



Yusra Mardini
Olympic swimmer and Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. Born in Damascus, she fled war-torn Syria in 2015 and currently lives in Germany. She swam on the Refugee Olympic Team in the Rio Olympics, and hopes to compete again in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Mardini with students of Taimei Elementary School, Tokyo. © UNHCR

Series: Friends of Japan

Achieving the Impossible: Syrian Refugee Swimmer-Ambassador

Syrian refugee, Olympic swimmer, and UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Yusra Mardini visited 2020 Olympic Host City Tokyo in August 2017 to promote awareness and understanding of refugees by sharing her own dramatic story.

“Refugees are people who, if only given a chance, are capable of extraordinary things.” Yusra Mardini lives out her claim. In 2015, Mardini fled war-torn Syria for Germany. In 2016, she swam in the Rio Olympics with the first ever Refugee Olympic Athletes Team. Now, as Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, she represents the more than 65 million forcibly displaced people around the world, working to inspire other refugees to pursue their dreams.

Mardini is seeking to change the negative image many

people hold of refugees. Speaking at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in January, she declared, “‘Refugee’ is becoming an insult—a name to hurt and humiliate—but there is no shame if we remember who we are.” Mardini describes refugees as “survivors with their own talents and skills that had to flee their country to escape persecution.” The label “refugee” hides the fact that these people are “doctors and lawyers, mothers, and brothers with much to contribute.”

Mardini knew her native Syria as a “vibrant country, full of generous, kind people; a center of art, culture and civilization.” Until 2011, Syria welcomed millions of tourists annually. Mardini grew up in the capital city of Damascus. Her father, a professional swim coach,



Mardini (left) traveled through Hungary with other refugees during her journey to Germany in 2015. © UNHCR/Lam Duc Hien



Mardini leaps from the starting blocks in the 100m freestyle race at Rio 2016. © UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau

started Mardini swimming at the age of three. She trained seven days a week, discipline that led to her competing in the 2012 FINA World Championships in Istanbul.

After war broke out, Mardini tried living a normal life, going to school and swimming. But when bombings interrupted her practice, she knew it was time to leave. At the age of 17, she escaped with her sister, hoping that the rest of their family could join them later. They traveled for 25 days through Lebanon and Turkey. They reached the coast and crowded onto a small boat, hoping to make it across the Adriatic Sea to Greece. When the boat’s motor failed, Mardini, her sister, and two others jumped out. They swam in the open sea, keeping the boat from capsizing. After three and a half hours, the boat and its twenty passengers, many of whom could not swim, arrived safely on the Greek island of Lesbos.

Mardini found welcome as a refugee in Germany. She started swimming again, working “incredibly hard. I have a good feeling when I’m in the water. Without



Members of the Refugee Olympic Team at the Olympic Village, Rio 2016. © UNHCR/Benjamin Loyseau



Mardini was appointed Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR in April 2017. © UNHCR

swimming, I don’t think I would have survived. Swimming teaches you to be patient and to be passionate at the same time, and in the end, it teaches you to keep fighting.”

Selected for the Refugee Olympic Team for Rio 2016, she joined athletes from different countries, united under the Olympic flag with its message of peace and respect. All counted it a privilege to represent fellow refugees.

On her visit to Japan, Mardini also shared her story with elementary school children. She found it “wonderful to engage with children about swimming, the Olympics, achieving your goals, and being resilient. Children have such a wonderful ability to be open and unbiased and non-judgmental, to just take things and people at face value—I love that.”

Mardini wants to compete in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and improve her time. “People say gold is out of my reach, but my heart tells me I can continue to break barriers, fight and maybe one day achieve the impossible.”