

Zaid Wadia, a refugee from Iraq, at the Coastal Growers' Market at Casey Farm.





UNCOMMON GIFTS

THEY FACE LANGUAGE BARRIERS, SEPARATION FROM THEIR FAMILIES AND ECONOMIC CHAOS AS THEY STRUGGLE TO BUILD A NEW LIFE HERE. BUT RHODE ISLAND'S REFUGEES ENRICH US FAR MORE THAN WE KNOW.

BY ELIZABETH RAU | PHOTOGRAPHED BY RYAN T. CONATY

Geoff Gordon and Keith Cooper ("teacher"), founders of the Granola Project.



IN A CAVERNOUS STOP AND SHOP,

somewhere in Providence, his cell phone rang. It was "teacher." Teacher got right to the point: Would you like to work tonight? Zaid Wadia didn't hesitate. He'd been in the United States for two months and needed a job to get going, to make a life, to support his family.

Back in Iraq — before the bloody war that took the life of his brother-in-law and almost killed his own brother — Zaid worked, first in his father's bedding store, then in a bookshop. Work helped define him. Work paid the bills. Now teacher was giving him an opportunity to be whole again.

"Yes," Zaid said firmly, and he put aside his grocery cart and waited in front for teacher. Minutes later, Keith Cooper, a bespectacled man in baggy jeans and a rumpled button-down, pulled up in his old Volvo station wagon. Off they went through the city's gritty streets until they came to the Amos House soup kitchen, where Zaid

stepped out and into a new world to make a food as foreign to him as American pop music: granola.

He stirred the pot that night — the oats, the spelt, the sesame seeds — with Keith looking over him and offering instruction in that gentle, easy way he has with people who have less in a country of abundance. By the end of his shift, Zaid knew he would be coming back.

"Without teacher," Zaid says, "I have no job."

There are two kinds of granola in the world: the kind you buy in convenience stores before a long road trip, and the kind that Keith and his friend and business partner Geoff Gordon make and sell under the

Zaid Wadia selling Granola Project products.



Maitham, Zaid and Bola making granola at the Amos House.



label, the Providence Granola Project.

The mostly organic, sweet-tasting artisanal granola, with names like Amaretto Pear, Pina Colola, and April's Got the Blues, is getting rave reviews from food critics and foodies nationwide, including the indie actress Mary-Louise Parker, who says it's the best granola she's ever had, period: "wholesome, legal, totally addictive."

But it's the company's mission that is getting the attention of state officials, business leaders and social service agencies. The company hires mostly international refugees—like thirty-four-year-old Zaid—who are newly arrived in the United States and trying to better their lives. The catchy term is social venture, a business model that is gaining attention here and nationwide.

"Social enterprises, like the Granola Project, offer sustainable solutions to our most pressing social challenges," says Kelly

Ramirez, CEO of Social Ventures Partners Rhode Island, which works with about 120 of these businesses throughout Rhode Island. "This type of model is the best intervention we have to help people who face barriers to employment find jobs and become self-sufficient. Geoff and Keith are incredibly committed to that vision."

MORE THAN 8,000 REFUGEES HAVE

settled in Rhode Island since 1983, with 150 to 250 arriving every year. The challenges they face are daunting. They speak little or no English and many are not literate in their own language. Some come from war zones where they witnessed unspeakable horrors. They are unfamiliar with American ways and unsure how to navigate the system. Figuring out how to get to the grocery store, never mind buy groceries,

can seem like a monumental task.

They have all the excuses in the world to fail, but don't, says Keith. He should know. He worked for five years at the International Institute of Rhode Island in Providence, helping hundreds of immigrants find jobs and teaching English along the way, hence his affectionate nickname, teacher.

Keith's experience with refugees changed his life. He says they have a robust work ethic and strong entrepreneurial spirit. Many went without jobs for years while living in refugee camps and now consider it a privilege to work in this country.

So far, the Granola Project has provided about two dozen refugees—from Burundi, Bhutan, Liberia and Myanmar—with their first job in the United States. What's just as gratifying, Keith says, is that nearly all of those workers have progressed to full-time work, some in hotels and businesses.



BY 2006, THE SECTARIAN VIOLENCE HAD BECOME MORE PREVALENT. ONE DAY, MILITANTS OPENED FIRE ON ZAID'S CAR.

Zaid's brother, Maitham, stirs granola after a honey mixture is added. Above: Bola Sanni, who is from Nigeria, prepares granola to be baked.





Zaid and his family
in their kitchen.

The company sees itself as a stepping stone to other opportunities. Making granola gives refugees the training and confidence to flourish in an American job market that can be demanding and stressful.

Workers start gradually, as they did one evening during a training session at the Amos House in South Providence. Zaid and his brother, Maitham, are there to help, as well as Bola Sanni, a Nigerian and graduate of Amos House's culinary education program. She makes the granola, along with head chef, Evon Nano, also from Iraq.

There are new employees, too: Zaid's wife, Zena Saed; Maitham's wife, Veen Naser; and Dawit Bochrison, who just arrived

from Eritrea. Keith stands next to buckets brimming with wheat germ, flax and other ingredients. He sprinkles barley on his palm and makes an offering to the circle.

"Try it," he says. "I want you to try them all."

"Barley," says Veen, repeating the word slowly and writing it down in Arabic.

"B-A-R-L-E-Y," says Bola, providing her expertise.

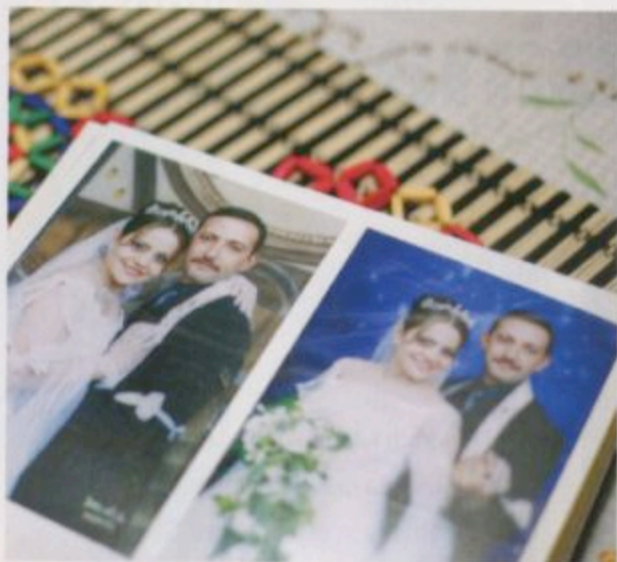
"What is this, teacher?" says Zena, pointing to another grain.

The goal of the Granola Project is to help refugees become self-sufficient, and Keith drives home that point right away. They set up a mock stand in the Amos House park-

ing lot to prepare for the farmers markets. They take turns putting up the white pop-up tent. They line up sample cups in a row on a folding table. At the end, the new hires get a Granola Project T-shirt. Dawit chooses green. He tries it on over his shirt. It fits.

Zaid takes the tents back to the storage area. He's industrious, energetic, always moving. His title is Man Who Can Do Everything.

Think of the neighborhood kid, the way he kicks a soccer ball around his yard, the way he rides his bike to the corner and back for the heck of it. This was Zaid as a boy in Baghdad. "Normal life," he says. "After school, we play football. You say



ZAID CRIED EVERY DAY. HE'D SEE FATHERS HOLDING THEIR DAUGHTER'S HANDS AND CRY FOR THE LITTLE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND.



Top, Zaid and Zena's wedding album. Above, Zena prepares dinner. Right, Zaid and his youngest daughter at home.

soccer. We put two bricks on the street. One here, one there. That's our goal."

His father owned a store that sold mattresses, pillows and comforters. The entire family — Zaid and Maitham, along with their mother and father — lived in a house they owned. The brothers graduated from the University of Baghdad. Zaid studied food industry; Maitham studied accounting. They had a comfortable middle-class life.

That began to crumble in 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq. "The war started in April," says Zaid. "We went to a small village, far from Baghdad. We were seven families, all together."

While most of the battles were in the

city, the village was not spared. He remembers a missile flying in his direction. It missed, but the war was real and near. The families stayed in the village for twenty-four days — "I know exactly," he says — and then returned home, to Baghdad.

"It was empty," he says. "It looked like a ghost city. Many big buildings destroyed. It was strange. When we drive in the street, we were alone. Quiet everywhere. You just see the American army."

Saddam Hussein was in hiding. The dictator's fall from power left Zaid and his family feeling both elated and anxious. "We were happy because Saddam Hussein system failed. But others were unhappy

because what would happen after the war?"

The first month, everyone stayed inside, unsure of what to do next. There was no electricity or running water. Drinking water came from a government pump station. Eventually, life started again. Zaid got a job as a bookbinder; Maitham found work as an accountant.

A car bomb went off now and then: "Normal violence," says Zaid. "I didn't scare."

Life held enough promise that, in 2004, Zaid married Zena, a dental lab technician. More than 100 guests attended the wedding. There was singing, dancing and the traditional beef dish of shawarma to feast on. The

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Uncommon Gifts

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newlyweds lived on the second floor of Zaid's parents' house. A daughter, Mena, was born a year later.

But the good life would end.

First, a bomb went off at a police station in front of Zaid's aunt's house. All the windows and doors were blown out. Thankfully, she came away only with scratches on her arms. "The God blessed her," says Zaid.

By 2006, the sectarian violence had become more prevalent—and more frightening. One day, Zaid was driving down a road and militants opened fire on his car. He slammed on the brakes and fled on foot, only to discover that they were shooting at Iraqi police nearby, not him.

The letter slipped under their house gate was the turning point. Zaid calls it "the paper." It said: Leave in seventy-two hours. At first, he didn't take it seriously. A few days later, he realized it wasn't a prank. As Zaid and Maitham left for work, a car drove by and a masked man opened fire. Zaid jumped behind his garage door.

Maitham wasn't fast enough. A bullet hit him in the chest.

"I was confession for Jesus on the way," says Maitham. "I didn't know. Maybe yes maybe no, I die."

The doctor at the hospital said he was lucky. The bullet missed his lungs and exited out his back.

The brothers say they were targeted because they were Christians, or Catholics, a religious minority in the country. "The terrorists say Christians are cousins to the American army," says Zaid. They left the house and found shelter elsewhere in the city. Still, the worst was to come.

October 4, 2006: A "triple bomb" went off at a local business. There were three enormous blasts: one to lure people to the scene; two others to kill them.

Among the dead was Zena's brother. He was only twenty-one. On the way to the hospital, thieves stole his cell phone and gold cross necklace. Zaid identified him in the morgue. "That's what makes me decide to leave the country—who died is near to me."

Two months later, Zaid and his brother sold all their belongings and fled with their families to Syria, to cramped apartments in Damascus, living on their savings and on money sent by relatives in

New Zealand.

Working with the United Nations refugee agency, they applied for political asylum in another country. The agency finally told them they could go to Australia. Zaid didn't believe them.

Zaid and Maitham decided to escape to Sweden, which, at the time, was quickly granting asylum to Iraqi refugees. They would establish themselves and then send for their families. Leaving behind their wives and children, the brothers took off on a perilous journey that cost \$14,000 each, paid to an Iraqi man who promised to "guide" them illegally into the country.

The adventure started in October of 2007, when the brothers took a flight to Turkey, where they squeezed into a van with fourteen other Iraqis and raced to the coast. From there, they took an inflatable boat across the Aegean Sea to a remote Greek island, where they spent four days sitting in cafes and dead-end bars, taking turns dozing in chairs.

The trip to Athens took another thirteen hours. They found themselves in what Zaid calls a "zero-star" hotel, dirty and dank. Still, their fake passports were detected by security at an Athens airport. They spent four days in the airport's jail.

A judge ordered them back to Iraq, but instead the brothers, still intent on Sweden, went to visit another aunt in northern Greece. They found a new "guide"—this one, a Syrian—who charged more money, but made better passports: Zaid became Belgian; Maitham, Italian. They dressed in suits and carried empty laptop cases to look like businessmen. This time, they made it through security.

In Sweden, the brothers requested asylum and rented a small apartment in Stockholm. Maitham found a job in a sandwich shop. Zaid sold hot dogs at a stand outside a bar. He wore three pairs of pajamas under his clothes to keep warm working from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. in the bitter cold.

Zaid cried every day. He'd see fathers holding their daughters' hands and weep for Mena, the little girl he left behind. They called their wives, who begged them to return to Syria. The brothers felt certain Sweden would come through. They waited one year and six months.

Asylum was denied. They eventually returned to Syria and started over.

Finally, four years after leaving Iraq, good news came from the U.N. refugee

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agency. The brothers and their families could go to the United States. Zena's aunt had already emigrated to Tiverton, so they chose Rhode Island. They arrived in Providence on September 20, 2010, with six suitcases and three carry-on bags. Zena managed to pack her wedding album, with photos of the loving couple cheek-to-cheek, each wearing a white arm band dotted with gold beads.

They found an apartment and set up a home. Zena's parents have received preliminary approval to come over, but are still living in limbo in Syria, a situation that frustrates and saddens Zena, who worries about them, especially as the violence there worsens.

Immediately after arriving in Providence, Zaid and Zena started taking English classes at the International Institute, where they met Keith. A few months into their friendship, Keith hired Zaid, as well as Maitham.

When Keith called him in the grocery store that day, Zaid didn't even know where teacher was taking him. He knew nothing about granola: "What is this?" Zaid trusted teacher; that was enough. How could you not trust Keith or Geoff? They're patient, kind, educated and have a strong sense of social justice.

THE HISTORY OF THE GRANOLA

Project has been repeated so many times in the press and on food blogs it is almost legendary: One night, Keith and Geoff were sitting around, drinking a few beers, and the conversation turned to deep topics, like how to help refugees rebuild their lives in America. Eureka! Make granola, a food Keith had been preparing for family and friends for decades.

Who knew that their long friendship would take them to a bag of oats? The two met in the 1990s at Brown University, where they worked as campus ministers. They eventually parted—Keith, a graduate of Yale University, left to get his MFA in creative writing; Geoff later went on to get his MBA from Bryant University—but hooked up years later.

By then, Keith was working at the International Institute and Geoff was living in Mystic, Connecticut, running a photo rental booth business, which he still owns. In 2008, they launched the Granola Project in the kitchen of Keith's house in Providence.

They soon moved to the Amos House, where they rent kitchen space for a small fee. Last year, Keith left his job at the Institute to devote himself full-time to the company and also concentrate on starting a nonprofit, Beautiful Day, which takes the Granola Project mission one step further.

The organization would be a training center and business incubator for not only refugees, but also people with low incomes and language and culture barriers. It would create a co-op kitchen available to participants; partner with local businesses to train workers; and also provide mentoring for potential entrepreneurs to start their own businesses.

Money, of course, is needed to flourish. While federal grants might be available, Keith says he is hoping for donations from individuals and Rhode Island businesses looking to support community projects. "For \$250,000 we could get a whole kitchen started and generate at least one or two businesses a year," Keith says. "I'd love one of those big vacant buildings in Providence."

Zaid is the company's shining example of success.

When he started two years ago, he took a crash course in all things granola. He learned about the different grains and how to toast them in the oven. He learned how to stir in the honey and operate the machine that seals the bags.

Soon, he was asked to sell bags at the farmers markets. His mind whirred. He worried that his English wasn't good enough: Would he be able to answer customers' questions? During his first outings, another worker, a volunteer, accompanied him. Then Zaid went by himself.

Left on his own, his English improved rapidly. His confidence soared. In the spring, he was at the Coastal Growers' Market at Casey Farm in Saunderstown. He started chatting with Wayne Pelland, a longtime customer.

Back at his house, Wayne checked out Zaid's personal story on the Granola Project's blog and thought he might need extra work. As senior vice president for operations at the *Providence Journal*, he was in a position to help.

In May, Wayne offered him a part-time job as an inserter at the paper's distribution center. Zaid jumped at the opportunity. "He's a hard-working, very caring man," says Wayne. "He's doing a very



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Zaid has dreams and they revolve around work. More work. Better work. Someday, he would like to start his own business.

On this morning, he is back at Casey Farm, selling. He sets up the tent, unfolds the table. He lines up the bags of granola: Keith's Originola; Ginger Zinger; Mochaccino Hazelnut. Sample cups are filled. He brushes a few wayward oats off the table to clean it.

"Good morning," Zaid says to everyone who passes by. "Would you like to try samples?" Most who taste buy. Sales are swift. Some customers ask about the company: What is the Project? Zaid says the company hires refugees to help them make a start in America. They learn English, get job training and earn money.

"Where are you from?" asks Rick Mofitt, of Narragansett.

"I am from Iraq," says Zaid.

"Nice," says Rick. "Well, welcome."

Zaid smiles. He says he's been asked that question many times since he arrived in the United States. When he tells people he's from Iraq, he says most apologize for the war. "I tell them it's not your problem, and it's not my problem. I tell them it's the governments—your government and my government."

He is grateful every day to be living in the United States. He likes the way Americans follow the law; treat children and the elderly with respect; and insist on access to their local governments. A special moment for him was when he shook Governor Lincoln D. Chafee's hand during a tour of the State House.

It's noon, time to leave. Zaid puts the bags of granola back in plastic bins. A late arrival walks up with a request. The man feels bad for asking Zaid to unpack. No problem, says Zaid. He digs deep in a bin. The man's day is made complete with a bag of Originola.

"Thank you," says Zaid. "Thank you for buying from me."

Back home, Zaid is welcomed by Mena, now seven, and his curly-haired son Yousif, born two years ago. He was playing soccer in the backyard while his father was at work. Zaid scoops up Yousif, and his red ball, in his arms. The little boy, asleep when Zaid left in the morning, is excited to see him: Dad is home from work. It could be a father-son greeting on any street, in any country, anywhere in the world. 