

Seattle Men's Chorus celebrates the courage of LGBTQ+ refugees

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Nayyef Hrebid and Btoo Allami's story is part of what inspired Seattle Men's Chorus' upcoming "Love Beyond Borders" concert. (Nayyef Hrebid)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

A sergeant in the Iraqi army, Btoo Allami risked more than rejection when he confessed his feelings to Nayyef Hrebid, a fine arts graduate serving as a translator for U.S. forces during the Iraq War. He put his life in Hrebid's hands and found love in return. But a life together in Iraq, [where LGBTQ+ people face violence by armed groups and police](#), was not possible. When Hrebid immigrated to America in 2009, he was determined to find a way to reunite with Allami, who remained in danger. It took six years and miles of bureaucratic red tape before the two were [reunited in Seattle](#).

Now the [Seattle Men's Chorus](#) is presenting "Love Beyond Borders," a concert to celebrate the courage of LGBTQ+ refugees like Hrebid and Allami who have fled their homes in search of a safe place to love. Canceled in the early days of the pandemic, the concert is as relevant now as it was in 2020. "Love Beyond Borders" will premiere commissioned music together with a film by SMC director of video Michael Willer that tells the stories of local refugees, including Hrebid and Allami.

For members of the chorus, learning about these refugees led to action. The Seattle Men's Chorus became an active stop on a modern underground railroad, an informal network of activists and nonprofits that helps LGBTQ+ people escape persecution and resettle in countries where they will be safe.

The chorus's involvement began when SMC artistic director Paul Caldwell met Michael Failla, a Seattle-based activist helping refugees since the 1980s. Since helping bring Allami to North America, Failla has focused on helping LGBTQ+ refugees and gender equality activists leave countries unsafe for LGBTQ+ communities. From Failla, Caldwell learned about "Out of Iraq," the Emmy-winning documentary about Hrebid and Allami, who are now married and own a house in SeaTac. The idea for "Love Beyond Borders" was born.

"When we can put music in the service of humanity and peace, it just means so much more and it's powerful," Caldwell said. Composer Lyn Rye not only agreed to contribute music to the program, but also became the point person assisting a young Syrian couple in hiding. Inspired by that same couple, former Seattleite Bonnie McKee wrote the song "[Love You in the Light](#)" for the concert. The third composer is Michael Bussewitz-Quarm, who often addresses social issues in her work and later wrote music for Seattle Women's Chorus' "Banned & Beloved" concert on Feb. 3.

"When we started this, I didn't understand the ways in which we could help, and I certainly did not imagine in my wildest fantasy that we would become the family for LGBTQ+ refugees who made it out safely," said Caldwell.



Paul Caldwell conducts Seattle Men's Chorus. (John Pai)

The chorus learned how it could help in November 2019, when a couple sponsored by Failla arrived in Seattle. After surviving hate crimes and false arrests in Turkey, the young men were met at the airport by members of the chorus. In the following months, chorus members helped them settle into their new life, finding them an apartment and carrying boxes on moving day.

When the pandemic hit and the March 2020 concert was canceled, the chorus's work with refugees continued. SMC members began working directly with the Syrian couple Rye was helping, checking in with them regularly on WhatsApp and finding resources and allies to help them as they attempted to reach safety.

"They gave us a reason for being when reasons were hard to come by," said Caldwell. "That might be the thing that kept the chorus together."

Today that couple has Canadian citizenship and lives in Toronto. But the rescue work continues. After the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, Failla's refugee caseload jumped from about a dozen to more than 200. Through the nonprofit [SCM Medical Missions](#) in Seattle and the [Rainbow World Fund](#) in San Francisco, he works closely with government refugee agencies in Canada and Germany, where most LGBTQ+ refugees are accepted.

"If the definition of the word genocide included sexual minorities, then we would say what is happening now in Afghanistan is a genocide against gay people," said Failla.

Though the U.S. resettles relatively few LGBTQ+ refugees, here in Seattle, Allami has helped half a dozen refugees find work. He and Hrebid recently joined Failla in Toronto, where they gave advice to a group of newly arrived refugees. In July, they will do the same thing in Germany, where a broad legal definition of refugee status has enabled Failla to help nearly 1,000 refugees settle.

"We got help when we needed it, and now it's our time to give it back for others that need help as well," said Hrebid, who is looking forward to attending "Love Beyond Borders" after such a long delay.

"What they are doing is amazing because they are not just singing a song. They are singing real stories and giving voices for people to gain knowledge about what's happening in Middle East," said Hrebid. Since 2020, Hrebid says, his husband's family has become more accepting, and he has seen signs of improvement for LGBTQ+ people in some parts of the Middle East.

"We are hoping by sharing our story, and sharing more stories, maybe the new generation will change," he said.

"Love Beyond Borders"

2 p.m. Feb. 18; Seattle Men's Chorus at Benaroya Hall, 200 University St., Seattle; accessibility: [st.news/benaroya-accessibility](#); 75 minute runtime; \$39-\$99, sliding scale available, call 206-388-1400; 206-215-4747, [seattlechoruses.org](#)

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