STRANGER BECOMES NEIGHBOR - EPISODE 4: Bridging the Gap

Andrea Smardon: This episode contains descriptions of violence, war and trauma. Please take care when listening.

(AMBI: People in parking lot, traffic)

Andrea Smardon: It's a quiet Sunday afternoon in December, 2021, and all at once, a bunch of cars are pulling into a parking lot outside a strip mall south of Salt Lake City, and families are piling out. Many of them still wearing their church clothes, dresses and ties.

Nazifa: Oh my gosh, this is a bigger crowd than I thought!

Man: Yeah

Nazifa: Do we have more translators?

Man: Just us three.

Nazifa: Oh, just three.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa and Jennie have opened the trunks of their cars, and are pulling out large bags of flour, boxes of diapers, and whole chickens. On the pavement, volunteers are distributing everything into a couple dozen boxes. Jennie and Nazifa are trying to direct people, but it's more volunteers than they expected, and it's hard to even be heard in the flurry of activity.

Andrea Smardon (talking to Jennie): Did you help organize this?

Jennie Hua: Yes, I did organize this. Which is why it's so well organized as you can see.

Andrea Smardon (talking to Jennie): What's happening today?

Woman: Do you want us to still take two families since so many people here are just take one?

Jennie Hua: Probably not, just take one. So we are just taking boxes of food. Grocery boxes to several families in the area and also some hygiene and some cleaning kits for them just to get started.

Andrea Smardon: By this point, it's been just over three months since the evacuation in Afghanistan, and about 450 Afghans have arrived in Utah. That number is expected to double once they're all here. Jennie and Nazifa have a list of 25 Afghan families they've identified who are living all across the Salt Lake Valley. They've put the word out to Jennie's connections in the LDS Church, It's what they call a flash service project. The idea is that volunteers will load the supplies into their cars and fan out to deliver them.

Andrea Smardon (talking to Jennie):
So why did you want to organize this and what were you seeing?

Jennie Hua: So a few of us went out and saw a family, they only had rice and oil. And when I saw that I just couldn't sleep that night. And I thought I need to do something to help and I need help to do that. So I just sent a word out to come and help and we got a lot of people.

Andrea Smardon: Utahns, led by the state's governor, have said they want to be a welcoming community to the new Afghan arrivals. But by this point, the systems in place to resettle them are strained to the max. Realizing the limits of what they can do alone, Jennie and Nazifa have called in reinforcements. It appears they have more than 25 groups of helpers, and only about 4 translators to go with them.

Dane: Is there a family that would like to go that has children that would that would like to take a family with four children, a mom and a dad?

Man: Sure.

Dane: Come on down here to the end.

Andrea Smardon: Many people want to help, but figuring out how isn't always so easy. This episode is about what it takes to bridge that distance between the wish to be helpful and actually helping. In this case, it's not a straightforward path. Jennie and Nazifa are about to test the limits of what they can do.

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Andrea Smardon, and this is Stranger Becomes Neighbor, Episode 4 Bridging the Gap

[MUSIC ENDS]

Andrea Smardon: When the first Afghans were arriving in Utah back in October 2021, Gov. Spencer Cox held a press conference at the state capitol.

Spencer Cox: This is truly a unique and exceptional situation unlike really any other in our nation's history. We have so many generous and caring Utahns that have expressed their desire to help.

Andrea Smardon: He reaffirmed the state's commitment to welcome the new arrivals with open arms. And he announced a public-private partnership called The Afghan Community Fund.

Spencer Cox: The Afghan Community Fund is an opportunity for businesses and individuals to donate what they can, and know their money will go directly to helping those Afghans that are resettling in Utah.

Andrea Smardon: Widow Jenny Taylor urged people to donate. Her husband Major Brent Taylor served in the army national guard and was killed while he was deployed in Afghanistan in 2018.

Jenny Taylor: He loved the Afghan people. And I know it is an honor of his life to have served, fought, bled and even died, trying to give them and their children the same freedom and opportunity he and I hope to give to our 7 children. Now please, Utah, open your arms, open your hearts, open your pocketbooks, and join me and our governor and the rest of this state in saying welcome to the United States of America, welcome to the great state of Utah, and welcome home. Thank you. (Applause)

Andrea Smardon: They were asked to open their hearts as well as their wallets, and Utahns responded. By December, In just over a month after the announcement of the fund, businesses and private donors in the state had pledged almost a million dollars for the effort.

But even as the donations were flowing in, Jennie and Nazifa found 16-year-old Baran with her sister and 4-year-old niece cold and alone.

Baran: It was a snowy weather. There was no power, no heat. And this apartment was dark, completely dark.

Andrea Smardon: They found others surviving on rice and oil.

Jennie Hua: I'm like, I just can't believe this is happening. I cannot believe that people are going hungry. And I have to help them. So I'm like, How many more people need food today, this week, and I can't get to them by myself.

Andrea Smardon: So why the disconnect? If we're raising a million dollars, why are people left in the cold and going hungry? Around that same time in December, I called Aden Batar of Catholic Community Services. He said in a span of just 3 months,-they had resettled more people than they had over the previous three years. Under normal circumstances, a typical case load is 25 families per case manager. Now each staff member was handling 50 families.

They were down to a skeleton crew since they lost staff when refugee numbers dropped to historic lows and budgets were decimated. They had plans to double the number of case managers, hire more job developers and interpreters. They were also seeking help from legal professionals, since most of these new arrivals had yet to apply for asylum. But all of this takes time.

While the agencies were scrambling to meet basic needs, they didn't have a lot of bandwidth to adapt their volunteer programs, which were designed to operate under a more manageable flow of refugees, not this kind of emergency situation. Many people offered to help, but Batar admitted that in the beginning, there were more people interested in volunteering than they could manage.

Batar: Managing volunteers require a lot of manpower and a lot of time and, you know, we only had two staff members, managing all the volunteers the volunteers at that time, who came to us and wanting to help did a lot for us, they were transporting people, they were interpreting, they were coming to our office, helping our staff with the paperwork, going to the airport, helping us with the, you know, pickups, because every day we have people coming in at the airport, people were putting them into hotels, they needed food. Volunteers play really a major role, even though managing was really a little bit tough at the time. Yeah, I think we got more volunteers than we could handle

Andrea Smardon: Meanwhile, people like Jennie Hua had chosen to bypass the resettlement agencies' volunteer programs, and find their own way to help.
As someone with a close-up view into the experience of the new arrivals, I wondered how she thought Utah was doing.

Andrea Smardon (talking to Jennie): You know, the governor made clear, early on that Utah was going to be a welcoming community for Afghan arrivals. Do you think we're achieving that? And what, what does it mean to be a welcoming community? And is it happening?

Jennie Hua: I think that we could do a lot better job than we have done and are doing right now.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie says she's been reflecting on this idea of what it means to welcome the stranger. Just when she started to meet the first Afghans arriving in Utah, she read an article in National Geographic magazine by Paul Salopek who had been traversing the globe on foot. Jennie couldn't stop thinking about the author's visit to some refugees from Syria living in a mountain hut in Armenia.

Jennie Hua: He knocked on their door and they said, Wait, wait, wait, wait. And so he waited, and could hear them behind the door. And they were preparing a meal for him, he said, of like cucumbers and salt and stale flatbread. And they said, Okay, come in, and they had this meal. And they, and they placed it on, on a sheet of newspaper for a plate. And, and didn't sit down the whole time and kept trying to say here have more have more, and their whole earthly belongings could fit into two suitcases. And yet, they fed him as he was a traveler passing by. He said that he was a something to the effect of he was stunned to silence for miles by the generosity of these Syrian refugees.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie says she read this article shortly after she met Sima who had served in the Afghan military with US Special Forces.

Jennie Hua: And I read that at the same time that I was finding out that you know, my friend didn't have shoes. And that you know, she was desperate for help for her baby. I have been meeting more people who have not had a proper amount of food when they've arrived, or a meal, maybe from their own country.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie thought about the Afghan arrivals here in her community and how they would welcome her into their hotel rooms or sparsely furnished apartments.

Jennie Hua: You know, I bring them something and they say, oh, sit down, sit down, sit down, and bring me some nuts and, and raisins on a tray. And yet they have almost nothing. They are so gracious. And we are, are not doing a super job of being gracious in return. So, yeah, I think as a community, we could really, you know, take a look and analyze that and come together and then, you know, do a proper job.

Andrea Smardon: Interesting, because I think there's a disconnect, like, I feel like you hear from a lot of people that they want to be, they want to help them be a welcoming community, they want to give stuff away. And, and, you know, everywhere I've been to the when there's an event, there's a pile of coats or used clothing, but somehow there's something missing in that, right, like, the thing that's people actually need, they're maybe not getting, the connections aren't being made the right human connection that's required to get them what they really need.

Jennie Hua: Right. Right. Exactly. So it's just like the people is not that people here don't want to help. Practically every person I meet wants to help. It's just that the refugee community and the community who live here are not being put together. They're not being introduced.

Andrea Smardon: Once the connection is made, Jennie has seen how relationships can develop. Just the day before, one of her friends was bringing winter clothes to a newly arrived Afghan family. And while she was there, they told her their story. She learned that the mother had lost one of her small children in the crowd at the Kabul airport.

Jennie Hua: And she's here without her four year old, and she just sobbed. And my friend sobbed. And I sobbed when she told me about it. And that connection that they made, that woman needed that! They don't just need clothes. That's that's kind of easy, actually. They don't just need food that also is easy, once it's organized. They also need friends and someone to say oh my goodness, and put their arms around you and let you cry. And then help you navigate the kind of scary situation of needing to find a job and needing to get an education in a foreign country.

Andrea Smardon: As the numbers of Afghans arriving was starting to swell, Nazifa asked Jennie to find more volunteers. They needed to grow the network and fast. But how could they make those personal connections happen on a larger scale and quickly?

Jennie Hua: And I'm like, we're only two people. We're at capacity. I needed to, like blast the word out to get more help. As soon as you meet one of these people, immediately, it changes your heart and you want to help you're like, yes, I can drive 35 minutes, no problem, where the day before, if I asked you to do that in person, without meeting them, you wouldn't do it, you'd be like, you know, like, I've got ballet, sorry.

Andrea Smardon: That's when Jennie got the idea for the flash service project to collect a group of people in a parking lot with groceries and supplies to deliver.

So I'm like, I'm just gonna blast this out on email, and text, and just get a bunch of people to come and like, go and see some of these people in person.

Andrea Smardon: From the parking lot with the boxes. I followed Jennie and Nazifa to a nearby hotel where they're making deliveries.

Nazifa: I'm at the hotel trying to figure out room numbers.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa and Jennie are leading a group of us to a hotel room. We're a big crowd, filling up the hallway. There are several volunteers plus me with my recording kit, along with a photographer that I brought. It's a lot of people to deliver a couple boxes of food.

Nazifa: Hello? Salam alaykum.

Andrea Smardon: A middle-aged Afghan man greets us wearing a button-up shirt with sweatpants and slippers. He sits at the end of the queen bed, while most of us stand awkwardly against the wall crowded around him, some in the kitchenette by the door. His 21-year-old son is on the far side of the bed, and another Afghan man joins us from his hotel room. Once we've all piled in, there are more than a dozen of us.

Man: We're happy to be here. We represent literally millions

Woman: Yes.

Man: So I want you to feel well you're welcome here.

Afghan Man: Thank you, thank you.

Man: We couldn't all fit though. (laughter)

Andrea Smardon: The Afghan man speaks some English, but Nazifa speaks with him in Dari to find out a little of his story, and translates for all of us.

(speaking in Dari)

Nazifa translating: He was a fairly high ranking official who worked with Americans, and has been a deputy governor for three provinces. He also worked on elections. That makes him and his family a target. He's here with his oldest son, but his wife and his five younger children are still in Afghanistan.

Volunteer Man: So any luck getting your family out?

Andrea Smardon: He says he hasn't gotten any help to bring his wife and children here. He thanks everyone for the visit, but he says he's not concerned about himself.

Nazifa: he's not worried about him, you know, getting help. He's worried about his wife and kids in Afghanistan. He's asking me if you know anybody can help him the process right? Like how he can bring his kids and wife here, that's his concern.

Afghan Man: And one month ago, Taliban killed my uncle.

Andrea Smardon: He says his uncle was killed by the Taliban, and he's worried about the rest of his family. They're in hiding because they're not safe there. And then Nazifa stops translating and starts editorializing, clearly upset on his behalf.

Nazifa: They're not getting legal advice, right? Nobody is asking them like, why are you here by yourself? Right? Where is your family, how can we help them? They're like, Okay, you're here. You let me put you in a hotel and give you some money to buy food. That's it. Good luck.

Andrea Smardon: The other Afghan man that is here says he also arrived without his wife and four children. One of the volunteers pipes up. Turns out she's a lawyer.

Attorney: I'm an attorney. But I don't do immigration law but the Utah State Bar is doing a clinic.

Nazifa: Uh huh.

Attorney: to help people file visas - Afghan refugees. So I can connect you with that clinic.

Afghan Man: (speaking Dari, laughter)

Andrea Smardon: The Afghan men are clearly interested in this kind of help.

Afghan Man: Thank you.

Andrea Smardon: We are about to wrap up when my colleague Ryan Meeks, the one taking photos, expresses his sympathy, but also a feeling of powerlessness.

Ryan Meeks: I think we all kind of feel for the situation and wish it was better and wish we could help, but I'm nobody, I can't do anything. I wish I could.

Andrea Smardon: Ryan, in a moment of candor, puts his camera down, and is expressing what I think many of us feel if we're honest helpless in the face of a big, complicated situation. "I'm nobody" he said. What can I one person, possibly do?

But the Afghan man doesn't see it that way.

Afghan Man: Nay, nay.

Nazifa: So he's saying that the you know, the US government has a lot of power. And the people, us as a citizen, we have a power, right? To influence because we're a taxpayer to the US government. They can hear to us if we raise our voice.

Andrea Smardon: This is America, he's saying, it's a democracy. Here everyone has a voice. And Jennie backs him up. She's got a petition to send to representatives in Congress.

Jennie Hua: I have a petition that I can send out, everyone that um, you can add your name to in your, and your voice. And really, it's just a matter of how many people reach out.

Andrea Smardon: Then, speaking to the Afghans, she makes the case why they should befriend Americans.

Jennie Hua: So it's valuable for you to meet members of the American community and to make friends to put yourself out there and we'll help you to keep getting your story out. That's a big way that you'll be able to help your families.

Andrea Smardon: Out in the lobby, I talk to a pair of volunteers. A married couple Jeff and Emily Loria to find out what they took from the visit.

Jeff Loria: You would think that things would be a little more organized to want to help them get assimilated into their new life, but also to coordinate and help them get their families here.

Emily Loria: The horror of that story of their stories just kind of resonates. And I just, my heart goes out to them

Andrea Smardon: With the separation of family.

Emily Loria: Yeah, separation of families. Family is everything!

Andrea Smardon: Did you know this is what you're getting into?

Emily Loria: I thought we were just going to drop a food box off. But this was amazing, like, just amazing to participate in and witness.

Jeff Loria: It's frustrating how helpless you feel, And you know, like someone said, as we reach out to lawmakers you know, hopefully there's enough voices that can make changes.

Andrea Smardon: You realize just delivering groceries isn't going to solve.

Jeff Loria: It's not.

Emily Loria: It's putting a bandaid on the situation.

Jeff Loria: And probably makes it more frustrating because they want help. But like the one gentleman said many times, he's fine. It's his family he's worried about, so groceries to him, isn't really gonna solve his biggest need.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie was hoping the event would expand the network and get more people to meet the Afghan arrivals in person.

Jennie Hua: And it worked. We got a ton of volunteers from that event.

it was not like, perfectly organized. But you know, so much good came of it. And we got a ton of good feedback. Almost everyone called or texted and said that was an amazing experience. Thank you so much for facilitating, making this introduction letting me know that this person is here. And I want to continue helping.

Andrea Smardon: The network was growing. But where Jennie saw a web of new connections, Nazifa saw chaos.

Nazifa: Yesterday was a bit of a disaster. (laughs)

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa wasn't sure all this well-intentioned helping was really helping.

Nazifa: I thought it was a disaster. It was like way unorganized. And I had no idea who invited who invited who

Andrea Smardon: That was a lot of people to organize.

Nazifa: That was a lot of people. And it wasn't me who invited everybody. Because my intention was to like, divide the 26-27 families that we currently know, into more of a geographic location and to build into a team, like 6 team would go out and you know, drop off whatever donation we had. And then we would have one translator for each team.

Andrea Smardon: Instead of 6 teams as Nazifa envisioned, there were actually more like 25. And there were many fewer translators than there were volunteers. For Nazifa, the translators were important because the idea wasn't just a one-time food drop-off. She was hoping the volunteers would get to know the families, find out their needs, and develop a relationship.

Nazifa: Yeah, so the reason I'm doing all these smaller events, so to kind of match a family with a volunteer family, to just kind of guide them through in the next two, three months, they can stand up in their feet.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa is worried if people drop off groceries, they might feel like they accomplished a good deed, but they may miss the chance to develop the relationship.

Nazifa: you can give somebody a food stamp, right money $400. But if you don't show them how to do that grocery, they may spend that whole money in one week, and then they're gonna stay hungry for three weeks.

Andrea Smardon: If you really want to help, Nazifa says, you have to spend the time to understand people's needs. Like the men we met in the hotel room without their families. Groceries were not their main concern.

Nazifa: They were hesitant to talk to us at the beginning because most of them were saying, oh, I don't need anything, right. They probably don't need our donation, but they have other problems that we can help with. And I was really hesitant to do that yesterday. We might offend some people, right? Yeah. And you have to like, kind of know, everybody situation on a personal level, one to one. Everybody's story is different. And you have to approach everyone differently.

Andrea Smardon: But how do you facilitate those personal connections when there are so many people coming and very few people who speak the language?

[Music transition]

Andrea Smardon: While Nazifa was feeling the need to regroup, Jennie was energized by all the new connections. When I talked to her a couple months later, she was filling all of her free moments helping the Afghan community.

Jennie Hua: I woke up at six, took the dog on a walk in the snow, and thought about some other, you know, solutions to problems. There's a family who has four sons, they're in a hotel and the mother is going to have a baby any day. And texting a few other people for some meals to be delivered tomorrow for a few people who ran out of food stamps,

Andrea Smardon: Also on this day, she met with her friend Sima the widowed soldier to make arrangements for her sewing class, she introduced a hotel manager to several Afghans looking for work. And she had a meeting with an existing refugee organization to see if they could find a way to coordinate their efforts.

Jennie Hua: So my morning was pretty full of refugee activities as well. In between, I took my children to school and gave them some leftover corn bread for breakfast.

Andrea Smardon: To me, it sounds like you're basically running an organization here.

Jennie Hua: Yes, I think so.

Andrea Smardon: Did you know you're gonna get into that?

Jennie Hua: No. (laughs) all of this has just happened and I can't really stop it. (laughs) And I guess I don't want to, because it's very fulfilling. It's it's super rewarding and fun to help people.

Andrea Smardon: By February 2022, about 900 Afghans had arrived in Utah.
By this time, word was getting around about what Jennie and Nazifa were doing. In their efforts, they caught the attention of the governor's wife First Lady Abby Cox.

Jennie Hua: Abby Cox, she wants to do just the same thing I did. She wants to like, get this out there so that people know that the refugees are here and that they need help.

Andrea Smardon: The plan was to invite some of the Afghan arrivals for a shopping spree at a couple of grocery stores in the Salt Lake Valley about 15 families in total. The company Associated Foods is footing the bill for each family to fill their cart. The First

Lady is inviting the spouses of Utah's state legislators to serve as volunteers for the event, to meet the Afghan arrivals and help them navigate in the store.

Jennie Hua: It gives these people an opportunity to meet each other. And I think her purpose is to let people know what's happening and to let people know that they can be caring, and they can reach out to their neighbors in love and friendship and they can, you know, strike out on their own and, and say hello, right to someone who's a little bit different, but who is here now and will be part of our long standing community.

Andrea Smardon: Coming up after the break, Afghan arrivals meet the Governor of Utah and his wife in the produce aisle.

[Break]

Andrea Smardon: It's late morning, Friday February 18th, and First Lady Abby Cox is standing in the produce aisle facing a ring of TV cameras. The backdrop a colorful display of vegetables. Unsuspecting shoppers stop in their tracks to watch the show. Or maybe they're politely waiting to pick up their broccoli and bell peppers.

Abby Cox: We think that Utah is the most generous, most loving and kind state in the nation, and we're showing that to our refugee families here, we want Utah to be a place where everyone feels like they belong, including, and especially our new refugees that are coming from a very, very difficult situation.

Andrea Smardon: The spouses of state lawmakers are here, ready to volunteer, along with several Afghan families, standing in wait with empty shopping carts.

Everyone is waiting for volunteer translators to show up. Like the last event, there are not enough of them to go around. The wife of a state senator is paired with an Afghan woman dressed entirely in black, and wearing a black lace head scarf. They can't really communicate since they don't share the same language.

Nazifa: So, we have called translators, so we're kind of waiting for translator, unless you guys are Ok to go with these people!

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa tells the senator's spouse that the woman they are shopping with has several children left in Afghanistan.

Nazifa: They were able to escape Afghanistan but half of their family is left. Like she has 3 underage kids left in Afghanistan.

Christie: I'm Sorry.

Nazifa: I know, and her daughter was 13-years-old forced into marriage

Andrea Smardon: Three children left behind and her 13-year-old daughter forced into marriage.

It feels so unreal hearing this story standing under fluorescent lights, in front of colorfully decorated donuts with mellow shopping music playing in the background. A family separated in one day with no way back to each other.

The woman in the black head scarf looks up with wet eyes at her shopping companions and everyone shakes their heads in disbelief.

A man arrives who can translate, so Nazifa leaves them together.

Nazifa: All right, I think you guys can go, I'm waiting for the next translator.

Andrea Smardon: The young son of the woman in black points to a sheet cake with bright yellow frosting, and the woman picks it up hesitantly.

Christie: Start with the good stuff! I'm not going to tell that little boy no.

Andrea Smardon: Sima has arrived, and Nazifa introduces her to the owner of the grocery store chain, explaining that she was a soldier working with Americans.

Nazifa: She's our first woman in the special forces that I'm aware of.

Bob: Will you just tell her it's an honor to have her here in our store and our state.

Andrea Smardon: They follow Sima around as she picks up tomatoes and garlic. TV cameras move in and are hovering as Sima pulls a gallon of milk from a case.

Then First Lady Abby Cox and governor Spencer Cox join the train of people following Sima's cart.

Abby Cox: Can I introduce you to my husband, this is Spencer Cox, he's the governor of the state.

Spencer Cox: Nice to meet you

Sima: Nice to meet you too.

Spencer Cox: It's a pleasure, welcome, we're so happy to have you

Sima: Thank you so much.

Andrea Smardon: Many of the groups end up in the aisle with canned and dried goods. The governor is offering up cans of beans, and Nazifa explains that Afghans don't normally use pre-packaged foods like canned or frozen vegetables. They're used to cooking from scratch with fresh foods. And suddenly the woman in the black head scarf starts to cry.

(Woman crying)

Andrea Smardon: Crammed in this aisle with several legislative spouses, the governor, his wife and a few Afghan families, Nazifa translates; she's crying because she's able to get food while her children in Afghanistan are hungry.

Spencer Cox: I'm so sorry. That breaks my heart

Christie: I could kind of feel what she was trying to tell me.

Nazifa: And it's so sad, because they were able to have two kids come in and three are left behind.

Christie: And her 13-year-old was forced into marriage.

Spencer Cox: That's so awful.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa explains to the governor that she doesn't know how to help this woman be reunited with her family or get the 13-year-old out of this marriage. First lady Abby Cox reaches out to hug her.

Spencer Cox: We're glad you're here with us, we hope you feel safe here, we'll pray for your little ones.

Andrea Smardon: Up until this moment, it was feeling like a media spectacle with tv cameras and officials and their spouses awkwardly following Afghans around as they tried to shop in a large, unfamiliar store.

But somehow, surrounded by canned chickpeas and dried spaghetti, there's this moment of human connection, tears, and hugs.

At the same time, here's a woman separated from her children, with a chance to talk to the highest official in the state. When he hears about her plight, he offers his prayers, but in this matter, he doesn't offer to help.

Maybe he doesn't want to promise something that's beyond the scope of his power. One state's governor can't suddenly change federal immigration policies.

I asked Spencer Cox what he hoped would come out of this event.

Spencer Cox: First of all, that's why we invite the media here. So that, this this story, this narrative can get out into the community and that others will see it and understand how helpful it is. But but then just the real connections, we have spouses of legislators that are here, and they're making friendship and bonds, I mean, I, you know, tragic story of a woman who had to leave some of her kids behind 13 year old daughter who was forced into marriage, and and she's in tears and the spouse of the legislator is in tears, and that's a connection, something they will remember. And our hope is that they'll stay in touch and that they'll keep those friendships alive for many years to come.

Andrea Smardon: It all seemed very heartfelt and well intentioned, but I was trying to pinpoint why this event made me uneasy. By putting it on the local news, it was meant to raise awareness, to motivate Utahns to reach out and help their new neighbors, which seems like a good thing. But it also felt reductive, like these Afghans had to perform the role of poor refugee, gratefully accepting free food in order to elicit the sympathy required for people to want to help them.

As I thought about it, I realized that Nazifa was playing a critical role here. Without her there to shed some light on the Afghans' real experience, volunteers may have just been helping to fill an empty grocery cart. Not knowing they were talking to an elite soldier, one of the first Afghan women to work with American special forces. left to wonder what was behind the tears of the woman in the black head scarf.

Making a real connection that all hinged on Nazifa, which seemed like a lot for one person to carry. It was also a chance for a handful of Afghans to interact with the

highest official in the state. I asked Sima about it later when I talked to her with a translator, and she started giggling.

Translator for Sima: It was so funny. I was in the front with my shopping cart and they just follow me everywhere. I was thinking if they stand somewhere, when I'm done, I would go talk with them, but they follow me everywhere.

Andrea Smardon: But seriously, what Sima really wants from the governor is permanent legal status in the US, either through a special immigrant visa or through asylum. She can't help her mother get out of Afghanistan without that status.

Translator for Sima: She said if the governor can hear us and help us with our special immigration visa. She say I applied before I come to the US and still they didn't approve

Andrea Smardon: But Sima may not realize that the governor of the state doesn't have the power to grant a visa or asylum, at least not directly. Those decisions are made at the federal level. But how would she know, unless someone explained it to her? She was invited to a grocery store, not a law office.

[MUSIC]

Andrea Smardon: Shortly after the event at the store, I called Nazifa to find out her plans for the next event. I knew that Nowruz was coming up, the Persian New Year celebration in the spring. When Nazifa arrived in the US as a teenage refugee, it was this gathering where she met people who would go on to play an important mentorship role in her life. I thought it would be the perfect way to end the podcast to come full circle, at this celebration of rebirth, where Nazifa offers the new refugees the kind of welcoming she received from the community.

[MUSIC END]

Andrea Smardon: But Nazifa told me she wasn't sure there would be a Nowruz party. She said she was thinking about taking a break. She was exhausted.

Nazifa: I had a lot of work and very little help.

Andrea Smardon: Later, when I saw Nazifa in person, she said there were people who wanted to help, but for many of them, it was more of a one-time thing.

Nazifa: They weren't committed, there was kind of like, let me do like a side project one time volunteer for something and they didn't follow up.

It's more of like a photo op you know, a lot of people reached out to me during Christmas time, whether they wanted to help a family or donate or something. But they just wanted to do for, you know, for the holiday season.

Andrea Smardon: Then by the time they got to the grocery store event in February, Nazifa told me that organizing rides and translators took a lot of time and energy. Effort that wasn't really recognized at the time. She said she was referred to as a translator, when really she was the head of her own organization and a professional in her own right. Afterwards, she questioned how it advanced what she was trying to accomplish.

The problem is with refugees, and they don't speak the language. They're somewhere so new, they don't know anything. So it's one time help is not really helping, right? Because I would get volunteer a one time help. And then that family would reach out to me on a constant basis, right? Like, what happened? Are they gonna visit us? Are they gonna take us a doctor? They're gonna take my kids to school? You know, I need this. I need this.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa didn't have the resources of a resettlement agency. She didn't have staff and she didn't have that many reliable long-term volunteers. But the Afghan arrivals were looking to her for help. The grocery store event was not her idea, but she had to answer to the Afghans who didn't get invited.

Nazifa: So for the grocery store event, there was only I think 15 family. And in my list I had about 50 family. So after the event I heard later on that, you know, they got really mad and upset like, on what basis I chose, you know, the families who went to the event and my selection was basically if I had somebody who is willing to give a ride to that family to the grocery store, I would just pick them him up right and there were people who I should have picked them up but I didn't have ride for them right. To find translator to find ride for them. It was a lot of coordination and effort.

Andrea Smardon: From what I could see, you were working really hard.

Nazifa: Really hard, yeah.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa did organize a Nowruz party after all; she mustered the energy to make food with her family and invited a few dozen guests. I only found out about it after the fact. I wasn't invited. Maybe Nazifa was tired of dealing with the media.

Afterwards, I heard from Jennie that Nazifa's health wasn't good. She had gotten so sick, she was hospitalized.

Andrea Smardon: You got pretty sick right after Nowruz, right?

Nazifa: Yeah, I actually got I think I was maybe frustrated and listening the media and seeing what's happening with the people who got evacuated, with people who was left there, it kind of emotionally drained me. I got sick and I thought that was COVID it was not COVID. I just have asthma, it was more of like my allergy asthma, but I still got COVID later on but I mean I've been consistently sick for the last few months. I haven't really felt well.

Andrea Smardon: But it was seriously sick, like you were hospitalized, right?

Nazifa: Yeah, I went to three times emergency. Yeah.

Andrea Smardon: How much can one person do? Nazifa had tested that limit, and her body gave her an answer. She had been focused on helping others, but who was taking care of her? Remember, Nazifa experienced her own trauma as a refugee, losing her father, barely keeping her family alive as the oldest child in Pakistan. From the US, she built an organization with her sister to educate girls. Everything they had worked for was lost when the Taliban took power. And she has her own family members left behind. When the evacuation happened, she felt powerless. But when strangers from Afghanistan arrived in her community, she chose to help. It's something she knows how to do. She's been a leader since she was 13-years-old, the eldest child responsible for her family's survival.

What people may not see when she is translating or organizing food drop-offs is that she herself is affected by these traumatic events coming full circle. She thought she had escaped and made a new life. But she's thrust back in the trauma. And she can't take a break from it.

Andrea Smardon: Okay, so you were in your very rundown and you think it was related to what was going on with Afghanistan and what you were trying to do to help people.

Nazifa: Yeah, I think like, asthma is really triggered by how you feel. And if your body is really drained and emotionally drained, and I was quite depressed what I was seeing. Because there was all this media hype when evacuation happened, right? Everybody was like, Oh, my gosh, what happened in Afghanistan. People are hanging from the airplane. But that was it, right? And a few months later, nobody cared about Afghanistan.

Andrea Smardon: When Nazifa started, many people were asking, ‘How can I help?’ But On February 20th, 2022, just two days after the grocery store event was featured on the local news, another global crisis overtook the headlines.

KSL Newscast: Breaking tonight, fear of a Russian invasion of Ukraine has become a reality.

Andrea Smardon: Afghanistan was completely eclipsed by the dramatic invasion of Ukraine, and another flood of people displaced from their home country.

[MUSIC END]

Andrea Smardon: But while Nazifa was forced to take a break for her own health, Jennie did not let up. In fact, I would say, she doubled down.

Jennie Hua: Nothing ever slowed down. Activities just kept rolling in every day. So pretty much I've been, it's like a full time job that I've been doing every day since I spoke to you last.

Andrea Smardon: She was coordinating with the state refugee services and the resettlement agencies to work together. And Jennie says she discovered there were others out there just like herself, living parallel volunteer lives.

Jennie Hua: One of them I met when we were delivering some items for a new baby at one family's house and bumped into her and discovered she's been living my life like the same timing, the same activities and she has a whole group, just like I do.

Andrea Smardon: While Nazifa and Jennie were focused on Hazaras, this other person has been helping mostly Pashtuns the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. She’s located north of Salt Lake, while Jennie is located south, so they call on each other for help depending on the location of the family.

Jennie Hua: Since then, we bumped into two more people doing what we’re doing. Those two people each help about 20 families and then she’s helping about 60 families. I’m helping about 45-50 families. So we figured between the four of us, we might be helping just about all of the afghans who came.

Andrea Smardon: last time we spoke, you were saying we could be doing a better job welcoming these new arrivals? How do you feel about it now? How do you feel we're doing?

Jennie Hua: yeah, so I guess, when I started this, in the end of October, November, I saw an emergency happening where people didn't have food and clothes. Now as time has passed, I've learned a lot about what resources are already in place, who the different agencies who are helping, and I'm still discovering new resources every day. So yes, I think that the main way that we could do better as a state in welcoming new Americans is to coordinate with each other.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie realized what started with one friend from Afghanistan, has become much bigger, and her citizen volunteer work is not done. Even while many people have stopped paying attention to Afghanistan and more than 80,000 Afghans now living in the US, Jennie says she can't look away, especially now when she sees how her friends are impacted.

Jennie Hua: All The news has turned to Ukraine. And so it's not on the forefront of people's minds.

Andrea Smardon: Meanwhile, attacks continued in Afghanistan. In April 2022, a school was bombed in Kabul, killing at least 6 people, and injuring dozens, many of them teenage students. Days later, there's a bombing at a mosque. The next day, a Kabul bus attack. An estimated 70 people were killed during that Muslim holy month of Ramadan making it one of the deadliest waves of attacks since US troops withdrew from Afghanistan.

Jennie Hua: I mean, those bombings in Kabul that were so important to my friend, no one here knew that that happened. And no one cares. Because they didn't know about it. I mean, 95% of the population is hungry. Those are the families and friends of all of my friends, my new friends. And so I'm seeing their stress, like, I think of one example of someone who he has a job and he has high rent and he's like, please, please, can you help me find an apartment that's cheaper. He's like, none of my siblings have work in Afghanistan. And I have to send money for all of them. And he is completely stressed out.

[MUSIC STOPS]

Andrea Smardon: But for Jennie, taking on the stress of her Afghan friends doesn't make her feel hopeless as you might expect. It's the opposite, she's energized by taking action.

Jennie Hua: it's easy to see all of the bad news and become numb, and just say, oh, yeah, people are dying everywhere now, and not care anymore. But when you have personal relationships with people who are in such a dramatic plight, you just feel this, like urgency to do something. Ukraine, of course, is very much a similar situation. It's so dramatically difficult. And I think a lot of people want to help and they are helping, and I imagine that some Ukrainians will start to arrive here as well. And I say let's, take a look at our system and l~~ike~~, really, get it in fine working order

Because if we all work together, we could really make a big difference.

I feel like that book, the Dr. Seuss book, Horton Hears a Who.

Andrea Smardon: You might remember this children's book. I had to read it again to understand Jennie's reference. Horton the elephant carries a tiny speck of dust around on a clover because he hears voices coming from it that no one else can hear.

Jennie Hua: There's a city on this flower. There really is. I can hear them.

Andrea Smardon: "Should I put this speck down?…" Horton thought with alarm.
"If I do, these small persons may come to great harm."

Can Jennie help her newest friends now that most people have turned their attention elsewhere?

In the next episode, she recruits her neighbors to try something new. And they have to act fast, the smallest of people a baby is due any day.

Jennie Hua: Let me get this straight, you want me to deliver your baby?

Andrea Smardon: And that small person needs a home.

(Credits)

Stranger Becomes Neighbor is researched, written and hosted by me, Andrea Smardon. Audio production and sound design by Aaron Mason. Bonus content produced by Nina Earnest. Mixing and mastering by Trent Sell. Executive Producer is

Sheryl Worsley. My thanks to our editorial team, Amy Donaldson, Dave Cawley, Ben Kuebrich, Josh Tilton, Ryan Meeks, Felix Banel and KellieAnn Halvorsen.

Special thanks to Tanya Vea, Stephanie Avis, Candice Madsen, Matt Elggren, and Toss Patterson.

Each week we are releasing bonus content with extended interviews if you subscribe on Apple podcasts.

I'm tackling the question, what can one person do to help. I'm talking to people who have figured out how they can make a contribution in their own way. For this week's episode, we meet a small business owner who Jennie recruited to help one Afghan family. He hears the family's stor, finds out that the father needs a better job to support his five children, ends up hiring him, and then, eventually hires a dozen Afghan men from the same military unit.

If you're unable to subscribe and you'd like to support the show, please give us a rating and write a review. It really does help others to discover us. For pictures and more information, find us at StrangerBecomesNeighbor.com

Stranger Becomes Neighbor is a production of KSL Podcasts.