

# Fair Oaks

LIVING

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CONNECTING ACROSS  
CONTINENTS:

*The  
Annaout  
Story*

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## CONNECTING ACROSS CONTINENTS:

# *The Arnaout Story*

By Laura I. Winn

Photography by Isabel Ollinger and courtesy of the Arnaout family

**THE SAME WEEK** COVID-19 shut down daily life in the United States, Mohamad and Malak Arnaout had the virtual chat that jump-started their lives together. Their love story spans two continents, over 7,000 miles apart. In 2020, Malak lived in the Fair Oaks Village with her parents, while Mohamad resided in a town outside of Beirut, Lebanon. Introduced by mutual friends, they had an undeniable attraction.

"I liked how sweet he was. He liked how funny I am," Malak said.

Despite living in two different worlds, Mohamad and Malak first found a common bond as business-driven individuals. Mohamad was driven by his passion for fine jewelry-making, a skill passed down to him from his family of jewelers and honed at school in Lebanon. A graduate of Bella Vista High School, Malak was running her

own business as an eyebrow tattoo artist. She had spent her life in the Sacramento area since moving to the United States from Lebanon at age 2.

Through months of texts and video calls across time zones, Malak and Mohamad's initial spark grew into a deeper connection. One year after their online introduction, Malak decided it was time to meet face-to-face. She flew back to Lebanon for the

fateful first date. "Within a year, we were engaged. We were married six months later," Malak explained. "We just knew, and we didn't want to waste time."

They spent their first two years together in Saida, Lebanon, where a 15-minute drive could take them to the snow in one direction and the beach in the other. They strolled around the downtown strip where Mohamad owned his gold shop near the gold shops of his uncles. Immersed in her culture, Malak said she loved everything from the vibrant nightlife to the mundane day life – assisting her husband in his jewelry business and then closing shop to dine on freshly caught sardines and fried fish.

While Malak missed her big family and community back home in Fair Oaks, where she fondly recalled going for frequent runs "out the door, through the village, down to the river and back through the village," she was making a new home on the Mediterranean coast with her own growing family. In 2022, she returned to the United States to give birth to her daughter, Gabriella. Mohamad could only support his wife virtually as sporadic shutdowns at the U.S. Embassy prevented his travel. The family soon reunited in Lebanon and planned to build their future in Saida.

But in 2023, everything changed with the October 7 Attacks in Israel. Although the Arnaouts had no ties to the conflict in

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the Gaza Strip, they were confronted with the escalating instability across the entire region. Malak felt she had to make a difficult decision for her family. With a baby boy on the way, she chose safety and opportunity in the United States and moved back to Fair Oaks with 1-year-old Gabriella. Mohamad had to stay behind. "Sometimes I don't like to talk about it," Malak said. "It's one of the hardest things I've ever gone through."

Living once more on two different continents and dealing with delays in Mohamad's arrival due to ongoing problems at the U.S. Embassy, Malak gave birth in 2024 to her son, Hasim, without Mohamad by her side. Finally, Mohamad was there to hold Malak's hand as she gave birth to baby girl Nayah in 2025.

Describing their three little ones, Malak

said Gabriella, 3, loves to draw and play dress-up like mommy, and while Hasim, 2, may seem quiet at first, he is the family clown and keeps everyone laughing. At 5 months old, "Nayah is still new to the world, so we're excited to see what she has up her sleeve," she added.

Now settled in the heart of town, the family of five is close to extended family who visit the Arnaout home for Mohamad's barbecues and Malak's traditional Lebanese cooking. Living just two stop signs away from her parents, Malak said she reflects daily on how lucky she is. "I can meet my mom halfway, and we can go for walks together," she explained. "My mom helped me when I was deep in the trenches of the newborn phase."

The Arnaouts have also established their business, Barik Jewelry, in the village.



Hasim



Nayah



Gabriella

Like in Lebanon, Mohamad designs and handcrafts the jewelry, and Malak handles marketing and enjoys meeting clients from the city she loves.

"I truly enjoy everything about this community, from the sound of roosters in the morning to grabbing coffee nearby, and especially the amazing neighbors who live around us," Malak said. "When the lights went out the other day, one neighbor offered us batteries, and another neighbor texted us to let us know what was happening. That's a sense of community."

Malak said she has felt that same sense of support since she first moved to Fair Oaks as a teenager. "Neighbors came forward with open arms and thoughtful gifts," she said. "It deeply moved me and made me appreciate the blessing of being part of such a special community."

With their future in Fair Oaks firmly established, Mohamad and Malak visit Lebanon annually to reminisce on the beaches where their partnership – both in life and in work – began. ■



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