

# Far From Home

Amal Al-Balushi

BY LIBBY ZAY

"I cannot do it. I cannot be committed to this. It's really hard," Amal Al-Balushi, MSN, RN, recalls telling her 13-year-old daughter in fall 2015.

Al-Balushi had just started the PhD program at UMSO and was having trouble adjusting to the workload and to life in a new country. She and her daughter had come to Maryland from Oman on their own because Al-Balushi's husband serves in the Royal Navy of Oman. Al-Balushi was also four months pregnant when

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she arrived, and after beginning the program, she developed gestational diabetes and learned her baby had a congenital heart defect.

"I had already sent an email to the associate dean and to my advisor telling them I wouldn't return to school," Al-Balushi says. "I had reached that stage."

But her daughter's response inspired her to keep going. "She told me that she had adjusted to school and a new life here and that she didn't want to go back," Al-Balushi recalls.

Al-Balushi's siblings came to the United States for the birth of her son, and UMSO faculty supported her in her studies. Now, she has a healthy 3-year-old and is preparing to defend her dissertation in May on the provider perspective of psychosocial care needs of parents and children with cancer in Oman.

"It's been a long journey, with challenges. Because I'm a mom,

I'm a student, and I'm from a different country," she says.

Al-Balushi says she was drawn to nursing because it is a good fit for her personality. "Caring is one of my characteristics, particularly caring for mothers and children," she adds.

She earned her nursing diploma in Oman, and after practicing for two years, she was sponsored by the country's Ministry of Health to receive her Bachelor of Science in Nursing at Villanova University in Pennsylvania and later her master's degree at Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland. At the time, any nurse who wanted to pursue advanced education needed to travel outside of Oman to earn a degree.

Al-Balushi then returned home and taught pediatric nursing at Muscat Nursing Institute for seven years before deciding to travel abroad once again to earn her PhD to "align with the improvements in nursing education," she explains.

As Al-Balushi gets ready to graduate, her daughter is doing so, too. She is on a fast track to complete high school in the United States by combining grades 11 and 12. After graduation, Al-Balushi will return to Oman, where



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her son will start school and where she plans to conduct research on clinical practice. "I'm really interested in serving the needs of children with cancer and their families because in Oman we have a gap in this area," she says. "There is a lack of health care providers, psychologists, and child life specialists and a lack of tools to screen the families for psychosocial distress." Her long-term goal is to translate an American psychosocial assessment tool into Arabic and adapt it to Omani culture.

"All nurses should be caring, listening carefully to the patients' needs and desires," Al-Balushi says. "Patients are like my family, so when I go to the hospital, to be honest with you, I feel like it is my second home." ♦

*bottom right:* Al-Balushi (center) first learned of UMSO when Meg Johantgen, PhD, RN, associate professor and associate dean for the PhD program (left), and Yolanda Ogbolu, PhD '11, MS '05, BSN '04, CRNP-Neonatal, FAAN, assistant professor and director of the Office of Global Health (right), visited Oman in 2014. Al-Balushi had been selected to lead the visitors on a trip to a traditional souk, or bazaar.