A Newcomer's Journey

Raised in a family of community activists and women's rights advocates, Ahmad became a teacher and spokesperson for human rights in Afghanistan. He encouraged girls to attend his classes in English and computer sciences and supported his sisters' international development and social justice endeavours. However, defending human rights put his family at risk of retribution by the Taliban, and Ahmad had a serious decision to make. This is his story, as shared in a conversation with Sofia Berumen (Coordinator) and Jean Harrowing (volunteer) of the Anglican Diocese of Calgary Refugee Committee.*

My family was increasingly under surveillance by the Taliban because of our ethnicity—we are from Kapisa province and speak Dari, while they speak Pashto—and community activities. My father narrowly avoided a suicide bombing at the school where he was an administrator. Threats came by phone and in the mail, and I was beaten on more than one occasion by unknown assailants. At first, I didn't take the letters seriously. However, by 2017, I realized my life was in mortal danger and my only option was to flee the country.

I tried to obtain a visa for Turkey but was unsuccessful. Finally, I secured a visa for Iran where I spent several weeks arranging to be smuggled across the border into Turkey. My situation was very bad, and I lived in constant fear of being caught. It took me two weeks of walking and catching rides, holding my breath as we passed through checkpoints, to reach my goal. It was very difficult, hiking through the mountains, getting lost, sliding and tumbling down rocky slopes. At midnight one night, I became separated from my fellow travellers, all of whom spoke a different language than I did. I had trouble breathing at times and couldn't keep up. I became weak and disoriented. I had little food and the only water I drank was from streams along the way. I was terrified that I would be captured and turned in to the authorities. I almost gave up, but a local man offered me a ride on a horse, which allowed me to catch up with my group. Finally, we reached and crossed the border into Turkey. This was the beginning of the very worst time of my life.

My existence in Turkey was very constrained. I was alone for the first time in my life. I wasn't allowed to work, so the meagre wages I earned were under the table, and sometimes I was not paid at all for my labour. Growing up surrounded by my siblings, parents, extended family, and friends, I had been part of a large vibrant Afghan community. In contrast, in Turkey, I was isolated, desperately lonely, and anxious about my future. I knew I couldn't go back, but my dreams of moving forward diminished rapidly. There was no brightness in my days. I became depressed and anxious. In winter, because I couldn't afford to heat my lodgings, I froze. I had made a few friends through work, but we had little social contact. Leisure activities consisted of walking in the park. I lost my life. Years passed.

There was one tiny glimmer of hope that kept me going. My older sister Asra* was already in Canada. She stayed in touch and sent money for my survival. She was busy searching the internet and emailing anyone who might be able to help bring me to Canada. The only positive response came from the Anglican Diocese of Calgary Refugee Committee but after the initial communication, she heard nothing further and so forgot about this possibility. Much to her

surprise, years later, she heard from the Committee chairperson again, offering me a spot if Asra would sponsor me. At last, I had something to look forward to!

The application process was a long tedious one, but ultimately it was successful. With the help of the Committee and my sister, I arrived in Calgary in May 2022, five gruelling years after I had left my home. I immediately found work and attended college classes to improve my English. I was so excited and relieved to be safe, to be with family, to begin living again.

Shortly after I arrived, my parents and siblings sold all their belongings and fled to Pakistan, thus commencing their journey to Canada and safety. With the help of the Committee, they arrived in 2023, and I am overjoyed to be reunited as a family again. A few family members remain in Afghanistan, some in hiding, and we hope to find the resources to sponsor them to come to Canada as well.

Determining my goals and remaining focused on their achievement was the only way for me to endure the hardships of my ordeal. You cannot be successful unless you are willing to put 100% of your effort toward positive action.

To anyone who is considering the gift of sponsorship, I can only implore you to please help people who are stuck in a bad situation—they want to live, rather than merely exist. Please offer hope for a new life. It is an unfortunate fact that borders are made by politicians and mapmakers, but we are all human and what we have in this world is just temporary, so it is important to share with and serve others when we have the opportunity.

*names have been changed for privacy and to protect those who remain in perilous situations.

If you or your parish feel called to help displaced people, please contact the Diocesan Refugee Committee (refugee@calgary.anglican.ca). We have single women, men and families in dire need who are desperately waiting for the hope, safety and compassion of sponsorship.