



From Afghanistan to Aurora

by Sherri Kimmel

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*“Nothing compares with being a refugee; you are robbed of context and you flail about, searching for self-definition.”
—Peter C. Newman, journalist and refugee from Nazi Germany*

This was not the parting I’d imagined. Actually, I hadn’t really envisioned a parting—yet here we were in early September, enfolded in a tight embrace, Najiba’s face pressed into my shoulder. As she clutched me tighter and sobbed loudly, I patted her back, murmuring, “It’s okay, it’s okay.” We held each other far longer than we ever had all those times over the last 18 months when we’d exchanged quick hugs as I came and went from her home.

Before long, tears were streaming down my face, too. I had to beat a quick retreat, too rattled to retrieve the yellow snow shovel propped outside the townhouse. I’d given it to her husband, Naser, last winter after our only significant snowfall. For the last two days, he’d been asking members of our Church World Service welcome team to take back items we’d donated.

Even though they were taking just the bare necessities for the cross-country move, they were leaving with more

than they had when they arrived in the United States in September 2021 as refugees from a chaotic Afghanistan totting an infant, a three-year-old, and four duffel bags.

Now, on Sept. 11, 2023, they were leaving central Pennsylvania with a newborn (their third girl) in their Honda Civic that Mechanicsburg Church of the Brethren and two other local congregations had helped them purchase a year earlier. Their destination: Aurora, Colo., where several family members and former neighbors from their remote mountain village in central Afghanistan had settled.

A new mission

When I learned in August 2021 about the fall of Kabul and the desperate departure of Afghans who feared the Taliban, I immediately thought of an Afghan student whose essay I’d recently featured in *Bucknell Magazine*, which I edited. Her academic adviser, a close friend of mine, was trying desperately to find a way out for the student’s family. I offered to do what I could, but all avenues were closed. If not her family, I wondered, were there others I could help rescue?

Then I thought about the Vietnamese refugee family my home church, Brookville (Ohio) Church of the

Brethren, had sponsored 50 years earlier during the ill-fated Vietnam War. I remembered how the Truong family had thrived in our community with the support of our church family. Knowing the relationship our denomination has with Church World Service, I reached out to the CWS Lancaster (Pa.) office.

CWS was one of nine resettlement agencies the US government tapped to resettle the 76,000 Afghan allies flooding into our country. Conveniently for me, CWS decided to open a new office in nearby Harrisburg to help handle the largest influx of refugees since the Vietnam War.

I approached our church leadership about sponsoring a family, simultaneously using professional and personal contacts to enlist two other local congregations—Grantham Brethren in Christ and Mechanicsburg Presbyterian. In September 2021, our new 10-member CWS welcome team held its first meeting. We began ironing out our organizational structure and started collecting furniture, household goods, and other items for the yet-unknown refugees we would be supporting. All we needed was a family.

When the time came, we had less than a week's notice, but we were ready for the family to arrive. All we knew was that the parents were in their mid-20s and had two small children.

A fresh start

Representatives from each of the three congregations joined newly hired CWS Harrisburg director Alex Swan at Harrisburg International Airport on Feb. 5, 2022. A van pulled up and the family stepped out into a new life.

For several months the family had been in a holding pattern, housed with 14,500 other newly evacuated Afghans at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in central New Jersey since Sept. 8, 2021. Naser, who joined the Afghan National Army in 2018, was a security guard at the US Embassy in Kabul when the Taliban swept into power. His duties, which included guarding Taliban prisoners, made him a prime target of the new regime.

His wife, Najiba, even before the Taliban takeover had received threatening phone calls because of Naser's work with the US Army. As conditions deteriorated, she bundled up the children and left their remote village in central Afghanistan for the perilous, two-day journey to Kabul—leaving behind her widowed mother and a disabled brother. The family made it through the chaos at the Kabul airport and joined the 125,000 other Afghans who were airlifted to safety, among 600 crammed onto US Airforce C-17 trans-



Sherril Kinnead

port planes. After a short stay at a military base in Qatar, the family arrived in Philadelphia.

As we made our way to the Airbnb that CWS Harrisburg had arranged as temporary lodging, I watched Najiba and Naser smile, pointing out the van window at the cornfields lining the road. Until then, all they'd seen of America was the military base and the highways leading to Harrisburg. At the Airbnb, Naser turned to me and asked where his eldest daughter's future school was located. Knowing the Taliban regarded females as second-class citizens, unworthy of education, I was impressed by his concern for her. (Two years after the Taliban takeover, a *Washington Post* editorial referred to the repression of women and girls as "gender apartheid.")

Lifelong relationships

Said Swan about our welcome team, which was the first he had worked with for CWS: "Over the next three months, these dedicated volunteers provided critical care and support in coordination with CWS Harrisburg and the Afghan Placement and Assistance (APA) program. At the end of the APA program period, the volunteers continued to walk alongside the family, forming lifelong relationships and sharing profound memories. As a direct result of the love and attention the volunteers provided, the family did well and contributed in so many ways to their new community."

The next year was a crash course on refugee resettlement as the welcome team assisted with a lease agreement that the Church of the Brethren co-signed, résumé writing, and job searches. Within six weeks of arrival, Naser had a job as a fast-food restaurant cook, riding his donated bike to work, and was enrolled in a class for English as a Second Language (ESL). That summer, Church of the Brethren

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members not only taught Naser to drive, using our own cars, but—with members of the partner congregations—also guided the family’s car purchase and accompanied them to a myriad of medical and dental appointments.

Despite the endless list of worthy causes during that period of time in early 2023, from the war in Ukraine to the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, the welcome team convincingly made the case to their three congregations to help purchase the car and help pay for insurance, extensive dental care, and other necessities. We hosted receptions to introduce the couple and their children to our church families. We provided regular updates on these unfailingly grateful and generous people who would not let us leave their tidy home without accepting a few cups of tea, almonds they brought from their own trees in Afghanistan, and often a fragrant and delicately spiced Afghan chicken-and-vegetable

stew accented with Najiba’s delicious flatbread.

Still, there were seemingly insurmountable roadblocks, in particular the \$8,000 needed for an immigration lawyer to process a green-card application. After much searching I found a pro bono lawyer, Christina Szoke-Luo of Compass Immigration Legal Services in Harrisburg, and took the couple to meet with her.

Making the case to stay

To help Szoke-Luo prepare their case, I spent hours at the family’s kitchen table, carefully questioning Naser about the threats he and his family had already received and the danger they would face if forced to return home. I learned just how much their religious and ethnic status factored in their endangerment. As Hazaras, they are a persecuted ethnic group. They also are Shiites, a minority branch of Islam that

Hosting Vlad and Zhenya

by Frank Ramirez

Like many congregations, Union Center Church of the Brethren in Nappanee, Ind., emerged from the pandemic a little puzzled about what would come next. However, deacon co-chair Rodney Bontrager, who later served as board chair, encouraged study of the book *The Post-Quarantine Church* by Thom S. Rainer. As a result of this study, it was decided to begin a new focus on prayer life and sponsoring refugees.

Memorial funds were used, designated by Juanita and Carlyle Frederick, who took part in the Starvation Experiment during his time as a conscientious objector during World War II. An apartment was obtained then furnished and stocked with food, linens, and paper products. Members of the congregation underwent background checks and were divided into various specialties for aiding refugees including finance, transportation, language education, and medical assistance.

This past spring, Jennie Ramirez,

one of the coordinators of the Relocation Committee and the primary contact for the refugee family, drove from Indiana to Dulles International Airport to greet Vlad and Zhenya. The couple come from a picturesque town in the center of Ukraine. They had to enter the US at that particular airport because they brought along Marcel, a ten-year-old Yorkie.

Vlad, who has a college degree in construction management, brought with him a variety of construction skills. Zhenya has a degree in social work. They speak Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish, and quickly began to speak English, thanks to online lessons and specifically the help of Phyllis Davis of Union Center. “Vlad likes to learn rules while Zhenya devours vocabulary,” Davis noted. “This makes for an effective learning team.” It’s been hard work, but, as she said, “Good humor gets us over some difficult spots of understanding.” English can be especially difficult to learn. “The answer to some questions (about both the lan-

guage and culture) has become, ‘It’s just tradition.’”

A sister congregation, Nappanee Church of the Brethren, expressed interest in partnering with Union Center. The circle was widened to include them in the process. Church member Janet Shaver said, “They [Vlad and Zhenya] are really teaching me what it’s like to come to a new country.” Resettlement coordinator Gene Hollenberg added, “The connection with the Nappanee church makes our support even stronger.”

Vlad and Zhenya soon had jobs at a local cabinet shop making high-end kitchen cabinets. They opened a bank account and, with the help of church members, began to familiarize themselves with the area. They also began attending Union Center regularly, particularly enjoying the praise band.

Both admit that they miss parents and friends, but they keep in touch online. Asked what they think of northern Indiana, which is largely rural, Vlad said he enjoys it. “The people here

often is not tolerated by the majority Sunnis.

When Naser received his summons for a green-card interview just two months after submitting the voluminous paperwork—a very brief time that is unheard-of for such applications—Szoke-Luo said the strength of their application had expedited the vetting process.

On Feb. 10, 2023, the family piled into my RAV4, Naser

wedged between two car seats in the bench seat behind me so his pregnant wife could ride more comfortably up front. I nervously clutched the steering wheel, praying that the Pennsylvania Turnpike would be kind to us on this most important journey.

Prayers answered, we arrived at the US Citizenship and Immigration Services Office in Philadelphia just five days

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Frank Ramirez

smile all the time.” Zhenya agreed. “Indiana is typical America,” she said. “I watch American movies in Ukraine, I see farms and sunshine. I like farms. Americans are very friendly,” Zhenya said. “We have made many friends. We go to other people’s homes for meals, and they visit in our home, too.”

During their free time, the couple

has traveled with church members to Lake Michigan and other local lakes where they have gone swimming and used jet skis. Recently, they took part in the Camp Mack Challenge Course, and Vlad was one of only two individuals to complete all the obstacles.


“I like America because Americans help people from another country,”

Zhenya said. “I feel like home because people understand me, and people love Ukrainians. We are very grateful to all the people who helped us to be here.”

“This climate is like home,” Vlad added. “Sometimes I think we are in Ukraine.”

Hosting a refugee family has been an educational and spiritual experience for both churches, Union Center and Nappanee, said Jennie Ramirez. “We’re all in this together and we need to help each other as much as we can. This is what Jesus wants us to do right now.”

Hollenberg noted that “there is a renewed spirit for our congregation. As we have come to know Vlad and Zhenya better, we have learned about the difficulty of life in Ukraine at this time.”

Vlad is now working for a local construction company, using the skills he developed back in Ukraine. And yes, Marcel is adjusting just fine, too. 

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past their one-year anniversary as residents of our community. The nerve-wracking buildup to the interview was for naught, as the government agent asked just a few cursory questions, then said they would receive their green cards in two weeks. Naser, Najiba, and I were so stunned we stared at the agent, then at each other, mouths agape. We celebrated with lunch at an Indian restaurant and a visit to the nearby Philadelphia Zoo.

Two weeks later, when the green cards arrived, Naser asked me to craft an invitation for a thank-you party for the welcome team and other church volunteers who had helped them reach this milestone. Najiba and several other Afghan women who had been resettled nearby prepared a veritable feast, and the welcome team delighted in this

chance to celebrate the family's success. They were among only 4,500 of the 76,000 Afghans evacuated to the US who had achieved permanent residency status by March 2023, according to a report in *The Guardian* newspaper. Naser thanked the group in his native Dari language, while a former colonel in the Afghan Army translated.

Life-saving work

Knowing that they now could remain in our country and apply for citizenship in five years allayed my worry that the family would be returned to Afghanistan, where the Taliban has hunted down and murdered former US allies. The work of our team and the support of our churches likely saved their lives, as their authorized stay in the US would have expired on Sept.

Hope started this adventure

by Anna Lisa Gross and Leslie Sperry

Radical hospitality and care for foreigners are loud, frequent commands throughout scripture. Beacon Heights Church of the Brethren strives to heed God's call in many ways, and congregants are now supporting a young family's resettlement in Fort Wayne, Ind.

Beacon Heights has a long history of supporting refugees and asylum seekers. Last spring, several members felt a strong calling to support refugees, many of whom have spent years in refugee camps.

A group of about seven people from the congregation began meeting in early 2023 to explore avenues for helping a refugee family come to Indiana. The group chose to work with Welcome Corps, a program of the federal government.

The Welcome Corps is being hailed as the "boldest innovation in refugee resettlement in 40 years." The program empowers everyday Americans to help refugees arriving in the United States through the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). It's a unique service opportunity for Americans inspired to

help those seeking freedom and safety, and in turn, to strengthen our own communities. Volunteers form a private sponsor group of five or more people and pledge to support the initial resettlement needs of a refugee or refugee family during the first 90 days of their arrival.

First chapters

Extensive research on education, transportation, child care, interpretation, employment opportunities, and housing was the first chapter of the Beacon Heights welcoming group's work. Raising enough money for at least 90 days of all of a family's expenses was another.

The group raised more than \$15,000, including \$5,000 from a Brethren Faith in Action Fund grant through the Church of the Brethren denomination, and very generous support from the congregation. In addition to the funds, we received many donations to furnish a house and meet the physical needs of the refugee family.

Our small group of volunteers learned first-hand about the challenges of finding rental housing in our com-

munity. Even with months of rent money guaranteed, the steps for securing a safe place to live, and the hoops to jump through were daunting, and took a couple of frustrating months.

All of these compassionate efforts were completed before knowing the people we would be welcoming, how many would be in the family, or where they would be coming from—really very little about who our new neighbors would be! As their arrival date approached, we learned more. Meshack, 29, and his wife, Aimerance, 25, are originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo but have spent most of their lives in a refugee camp in Tanzania. Their two children, ages four and one (the latter born on Christmas Day 2022), had spent their entire lives in the refugee camp.

The welcome, and what's next

A group from Beacon Heights gathered at the Fort Wayne airport in September, with welcome signs and curious smiles, to greet the family who had traveled for two days through many countries and time zones. Both Meshack and Aimerance left many


7, 2023—five days before they moved to Colorado.

One volunteer wrote to me, summing up the thoughts of those who had helped the family: “We were enriched by the experience, and I wish many in the US who disparage immigrants could know people like these folks.”

Another volunteer reflected on the bond that the three otherwise unrelated churches had formed: “It’s been a fruitful time of partnership with Naser and Najiba—and with our team. I feel grateful for making and deepening our connections among our team. I pray that God will bless the family as they go out from here and to their new home.”

What we accomplished exemplifies the Church of the Brethren’s ambition to be “Jesus in the Neighborhood.” It also fulfills a historic charge of the church. As my congrega-

tion’s interim pastor, Jim Benedict, said: “The Brethren have been involved with refugee resettlement for a long time. What we often forget, however, is that our spiritual ancestors were once refugees themselves. Thanks to the kindness of people in the Netherlands, many [of the first] Brethren found refuge there for nine years before coming to Pennsylvania. Mennonites and others welcomed and helped the Brethren immigrants get established in the new world.

“To welcome others, like Najiba, Naser, and their children, was a way to honor those who welcomed our ancestors and a way to honor God, who welcomes all.” 

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siblings and other family members to come to the US, as well as many friends from the refugee camp.

They now keep in touch with family and friends through WhatsApp, as they navigate a truly foreign world, lan-


guage, and customs. Along with getting to know and become friends with Meshack and Aimerance, we have discovered a much wider circle of immigrants who migrated earlier to Fort Wayne. They also provide support and

continuity for Meshack and Aimerance.

Meshack was an influential leader in the refugee camp. This experience will be very useful as he begins working in food service at a local hospital. The older child is attending Beacon Heights Preschool, and Aimerance cares for the baby full-time. We love the beautiful way she sings while cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children.

Hopes and dreams

Our hope in starting this adventure was to be able to offer a safe, welcoming environment where the family could begin a new life and follow their dreams. Meshack has larger dreams of being able to provide safety and support for all the millions of refugees around the world, and to eliminate the conflict that causes people to leave their homes and seek safety.

We continue to pray for all to have a safe home and community, and freedom to pursue their dreams. 

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