to him and said, "That's supposed to be my house. That's literally my street." I'm just seeing it from a stranger here and not just from people that are posting videos there.

When he saw that, he was like, "I'm so sorry. I could delete it right now."

I was like, "No, no, it's fine." Like when I saw how people responded, they don't know that it really has a story behind it. It has a meaning and again circling back to that sentiment...

It's where I rode a bike for the first time. It's my first everything. That's where I grew up most of my life. It's the first olive tree that my dad planted when he was a kid, and I engraved my name on it.

I kept promising that I'm going to bring my kids back here and I'm going to show them the house and I left a lot of things in that house in the summer for that reason.

I don't regret a lot of things in my life, but that is my biggest regret. That last day in Gaza, I held all the albums, and I was like, no, I won't take them back because they don't belong in Canada. They belong in this house, and I'm going to come back every other year and I'm going to look at them in the same house that they were taken in. And I'm going to bring my kids back and we're going to look at them in this house together.

But now —if I only just grabbed that photo album with me. If only I just held it in my hand or kept a piece of that house. I'm currently wearing the only and

last piece left of my Grandpa, which is his keffiyeh. Everything that was left of him was in that house, and now it's nowhere to be found. Anyhow, we can't even see it in the pictures. It's literally just rocks and rubble, as if there was never a four-story building there, as if we did not have the most beautiful house that I've ever seen that was full of all of our memories.

I guess as much as — even the community that wants to support us wants to know more, I don't think anybody can recognize or comprehend the extent of what's going on. They see it on live television, and they'll post about it.

But I think I want them to know that whatever they imagine it is, it is a million times worse.

And that every street they see had stories, had memories. It was enough for me to just smell the streets and smell that beach where I was just like walking and taking pictures and it was a lot more than what they see on the screens.

And that even though they're students, they have power. We all have the power.

And I know that sometimes it seems like we are making difficult decisions that could cost us a lot, but at the end of the day, we all have a choice.

I have a choice to do everything that I could possibly do. When I was first approached that I would need to go on media, of course, my first response was no. When they approached me to be a speaker at the encampment and other events, of course, my first response was no, because I know the minute I say the word "Gaza", I'm going to start flooding with tears. And I don't want to show that as a sign of weakness.

And because to me, I kind of lost hope in people that don't see us. We're literally practically just numbers right now to them. But I guess I kept doing it as a tribute to Hala and to all my friends and family that I lost. It's a tribute to the lives that were lost. It's a tribute to everything and everyone I've ever cared about.

But it's a push to do everything in my power, even if it's just as simple and as small as a story.

We all have a choice in this. You as a reporter have a choice to say the story fully, which could sound like such a simple task, or you have the choice to sanitize it the way you think your readers want to see it.

If you're a professor, you have the choice to see those students or to act like they don't exist.

I have a choice to speak my story or be silent about it just because I might lose an opportunity or two.

We all have a choice.

And we all have a commitment because we are not different. It could have been you or you or your kids or your fathers and mothers and sisters. The only reason that it's us is because of our geographical location. I guess that's how the world works sometimes. Or it's sometimes because of how you look like or if you wear a hijab or if you're Black.

Sometimes things are out of your control, but I will always and forever be so proud of being Palestinian, it is the greatest honour of my life.

At least we know we are humans. A lot of times I was thinking that I swear I would have rather just stayed back. At least I would have experienced all that with people around me that are genuine humans and have feelings and would not do that to other people. That they would fight for other people.

I want them to know that even though they're students, there is stuff that they can do. That could be the simplest thing of reaching out to that community and showing up for that community.

I guess we always claim that this is a brighter world. Ever since last year, I never saw that. So, it made me feel like I chose McMaster for a brighter world, only for me to realize that it only applied to certain people, not to others. And it applied to a lot of people, but my people seem to be the exception.

Although I'm Canadian, I'm not just Palestinian, I'm Palestinian-Canadian, and I've been proud of my Canadian identity up until everything that I've experienced in this past year. I did not feel like I was Canadian anymore.

I felt like I was just only Palestinian, and it felt like I will continue to probably fight that battle on my own as a Palestinian with my fellow pro-Palestinians.

You mentioned your struggle to focus on schoolwork as this all unfolded. How have you stayed invested in your studies and in a sense of hope for the future?

It was extremely difficult.

Especially when like I was never reached out to by the university administration or anything to tell me, "Hey, this is a safe space." "Hey, we can set something up on your profile that you can get this amount of accommodations whenever needed for any course." "This person is trusted, you can speak to them," et cetera.

There was nothing. The only time that somebody communicated with me was when the SPHR community found out how directly impacted I was. They tried to advocate for me when I couldn't advocate for myself. They were the only outlet in this university — although the university tries to shut them down — they're the only outlet that was like, "You're able to push through this. You're doing this for your people."

I guess I had a point that was on top of my head right now ...it's flying...

We were talking about your studies and seeing hope for the future.

I think the days that I had to push through and write my exams and try to do as well as I could do were the days where I sat down with myself, and I was like, "They took everything from you. Your people, your homeland — not once, but twice. Your house, everything and everyone I've ever cared about, and I've ever worked for."

I've always been working for my people, for that community; they took away everything. I thought the only thing that they can't take away from me right now, the only thing that I practically really have a lot of control over is my grades, is me doing very well and so I was like, "Even if I have to push through it, even if I have to put the news on pause for two days," — which I never was successful at doing, even though I tried — "I'll do it, just push through this exam." And I'll be like, "Hey, I'll finish this exam and I'll be fine."

And then another one comes. "I'll be done by then."

I literally could not tell you how I did it. For this semester, I tried to lighten my load because I knew. I knew I struggled last year, and I knew that I was like, OK, maybe these assignments I don't need to put my 100% in and I could still do decently well.

I put my future on the side, which hurts a lot right now. It's making things 100 times worse because I want to do a lot of things and I'm approaching graduation and it feels like I have no next plan, and that's because I spent years of my degree just trying to push through.

Literally just wake up the next day and just push through the day. It's just literally... I go day by day and I pray, I stay connected to my religion and that's literally purely what it is. It's day by day.

And when I need to push through, I'll just keep convincing myself that at the end of the day, sometimes I do need to focus somewhat on my courses or my grades, because that's one thing they can't take from me, when they took everything.

That's one thing I can prove to them that if I do this, I can become someone who will have a lot of impact on this world (hopefully fingers crossed, one day).

Then I can look them in the eye and tell them that a Gazan did this. That one of the God knows how many young Palestinians killed could have done this if they didn't kill them. If only they didn't.

Even those who survived, those ones are the unlucky ones. The ones that got killed are the lucky ones to me in this genocide because they did not have to experience more and more and more of this genocide. It's the ones that will survive are the ones that are going to have to live with this trauma forever, and I don't know if they'll ever recover from this genocide.

You mentioned things that you want to do in the future. Can you tell us more about that?

I had one specific plan that required exams over the summer. It's one of those really difficult fields to get into, which I knew I wasn't up for it. I knew mentally, I

am not there. But I booked the exam because I was like, "I know I'm going to fail it, but I'm really not a quitter. I don't care even if I fail it."

At least I know that I did it. And things are hopefully better by next summer, then I'll redo it.

I tend to be a perfectionist, and I think a lot of Palestinians are, because they want things to work out always because a lot of things are not in their control. So, if something is in their control, they want to do their absolute best at it.

The most hard-working people I've met are the Palestinians that got ripped off with everything, and it comes from a place of it's called "*Qahr*" in Arabic, which is like a mix of anger and pain and revenge, and all of it coming all in one feeling that it's like "I want to prove everyone wrong and I want to do this."

And I think you see this a lot with oppressed people in the past and where they've ended up.

And so, I've seen that pattern with Palestinians that I speak with and are directly impacted. There is always that passion to do even better, and to do even more and more and more, like nothing is ever enough for me. Like, I need to keep doing.

And so, I did the exam, but I know I didn't do well. And so, I'm not applying for that certain field.

And after everything that I've experienced, I started taking courses with EDI, and I started taking courses that will somewhat vocalize this. I started connecting with the profs that I saw on campus. Even if they didn't vocalize it, I knew deep down they knew what was right.

A lot of the profs that I've noticed are from marginalized communities, and so, even though it's not the same struggle, I know they've seen something similar. And I've seen that and have taken their courses. That space I felt safe enough saying out loud that yes, I am Palestinian, and I have lived through this and that's why I want to do something where maybe I can fight for the oppressed one day in whichever field.

Now it's become extremely clear to me that if I'm one day in a place of power, I made the promise to myself from the beginning, I will never back down, even if it meant losing every opportunity. I will never back down.

And when I see an oppressed person, I feel for them now 100 times more, because I know how it feels and others don't.

As much as the pro-Palestinian community will try to empathize with you, they'll never understand the extent of it. They will never understand the small, tiny details. I can go on for probably days nonstop on things that I've seen and things that I've witnessed when I was not even there during the genocide.

So, I can't imagine what my family had to endure. My little cousins are five and six and seven. They're there and all I can think of is "How are these people going to survive?" I talked to them and at the beginning I used to be like, "Yeah, we've lived through this before. It's fine. We've survived. They will survive this one again."

But it got to the point after a year, I stopped texting them every day.

I'm like, I don't know what to tell you anymore. I don't have the words other than "Yes, I'm surrounded by people that frankly don't give a crap about you and they're just going on with their lives like nothing ever happened."

And so, I have no clue what's going to happen in my future. I have no clue what my plans are and right now it's the time where people are applying for a lot of things, and so it makes it 100 times more stressful because I'm like, I don't even want to think about that right now.

I want to think about the fundraiser that's happening this week. I want to think about how I can send the money to these people.

I want to think about how I can change at least one other person's perspective and tell them to do a Google search. Please just come to an event. Just hear both sides because I know what you'll pick if you hear both sides.

It's just one of those things where it's extremely painful to think about.

It's just my future has become just secondary, when it's always been my number one ever since I left Gaza. It's even the number one thing for my family, my education, everything I want to do.

But at the end of the day, I'm prioritizing this because I think that's their only hope.

I look at my dad and I'm like, "I don't know what to tell you. Your dad has lost everything and now he's gone and now you lost everything, and now you're probably going to die and not see a free Palestine or your house ever again."

He was forced not to get educated from an early age because he had to work to support his family that got kicked out in the Nakba after they had everything.

And for one part of my family, it's worse. They lived in Gaza for hundreds of years. And knowing that my grandparents are in their 70s right now and they're not going to come back and they're not going to die where they were born. There's just this huge stab in the heart that, yes, I was grateful that my grandparents were able to evacuate a couple of months ago.

But I was battling this whole thing where it's like my bloodline is over in the city, and I practically don't have that family anymore that I can go back to, and that my grandparents will not die in the same place and that now both sides have experienced a Nakba and they're experiencing a Nakba in their last couple years of life.

God, I'm grateful at least my grandparents from one side died years ago and did not have to experience this because I don't know what they would have said experiencing multiple Nakbas and genocides in their lifetime.

And so really my mind is ... I don't like to speak about it because my mind gets extremely overwhelmed, I don't know what's the right place to even start here.