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The Cat Man OF ALEPPO

Rescuing cats in war torn Syria, Mohammad Alaa's story has captured hearts across the globe. Anita Kelsey defied the odds to track him down for an inspiring interview.

One man's quest to help our feline friends left me brimming with admiration and a renewed hope for humanity towards the sentient beings we share this planet with. His name is Mohammed Alaa al-Jaleel, or as he is now known, The Cat Man of Aleppo.

While fierce civil war gripped Syria forcing

many to flee their homes, Mohammed Alaa, stayed behind to help the local feral and pet cat population and established a cat sanctuary in Aleppo.

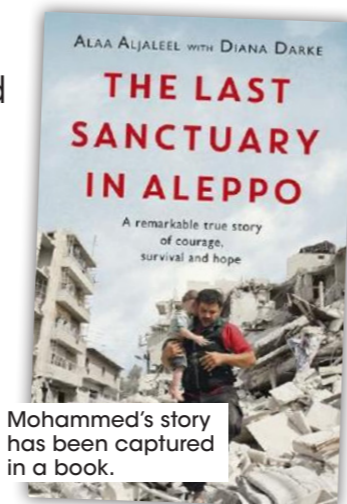
Support and donations for the sanctuary and Mohammed's work came from Il Gattaro Di Aleppo organisation, a Facebook page set up in 2015 by Alessandra Abidin, who

has become Mohammed's friend after reaching out from across the world to help him. Mohammed Alaa's work became famous when an article appeared in 'The Telegraph' reporting how a humble ambulance man saving people, was also rescuing cats too.

Tragically, the first cat sanctuary was destroyed in a bombing raid. With the help of donations from all over the world, a new cat sanctuary and orphanage for children was set-up in area not far from Aleppo where Mohammed and his team continue to do incredible work to help cats and children.

Inspired, I decided to track Mohammed down and with the trust of Alessandra Abidin, who passed me Mohammed's contact details, and the patience of translator and interpreter Rana Habbal, we managed to get an inspiring and honest interview. It took many phone conversations over a month to do the interview due to time differences, the fact that it was Ramadan (a holy fasting time for Muslims) and, of course, the hardships involved being caught in a war zone.

Here Mohammed reflects on a journey with cats that few would be brave enough to make...



Mohammed's story has been captured in a book.

Q What's your first memory of cats? Did you have them in your home as a child and do you remember how they made you feel?

We used to visit my grandparents, who had a cat called Bailasan. Every time she had kittens, the rest of our family — 22 uncles and nine aunts — used to reserve one kitten in advance. When it was our turn to take a kitten, my sister, Nailaa, and I were extremely excited. We named our kitten Loulou. She was white with blue eyes just like Bailasan. I was five years old and Loulou was my biggest joy.

My sister and I would fight over who would feed, bath, and spend time with Loulou. I felt like Loulou loved my sister more and started to feel jealous. To solve the problem, my father decided to bring home another cat; a feral one from his work place. Of course, the two cats did not get along.

My sister managed to win the cat's love over me,

“ We always looked after the street cats



as she normally did.

We had Loulou for seven years, until one day she became ill and disappeared. We felt so sad. I waited for her at the door to come back every day for 15 days. My father tried to comfort us, saying that when a cat falls ill, she goes away to die so that the humans who love her don't feel sad.

Three months later, I was walking to the ice cream shop when I found a small kitten

at the gate of one of the buildings next door. I asked the ice cream man if the kitten belonged to anyone. When he said no, I spoke to my father and we went back together to take the kitten home. After we gave her some meat, she felt secure and jumped into my father's lap. We named her Jongar, after a cartoon we used to watch, and she became a big part of our lives.

Before we had our own cats, we always looked after the street cats. My father always taught his children to feed them as they didn't have owners to feed and care for them. He also said the cats couldn't express their feelings and that we should be the ones who take the initiative. That was the family's approach with us children, I guess to make us feel responsible.

Q When did the idea of the sanctuary come into your head and how did you make it happen?

A British journalist was writing a report about the White Helmets (A volunteer organisation that provides

rescue services in Syria) and heard about how I was looking after the cats. He decided to do a report on me too. That was the first time in my life that someone wanted to write about me.

The article was for the Telegraph and people around the world read it and wanted to know more. I created a Facebook page, and in no time at all it was published

on numerous news websites like Smart News and Aleppo News. People were asking me to post about my rescues on a daily basis so they could follow what I was doing. In the first three days, I received 2,500 friend requests, the vast majority of whom were cat lovers and sympathetic about the Syrian crisis. There were diplomats, supermodels, astronauts, artists, and even a member of the Italian Parliament.

Eventually, the Facebook supporters asked me to establish a cat sanctuary, including my good friend Alessandra Abidin. After much

Did you know?

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 and has resulted in more than 350,000 casualties.

The Cat Man of Aleppo.



Helping cats has been a lifelong passion.



Images: All photos used with kind permission from Mohammed Alaa al-Jaleel.



The cats receive veterinary treatment.

“ The first original cat sanctuary in Aleppo was bombed ”

support from many people, I started to collect the stray cats and managed to secure a house that was previously lived in by a family who fled the war. I adapted the house to make it suitable for cats and started to search for strays that looked in need of help.

My Facebook friends helped me with funding for the cats' food and medical supplies. I did encounter some hardship with some of the cats that were once domestic pets, as they kept trying to return to their empty houses, looking for owners who fled the war. The Il Gattaro Di Aleppo Facebook group bought a power generator for €3000, which wasn't only used to process the cats' meat, but also to help the neighbourhood.

Q Were the cats already a feral colony in the space made into the cat sanctuary or did they gravitate there? I understand people fleeing the war were giving you their pets also? Once I started to feed the stray cats, many others started to

gravitate to the feeding area. I also started to rescue stray cats from different remote areas since they would not have been aware of my sanctuary. When people found out about the cat sanctuary, many of them brought their pets for me to look after. Others reported abandoned cats that needed help. I would go to the area and call them, or sound my car horn. They became familiar with that and would come out to me.

Q Were there any special cats who you became attached to?

There was a young cat called Teresa. She came to the sanctuary all by herself and was very beautiful with long fur. I used to bring her the kittens so that she could feed them; there were fifteen in all. I called her Teresa after the nun, Mother Teresa, who looked after poor and unfortunate people. The feline Teresa used to sleep in the sanctuary

Did you know?

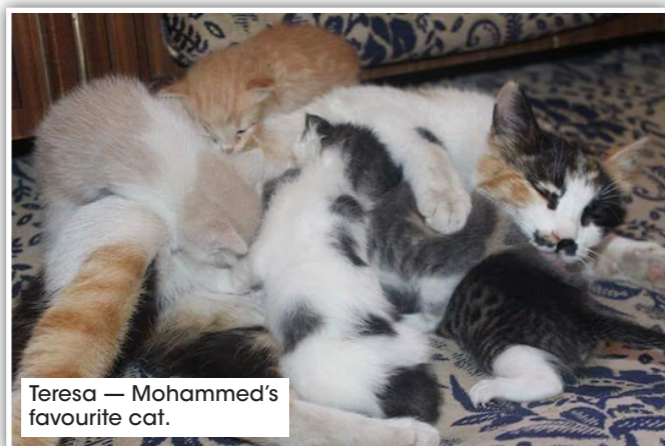
There are over 200 cats in residence at the current sanctuary, as well as other animals.

office next to me. People would visit to watch her feeding other cats' kittens.

Q After the first sanctuary was destroyed, you've started a new sanctuary in a different area. How did you pick yourself up to start again?

The first original cat sanctuary in Aleppo was bombed by chemical weapons and about 30 cats died, so we had to set up another one. I started to evacuate people from the area when the fire from the bombing ceased. I also started to collect the cats and asked departing families moving out of Aleppo to the suburbs to take one or two with them.

On 16 November, 2016, I too left Aleppo for the suburbs and in December met my supporters in Kilis, a city in Turkey near to the Syrian border. It was very overwhelming and emotional. One of them said they did not expect to see me after what I'd been through. I was encouraged to travel to a European country, but I refused. I told them I would



Teresa — Mohammed's favourite cat.

like to start all over again.

We agreed to establish five projects. We have done the animal sanctuary, a hospital for both humans and animals, a centre for the disabled called Amal, and the children's play park. As for the orphanage, we've started on the building but this has been stopped due to the funds coming into Syria being suspended.

When I decided to return, people supported me very generously to achieve my goal. The financial support reached 20,000 euros within one year. With this amount we were aiming to expand our support circle to help as many people and animals as we could. The funds were to support many poor families, schools, and more.

Q Why are cats so important to people, and is this to do with the respect for cats that Islamic culture teaches?

The cat sanctuary became a shelter for the children seeking what they have lost. They gather, play, and laugh in this place. In this sanctuary, my aim is to teach the children how to love the animals and look after them. I believe that if you want to teach a value to someone, you should start at a young age. I wanted to teach them how to look

“ My aim is to teach the children how to love the animals and look after them ”

after these animals and not to harm them and how to have responsibility. Also, I felt that this sanctuary could be a place for the children; to help them forget all their pain and anguish. The children's parents were very happy about this idea and they have noticed the difference in their children's attitude.

Islam, similar to many other religions, strongly advises that we should take care of animals, look after them and feed them. Islam strictly prohibits humans from harming animals and asks that we do not let any ill animals suffer.

Q What would you like the world to know about you, the cats, and the war in Syria?

I know that war is brutal. It financially and spiritually drains everyone, but especially the poor. The less fortunate are the biggest losers in war because they cannot afford to flee it. The people who are richer manage to escape.

I believe that when man is merciful towards the poor and



Feeding the kittens.

less fortunate, God will stand beside him. Although I faced certain death on many occasions, God saved me each time. Despite all the difficulties I have continued with what I started. With each setback I am more determined to go until the end. War is the worst thing that could happen to humanity. People used to judge me and blame me for trying to save the cats rather than people. I told them that cats are also

living creatures, just like us, and we have to help them.

I want people who have a good heart, like I feel I have, to know that as a result of my work with cats, I got to know remarkable people all around the world: the people who supported me. As a result of my passion for cats I achieved many things that the government could not do. For the first time, the government has issued a directive to establish similar sanctuaries.

Update from the sanctuary

Mohammed Alaa is safe but there is high possibility for air raid and further battles in the area. However, he is well prepared to move with his cats to the safe areas at the borders. The logistics and even the cages to keep the cats are ready for urgent move if needed. Mohammed is also intending to buy a piece of land to build another shelter for more cats.

He visits the areas that are hit by air raids when there are no shootings and collects the cats in these areas. So far, he has managed to save 120 house cats and 600 stray cats.

The orphanage is now established, with 85 orphan children housed there and where they are also helped with rehabilitation through the pets.

Mohammed Alaa also added that he is deeply grateful for all the help provided by the people who have been donating over the past five years. He says he hopes to repay the trust people have shown in him.

Find out more...

To find out more about the sanctuary and to donate, visit www.ernestosanctuary.org Anita's fee for writing the article has been donated to the sanctuary. Mohammed is currently celebrating his birthday by raising funds for the orphanage, if you would like to contribute to the orphanage, visit: <https://myevent.com/alaandkids>



The project has helped lots of children too.