

Afghan refugees are learning to call Rhode Island home

By Zane Wolfgang · November 20, 2023

‘Rhode Island is the best, most welcoming state’

WEST WARWICK — Basri Darabi’s face is furled in concentration as she carefully constructs her sentence: “Akhtar is my husband.”

She breaks into a beaming smile as she is given a clap for her perfect grammar and word choice – she and an Ocean State Stories reporter are using a common sentence structure to explain familial relations. Basri continues down the line, talking about her five sons, one daughter, and two young grandchildren.

Though the modest sensibility of her traditional Afghan culture will not permit capturing them in a photograph, Basri has very kind eyes. She switches to her native language of Dari, gesturing at a variety of homemade food she has put out on the table for her guests. The individual words are indecipherable, but the message is quite clear: *you had better eat this food I made for you.*

There is always food, and it is always accompanied by a Thermos of hot green tea which she periodically rises to open and top off everybody’s cups. Basri’s generosity and ready smile bring smiles to everybody else in the room as she serves a stuffed, fried Afghani flatbread called *bolani*. The will and ability of this woman to learn a new language in her mid-fifties, despite like many Afghan women of her generation never having been taught to read and write in her own language, is impressive.

After displaying her surprisingly extensive vocabulary by way of listing the ingredients in her *bolani* filling – onions, carrots, potatoes, coriander – Basri pantomimes writing in her notebook and explains, “In Afghanistan, me, no.” She turns to gesture at her 22-year-old daughter Ayesha, who is sitting on the couch next to her in their modest apartment in West Warwick’s Arctic village. “Ayesha, Mohammed, yes. But me, no.”

Ayesha, who takes a weekly English lesson on Saturday mornings at the Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island in south Providence, can speak more English than her mom and dad, and she often helps them muddle through in the group lessons they take together at home.

A talented seamstress who can sew together an evening gown in less than a day – she made a beautiful blue dress replete with sparkly sequins as a gift for her English instructor at Dorcas, which her mom proudly showed off on her smartphone – Ayesha works at Pease Awning & Sunroom in West Warwick, where she sews industrial canvas products. Mohammed, Ayesha’s 21-year-old brother, works night shifts at a restaurant, and their father Akhtar works at Job Lot, sometimes hitching a ride into Providence with a friend and sometimes patiently picking his way there on the multi-bus RIPTA commute. Like his wife, Akhtar is quick with a smile and a laugh.

Though there are clearly different expectations around gender roles in Afghan versus American culture, Akhtar seems fine with his family interacting in mixed gender situations and seems comfortable with his daughter working full time to help support the family. The Darabis, like the nearly 80,000 people who were evacuated from Afghanistan in the chaotic airlift operation which took place in 2021 after the United States military withdrew from its multi-decade occupation of the country, are figuring how to assimilate themselves into America’s cultural landscape while also retaining the culture of the land they left behind.

Alexandria Nylen, who completed her PhD in political science at University of Massachusetts – Amherst and is now a research faculty member at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, published a [report](#) this past April on Afghan refugees in Rhode Island which drew on extensive interviews with 32 Afghans currently living in Rhode Island. She and the other report authors identified some challenges Afghan evacuees face in their post-resettlement lives.

“The common themes that I identified through the interviews and then validated with quantitative data [from mental health surveys] are deep feelings of loss and being uprooted,” explained Nylen. “People left entire lives that they had built up for decades, and they had to immediately start over in the US from scratch, so there is great trauma in this population.”

She said family separation was a major source of anxiety and stress for almost every person she interviewed, stating, “The vast majority here had to be separated from family members...and most want to bring family members to the US. There is a lot of concern and stress for family members left behind, especially if those people had worked with the US government. There are a lot of anecdotes from people about their family members being targeted by the Taliban for retaliation because they worked for the US, so there are concerns about family safety in addition to simply wanting family reunification.”

The Darabis are a separated family: while four of them, along with about 250 other Afghan refugees, now call Rhode Island home, four Darabi brothers are still in Afghanistan, including one who is married and has two young children. Despite their far-flung point of origin, the Darabis’ connection to Ocean State Stories, and their connections to the state’s broader web of refugee service providers and recipients, constitute a classic Rhode Island chain of personal connections – Ocean State Stories met them through Mary Howe, a journalistic colleague who writes for [local nonprofit news outfit ecoRI News](#). Howe, an animated teacher who clearly loves learning from the Darabis at least as much as she loves teaching them, has been tutoring all four of them in English since June. She was connected with the family through a friend who volunteers with the Refugee Dream Center, a Providence-based organization which provides resettlement services and post-resettlement extended services for Rhode Island refugees from around the world.

The Refugee Dream Center was founded eight years ago by Omar Bah, who was himself a refugee from Gambia when he first arrived in Rhode Island without much of an idea of what the place had in store for him. Bah laughed when he reminisced about receiving his resettlement placement while living in a refugee camp in Ghana, explaining, “I actually thought it was an island – I created some drama at the office that was helping me because I thought they were sending me to an island. They had to show me a map to help me understand.”

Bah said he feels Rhode Island is a uniquely good destination for refugees to the United States, especially in comparison to larger and more rural states.

“One unique characteristic is the small size,” he said, “and that small size makes it easy to navigate, to get around, and to easily adjust and belong. Two, it is located between two major American cities, with Boston to the north and New York to the south – it is not as isolated as other states like Idaho or Utah.”

His center now serves over 3,000 refugees across the state, including approximately 500 new arrivals who are primarily from Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (while many Americans are familiar with the situation in Afghanistan due to the American military’s long-term presence and abrupt withdrawal, fewer may be aware of the massive humanitarian crisis in the Congo, where multinational mining companies fund local militias to violently displace people from land over valuable mineral deposits). The Refugee Dream Center also worked closely with Alexandria Nylen and Brown University’s Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies on the aforementioned report about Afghan evacuees, and Bah is listed as a co-author.

When Bah arrived in Rhode Island from Gambia via a refugee camp in Ghana, his caseworker at the International Institute of Rhode Island (now the Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island) was Keith Cooper, who went on to start a social enterprise called [Beautiful Day](#). Beautiful Day, which produces and sells food products including granola, coffee, and most recently, their Syrian chef Saad Awad’s signature hummus brand, offers small cohorts of refugees from Afghanistan and many other countries valuable workforce skills training, including individualized English language learning plans facilitated by an ESL consultant, over the course of an intensive three-month program in their industrial kitchen on Benefit street in Providence.

Rebecca Garland, Beautiful Day’s associate director, explained the company’s cohorts generally accept refugees who need more intensive language and skills training than others who are more socially and professionally prepared to receive and immediately accept job placements through the state’s official resettlement agencies.

“Many refugees who come here are able to find jobs, and I find that to be pretty extraordinary because of the language barriers and cultural barriers they face,” she said, “but there is a subset of refugees who face a number of challenges, and many of the Afghans have these challenges.”

She listed lack of English language skills, lack of native language literacy, lack of transferable skills (i.e. a very skilled goat herder or farmer may still need to acquire totally new skills for Rhode Island’s job market), advanced age, culturally rigid gender roles, and of course PTSD and trauma as overlapping barriers to entry for some Afghan refugees trying to figure out a path to economic stability in America.

Garland explained, “There’s nine organizations throughout the country that are responsible for allocating refugees to different states. Dorcas works with one of them, Catholic Social services works with another, and Refugee Dream Center works with a third... They provide all the initial services for refugees, and they also provide job development and placement... For the ones they cannot place because of those barriers I mentioned, they come here.”

Beautiful Day also runs a weekly coed youth program for roughly the duration of the academic year, which includes an internship placement at a local business. Partners include Seven Stars Bakery, Harvest Kitchen, Farm Fresh RI, Wright’s Creamery, and Rhed’s Hot Sauce, and some of the interns end up receiving job offers from the partner businesses at the conclusion of the program.

The youth program’s last two cohorts have included a solid contingent of teenage boys from Afghanistan. One boy from last year’s cohort, a 16-year-old named Nasrat Ullah, recruited five or six of his Afghan peers for this year’s group. With a full academic year at Central High School in Providence and a full year of Beautiful Day youth programming under his belt, Nasrat’s English is noticeably stronger than the more newly arrived boys, and his social confidence seems to be commensurate with his improved language abilities.

Nasrat, who is employed by Beautiful Day to sell their products at local farmers’ markets, serves as something of a mentor and a role model to the younger guys. Unlike the Darabis, who speak Dari, he and the other boys in the Beautiful Day program speak a language called Pashto. While Afghanistan boasts linguistic diversity to the tune of 40 distinct languages, Dari and Pashto are the two most commonly spoken tongues in the country, and both are related to Persian. However, a huge benefit of the Beautiful Day program is that the youth come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which forces the kids to practice their English in order to form friendships with peers from places as varied as Tanzania, Syria and the Dominican Republic.

Nasrat, who loves all sports but particularly favors cricket, said there are five other boys and four girls from Afghanistan with him at Central High School, but as his English improves through ESL programs at Central and at Beautiful Day, he is making more friends from different backgrounds. “I have a lot of friends at Central High School now – a lot [who speak] English, a lot of Spanish, a lot of countries. Not just Afghanistan people – I try [to meet] other friends too.”

True to Nasrat’s experience of being able to meet a diverse group of friends at school, Bah praised Rhode Island’s local population for being welcoming and inclusive, saying the [Refugee Dream Center](#) is supported by the work and donations of literally hundreds of volunteers. He also made a point of welcoming any readers interested in the center to contact them or even visit their office on Broad Street in person.

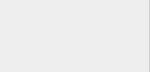
“That’s really what is special about Rhode Islanders,” said Bah. “People are welcoming, they are curious, they want to know [about their refugee neighbors’ cultures], they care...and it is such a diverse state. It is small, but I am amazed how diverse it is. I don’t know as much about other states, but in my experience I would say local Rhode Islanders are very welcoming and Rhode Island is the best, most welcoming state.”

ecoRI News journalist Mary Howe teaches Akhtar Darabi English in his West Warwick home – Zane Wolfgang / Ocean State Stories

Omar Bah – Submitted photo

Nasrat Ullah, left, and other teens in the Beautiful Day youth program gather in the kitchen – Zane Wolfgang / Ocean State Stories

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