



A Sacred Encounter: Our Friendship with Afghan Refugees

Stories from the Refugee Working Group
and the Justice, Peace, and Outreach
Commission (JPOC)



Introduction

By Kathryn Lien

The familiar smile and “hello, how are you?” met me at the door. For several months I had come to this small apartment in Edina to visit Fatima* a young woman barely out of her teens. She and her new husband had arrived in Minnesota from Texas after having been evacuated from their home in Afghanistan. Fatima and I were getting to know each other slowly, taking walks, finding bus schedules, driving to VEAP, the wonderful food pantry nearby. Fatima loved our trips to VEAP, declaring, as she dove into a small bag of Doritos, “I like VEAP—good chips!” Despite the warm summer afternoons, Fatima’s wardrobe always included long skirts and a scarf that she deftly wound around her head and shoulders. On this afternoon she invited me into her very tidy apartment. As we ascended the stairs to the third floor, the scarf slipped off and I got a glimpse of the thick, dark curls beneath, bouncing along with her youthful gait. I came through the door and removed my shoes, waiting for the cup of tea I knew was on the way.

**Fatima is not her real name. This name and others in the following pages have been changed to protect the safety of the refugees.*

Refugees in Minnesota: One Parish’s Experience

In September of 2021 the newly formed Justice, Peace, and Outreach Commission received a request from the parish, brought to us by Father Ralph Talbot, the pastor at the time. The news of the day was filled with stories of Afghan immigrants who had been evacuated in August. Among the evacuees were single men who had worked with American military personnel and families of those men. The request was for JPOC to find a way to assist in the settlement of these refugees whose lives had been upended by war.

We agreed to honor the request, as disciples of Christ who consider all people as children of God, as world citizens responding to victims of war, and as Catholics who had heard the plea of Pope Francis to Welcome, Protect, Promote, and Integrate migrants, refugees, and all those on the margins. This booklet is a diary of sorts, with stories of the people we met, the work we did, and the many things we learned along the way.

We offer this diary to all who would open their hearts to the many ways God works in this world, at this moment. In our experience, the relationships we built, the fellow workers we met, the stories on the news that caught our attention, the letters we wrote to politicians, all lay claim to the fact that we are part of a community of faith “who know, follow, and go forth to share Jesus Christ”.

The Call

When Sr. Mary Kerber, the former Director of Mission at the parish, brought the request to “do something” about Afghan refugees, we knew little about the process of walking beside those whose lives had been so uprooted. We looked for guidance from organizations whose work in settling immigrants and refugees was thorough and ongoing. After research into a variety of non-profits, we chose Lutheran Social Services as the partner that seemed to be the best fit. We got to know their staff and learned from them the many ways there are to mentor a refugee. We reached out to Catholic Charities, but they have moved away from immigrant work in order to concentrate on other deserving areas of service. It was Catholic Charities St. Paul-Minneapolis that pointed us toward Lutheran Social Services.

The Infrastructure

Lutheran Social Services had teamed up with the Justice Ministry at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis to develop a mentorship program they called “Circle of Welcome”. We easily recruited seven people to join our Circle. After background checks, information gathering, and learning how to use WhatsApp we were ready to go.

Our first assignment was to mentor two single men and two married couples. Our second assignment was with a family of six, with a new baby on the way. We would meet each household through Lutheran Social Services and then find our way to supporting and mentoring them, through home visits, help in communicating with social services, speaking English slowly and carefully, and simply spending time with them.

The Friendship

Afghanistan is a country of many stories. The people we met were, for the most part, involved with American military during the time US forces were stationed in Afghanistan. They came from urban and rural areas, some were high school graduates, others were illiterate. Most came from large families. In some cases, following the fall of the government and the takeover by the Taliban, our friends had deep concerns about the safety of their families left behind. Despite the worry and fear, they were grateful to be here and eager to find their way to becoming American citizens. We mentors found ourselves in the southern suburbs several times a month, happily roaming the aisles of Target or Cub Foods, locating community education centers to learn English, figuring out the bus schedule, planning picnics and holding new babies.

The Culture

Afghanistan is an ancient land bordered by Pakistan, Iran, and countries that were states of the former Soviet Union. Humans have lived there since the Middle Paleolithic Era and, with its strategic location, it has been described as “the roundabout of the world”. The Silk Road, a network of Eurasian trade routes, runs through Afghanistan, bringing with it a variety of spices, fabrics, languages, ways of seeing the world and of course, conflict. The two primary languages are Pashto and Dari, but the regional dialects are numerous and contribute to the sense of home that connects families to each other. It is not unusual to find families living together in multi-generational situations, with traditional roles for women and men.

Afghanistan is an Islamic state, with more than 99% of the population practicing Islam. Today the Taliban comprises all government bodies, including education. Although some areas of the country disallow girls from education beyond puberty, the international community is providing educational opportunities through formal schools, community-based classrooms, virtual learning, and digital resources (USAID Fact Sheet).

Family Story

By Kathryn Lien

Emily and Kushhal were waiting for us in the parking lot of the small apartment building in Bloomington. We were about to meet our first family to mentor through Lutheran Social Services' Circle of Welcome program. With hearts full and face masks at the ready we greeted each other and waited for Karzai to invite us into the apartment he could call home. He and his wife were expecting their first child in just weeks. To be so far from home at such a unique moment must have been difficult for them, but we certainly did not see it in their welcome. We were offered tea, nuts, dried fruit, and sweets as we found our way to a seat—either on a chair or on the floor.

Emily directed the conversation towards the practical—how to use the bus, where to find food and clothing, opening a bank account, and highlighting the importance to register for English classes. The big items—banking, enrolling in MnSure, finding their way through the many support services available to them—were handled by LSS. Our job was to befriend this little family and let them know that they could rely on us for friendship, for asking questions, and finding ways to navigate this big, new world.

Khushhal was our interpreter and soon became a trusted partner in bridging the language gap. We all had his cell number on our phones, and he graciously answered our calls when communication between us and our young friends was just not happening. This coming together was the first of several we were privileged to be part of, each one holding a place of excitement, laughter, apprehension, and hope. Every one of these refugees has grown beyond our expectations. Our lives have been enriched beyond measure, our world has expanded, and our eyes have been opened to a love of neighbor we had never considered.

My name is Khushhal Mirza, a Principal Office Specialist with Hennepin County. I speak 4 languages and am passionate about learning Spanish in the near future as well.

I am married and am blessed with three beautiful daughters.

I served as an interpreter and Cultural Advisor for the US Armed Forces in Afghanistan from 2007 to 2016 and was fortunate enough on being able to immigrate to the United States in the year 2016.

I and my family were immensely assisted and welcomed by the community which helped the transition go easier for us to adjust and learn the way of living here. That is the reason I chose to work with Hennepin County to give back and serve our residents.



Week of the Refugee

By Carol Stehly

Even though it was not refugee week (March 1-8, 2023) we appeared to make it so. The previous weekend our refugee committee asked for cleaning supplies for the 80 new refugee families that were expected to arrive with the next few weeks.

We started the week by collecting, before and after each of the masses, all of the cleaning supplies our parish families so generously donated. Our group was overwhelmed with the 100 plus baskets of supplies we received.



On Sunday Carol made a visit to check on Mina and the baby to make sure all was ok. On Monday Kathryn met with Fatima to take her window shopping for some ideas for her apartment. Also on Monday Aine went to VEAP with two of our families...only to find out that another of our families took over child care so the others could go to the food shelf.

On Thursday seven adults and five children and three cars equipped with the required car seats were off to Como Zoo and Conservatory for the afternoon, as the children were on Spring break. Luckily Julie brought snacks because as usual after two hours the children were hungry. We all had a delightful afternoon.

Friday brought a busy day of renting a U Haul, picking up a needed mattress and loading all of the cleaning supplies in so we could transport them to LSS. Off to the storage unit on Lake Street we went. We then found it necessary to rearrange the storage unit so all of the supplies would fit in.



Circle of Welcome

A Circle of Welcome is a group of 5-8 people who promise to accompany migrant or refugee families for a period of three or six months. Among the circle are men and women who can respond to a family's need in an appropriate amount of time. As in any family, certain emergencies need prompt attention, and the circle group is there to assist.

Unplanned Day with our Friends

By Carol Stehly

The only thing on my calendar today was an eye appointment. I was heading out when I received an urgent text from Aine saying that we would be on our way to Bloomington at noon, to help out the Karzai family, Gul and Mina. On the way I stopped to pick up the used vacuum cleaner that Julies had secured, fresh fruit, and some cleaning supplies.

Today Gul, meeting us at the door and always gracious to help with groceries, had an agenda. Alight, one of our refugee partners, had dropped off a television the previous week and Gul needed help setting it up. The apartment was already equipped with cable, but an antenna somehow was part of the story and our technical experience was, at best, limited. We called our tech guy (Carol's husband) who guided us enough so that eventually we got a picture and some sound. We promised a return trip to finish the job.

Next on Gul's list: the vacuum.

Next on our list: food.

VEAP (Volunteers Enlisted to Assist People) is a wonderful resource for families living in the south metro. This non-profit has fed our refugee friends with healthy, fresh food, many times without an appointment and always with wide smiles and a warm welcome. We got the Karzai family registered with VEAP, the car was filled with food for the coming week, but before we could go home we had to go to Target—the one word Mina was happy to repeat as often as needed. She purchased a small wristwatch and I noticed that she glanced at it several times on the way home. Something to call her own, something for us to remember the day.

Refugee Resources & Local Organizations

International Institute www.iimn.org. St. Paul non-profit working with refugees and immigrants on housing, jobs, education, and community building.

Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota www.ilcm.org Information on ways to assist immigrants and refugees in Minnesota.

Alight www.wearealight.org Formerly the American Refugee Committee, Alight provides health care, shelter, protection, and economic opportunity to people throughout the world.

Lutheran Social Services www.lssmn.org Working to offer help to new Minnesotans.

Minnesota Council of Churches www.mnchurches.org Inter-faith non-profit offering refugee support.

Learn more about the Refugee Crisis

Center for Migration Studies of New York www.cmsny.org Offers US policy updates, Catholic and Faith-based updates and news relating to refugees and immigrants.

Vatican News www.vaticannews.va The latest news surrounding refugees and migrants.

International Refugee Assistance Project www.refugeerights.org Background and news on refugee issues.

“Rashid”

By Michael Lien

As we became more and more familiar with the customs of our Afghan friends, the issues of gender became obvious and they were significant in how we might interact. Men in our mentor group from St. Mary's soon realized that their contact would be restricted to the Afghan men or to Afghan couples (when both men and women were present). As a man from St. Mary's, I found myself devoting most of my time and attention to “Rashid” who I thought was single. Over time, our relationship grew and eventually he told me about how he had worked as a medic in the Afghan Army and then later with the Americans. When the Taliban took over the country in 2021, Rashid's life was in extreme danger, and he was evacuated by the American Army. Other men in his family were also very involved with the American armed forces, but when there was no room for them on the final evacuation flights, they found themselves “on the run” in Afghanistan. His brother and an uncle were eventually caught and killed by the Taliban while others have still avoided capture. As our relationship and trust grew, Rashid finally told me that he is NOT single. He has a wife and five small children stranded in Afghanistan. He has never even seen his youngest daughter! Over the past 2-1/2 years, they have been moving from place to place in order to avoid capture by the Taliban. Rashid tries to communicate with them over WhatsApp each day that their location is in a place with wi-fi. As soon as he finally receives his official asylum status, he will be able to apply for Family Re-unification. That process should have been completed long ago, but processes are extremely backed-up as the US Congress has still not passed the “Afghan Adjustment Act”.

THE AFGHAN ADJUSTMENT ACT: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT IS ESSENTIAL

In early August 2022, the Afghan Adjustment Act was introduced into Congress. This legislation would give Afghans, now under ‘humanitarian parole’ protection, a pathway to lawful permanent residency. This “adjustment” would clear the way for those who helped our military during the two -decades-long war to make their home in the United States. This bi-partisan legislation echoes adjustment acts that Congress historically passed for every other generation of U.S. wartime refugees. This is our opportunity to bring safety and the fullness of life to those who put their lives in danger to protect our troops.

How can you help? You can write to your senators and representative to urge them to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act quickly. For much more information and a sample message to send to you legislators, visit <https://tinyurl.com/lettertolegislators>. PBS Newshour also has stories of newly arrived Afghans that mirrors our own experiences with our refugee friends. To watch visit: <https://tinyurl.com/afghan-stories>.

Do Grapes Belong In the Freezer?

By Carol Stehly



Whenever we visit our refugee families, we can be sure of their hospitality, we learn new things and are humbled by the effort that our friends put forth, learning from us as well. One Saturday Aine and I went to see Karzai and Mina after they had called on WhatsApp to let us know they'd like a visit and that it was urgent. We are sure to bring basic necessities along whenever we visit, some things are a treat, like ice cream and chocolate, but also fruit, bread, and, in this case, baby formula. We unpacked everything and went back to the car to be sure it was all in. Looking around for the formula and fruit and not seeing it when we returned from the car, we asked what had happened to it. Mina proudly opened the door to the freezer, where all the groceries, grapes included, had landed.

The week before, we had helped bring little baby Laila home from the hospital and were eager to see how she and Mom were doing. The hospital had supplied the little 2-ouncer baby bottles and, as far as we knew (and we were correct) those were still the ones they were using. Aine brought some larger bottles along with the formula and we watched as Karzai looked with some bewilderment at the directions on the package. We drew a picture of a bottle and a scoop and demonstrated how to prepare the formula for little Laila. After each of us had had a turn at holding the baby and putting things away, Aine and I prepared to leave. Well, now we understood the urgency. Mina was simply and deeply lonely and she did not want us to leave. She had had a Caesarean section and was physically weak and emotionally drained. At 20 years old and very far from home, with no one nearby who spoke Pashto, Mina just needed some wise women around her. We promised to come and see her and Laila soon, but we knew that we could not replace the love and family that Karzai and Mina had left behind.

After another round of baby cuddling, we stood up to leave. We exited with the usual very gracious thank you from Karzai and Mina but felt a little sad and a little empty. We knew our limits. We do not quite understand their life experiences, and yet we have connected with a special place in our hearts and will continue to be the advocates this little family needs to bring them to a good life here in Minnesota. As we left, Karzai said "I love Minnesota".

Prayer by Pope Francis for the 108th World Day of Migrants and Refugees



God, Father Almighty,
grant us the grace to work tirelessly
for justice, solidarity and peace,
so that all your children may enjoy
the freedom to choose whether to migrate or to stay.

Grant us the courage to denounce
all the horrors of our world,
and to combat every injustice
that mars the beauty of your children
and the harmony of our common home.

Sustain us by the power of your Spirit,
so that we can reflect your tender love
to every migrant whom you place in our path,
and to spread in hearts and in every situation
the culture of encounter and of care.

Acknowledgement

By Kathryn Lien

There have been many along the way, without whom this work of welcome would not have been as warm and loving as it has been. First of all, we want to thank the parish for nudging JPOC to reach out to those whose lives were ravaged by the war in Afghanistan. It was this request that turned our hearts toward refugee work. Father Talbot, with his support in preaching about the importance of welcoming the stranger, highlighted the urgency in protecting and promoting those in need. Sister Mary Kerber kept us aligned to the project at hand and, with her deep experience of working in Africa, lent us the listening ear and understanding heart we needed when things became overwhelming. Nathan Schuster has been tireless in putting together bulletin articles and updating the website. Lynn Mullin and Micah Sherwin at Lutheran Social Services have been wonderful partners in bringing hope to our friends.

Finally, we are grateful to the citizens of the cities where our refugee friends have found homes: Richfield, Bloomington, and Edina. The welcome in these places has been overwhelming, from the administrative offices at city hall, the libraries, and ice cream shops to the health clinics and pharmacies. At no time in our experience have we witnessed anything but hospitality and a willingness to help.

Our hearts are now attuned to the work of immigration and refuge. Our lives have been changed. The work we have accomplished is a prelude to our ongoing effort to help settle migrants, immigrants, and refugees so that they, like our forebears, may come to know the satisfaction of building a new life in a country made up of origin stories just like theirs. We would love to have you join us.

Thank you for your Support!

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Your support and dedication have truly made a difference in bringing this booklet to life. Thank you for your generosity!

