

Courage Under Fire

By Jessica Lacasse

On January 14, 2011, Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was forced from power after five weeks of civil protests. The revolution and speed of events took much of the population by surprise, especially Dhouha Dallel-Bousnina, a consular officer at the Canadian embassy in Tunis.

The day after Ben Ali fled, when the country was in total chaos and the Embassy was flooded with requests for assistance, Dhouha showed remarkable courage and dedication by reporting to work despite having just dropped off her 11-month-old son at the hospital.

“There are no words to describe what I was feeling,” says Dhouha. “I was torn between my son, who was ill, and my job. All day long, I was thinking of him and wondering if he was okay. Thankfully, he was with his father, but many Canadians in Tunisia were all alone. That’s why I tried to give the very best of myself to help them.”

That first “dictator-free” day was the beginning of a long journey for Dhouha. Until just recently, she has worked long hours almost every day to process cases (most involving passport renewal) from Tunisia and Libya, only to go home late at night to start her second shift with her family.

“During her first year as a consular officer, Dhouha faced an extraordinarily challenging sequence of events,” says Darcy McFarlane, First Secretary and Consul. “Through her good judgment, strong communication skills, teamwork and sheer dedication, she overcame major challenges and earned the respect and admiration of her colleagues, supervisors and clients.”

After Ben Ali was overthrown, Tunis became a very dangerous place: there were crowds blocking roads in every district, the sound of gunshots every night and the constant threat of aggression. This was an enormous upheaval for most Tunisians who, until this time, considered their country secure.

Dhouha’s determination to get to the embassy and help Canadians day and night was incomprehensible to many people in her community, who expected her to do what they were doing: staying home with their families and avoiding going outside.

“Many Canadians were in need during those difficult times, and my colleagues and I had to be there for them,” says Dhouha. “I knew we could help, as that’s exactly what we’ve been trained for.” Indeed, it was Dhouha’s passion for her job—and her strong humanitarian spirit—that allowed her to get through the crisis. She’s also very grateful for the unwavering support of her husband, Nour Bousnina, and colleagues, particularly Darcy McFarlane, Thérèse Laatar, Anissa Cherif and Amel Lamouchi.

“I feel that I’ve grown as a human being through my job. It’s allowed me to work with people in times of crisis and give the very best of myself. When I go to bed each night, I feel a strong sense of accomplishment.”



Dhouha with her son, Nour, Jr.

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