

## **STRANGER BECOMES NEIGHBOR - EPISODE 1: Welcome to Your New Home**

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

(music and sounds)

**Andrea Smardon:** It's wintertime in Kabul, Afghanistan, early 2021, and 15-year-old Baran spent her break from school binge-watching the TV series Prison Break.

**Baran:** I watched it three times, because I really love it.

**Andrea Smardon:** At first she watched it dubbed in Persian, but then she had an idea. She wondered if she could teach herself English by watching the show.

(Clip from Prison Break)

**Warden Pope:** "I can't help wondering what someone with your credentials is doing in a place like this."

**Michael Scofield:** "Took a wrong turn I guess."

**Andrea Smardon:** She knew the story well - the main character, a structural engineer, makes an elaborate plan to get himself into prison just so he can break his older brother out. He even has the blueprints for the prison facility tattooed onto his upper body.

(Clip from Prison Break)

**Lincoln Burrows:** Michael... why?

**Michael Scofield:** I'm getting you out of here.

**Baran:** I really like that character. He is very smart. And he thinks about all the things. That was the reason I kind of learned English.

**Andrea Smardon:** But she had no way of knowing how much she would need English in just a few months.

(Music)

**Andrea Smardon:** Baran is not her real name. She asked that we use a pseudonym to protect her family. Back in the nineties, the Taliban beat up her father and broke his back. Because he was training women to work in the medical field the family fled to Iran for several years. But Baran was born after American forces and allies occupied

Afghanistan and ousted the Taliban from power. Her family decided it was safe and moved back to the country.

**Baran:** Now it's a good place, Afghanistan is good for living. We come back to our country.

**Andrea Smardon:** She wanted to be a doctor like her father. She had every reason to believe she could achieve her goal, and she was in a hurry. Baran finished high school two years early, but she never got to attend her graduation ceremony or take the exam to get into medical school. By August 2021, all of her plans evaporated.

(News Clip)

**Reporter 1:** The Taliban is in downtown, like, driving, but there is no one to stop them.

**Reporter 2:** Suicide bombings just outside the Kabul Airport have killed dozens.

**Andrea Smardon:** Suddenly, the focus was on escape and survival. The Americans were withdrawing from Afghanistan, and Baran found herself at the Kabul airport, one of many Afghans desperate for a way out. For five days, they waited on the street outside the airport. Baran, her parents, her 31-year-old sister, her two older brothers, their wives and kids.

**Baran:** All Afghanistan came to the airport to enter through the gate. And it was very crowded, everybody lost each other.

**Andrea Smardon:** And then the gates opened. As they pressed forward, Baran's sister was carrying her 4-year-old niece, their brother's daughter, and they were knocked to the ground. They managed to get up before they were crushed. They made it through the gate. But when Baran looked around, several family members were not there.

**Baran:** And when we entered through the gate, we lost our parents.

**Andrea Smardon:** One of their brothers and his wife, the niece's parents, didn't make it either. But the authorities pushed them forward. They couldn't wait and there was no going back. They flew to Qatar, hoping the rest of the family would follow. They ended up at a makeshift military camp in New Jersey, where they spent several weeks. It was there that Baran celebrated her 16th birthday.

(Music stops)

**Andrea Smardon:** One morning at 5am, Baran, her sister, and niece, woke up in the dark, skipping breakfast to get on an airplane, having no idea that they had 2 stopovers and would be traveling all day and into the night. The 4-year-old begged to eat the food she saw in the airport restaurants, but the only money they had was Afghani. By the time they arrived at their final destination in Salt Lake City, there was a snowstorm.

**Baran:** The first night that we came to Utah, it was a very horrible situation.

**Andrea Smardon:** It was 1am. A case worker from a resettlement agency drove them through the empty streets covered in snow, and brought them to an apartment close to downtown.

**Baran:** When he opened the door and when he entered to the house, it was very cold. And it was snowy weather. There was no power, no heat and this apartment was dark, completely dark.

**Andrea Smardon:** Baran tried to recall the English she had learned from watching Prison Break. But that night, standing in the dark room, she couldn't find the words to communicate with the caseworker.

**Baran:** Even I couldn't talk with our caseworker, how we can turn on the heat? How we can turn on the lights? Even we don't have the phone to call him that come here.

**Andrea Smardon:** They asked the caseworker to come back the next day. He said he would be back the next week. And then he left.

**Baran:** My niece, she start crying and she say that I don't want to be in here.

**Andrea Smardon:** And then they were all crying. There was a chair, with a box of household items - toiletries and laundry soap stacked in the middle of the living room and some food in the kitchen left by the agency. Their niece was hungry.

They had been traveling all day without a meal. Without power, they couldn't cook. So they gave her a glass of milk and some bread. As women alone, they didn't feel safe. The lock wasn't working, so they pushed a table against the door. Before they left Afghanistan, they had never spent a night without their family. They were all alone in a strange land.

**Baran:** And my sister said, so what should we do? We want to go back to the airport and I want to sit there. At least there's a kind of people, there's a population. If we live in

here with this kind of situation, I want to come to come back to Afghanistan. If there's a Taliban, it's okay. Just I want to go back.

**Andrea Smardon:** They were so scared, Baran's sister thought it might be better to risk living under the Taliban. At least their family would be together.

(Music Fades)

**Andrea Smardon:** News about Afghanistan once dominated the headlines. Now it's disappeared from our feeds, but this story isn't over.

What will happen for Baran and her family? That will depend on people like you and me. The global forces and political choices that created this situation are beyond our individual control. But how we respond will test who we are and how we define community.

On this podcast, we're going to follow people after the evacuation is over and they've arrived at their destination. Who will emerge to help these new neighbors? How are we connected to strangers from halfway across the world, and what does it mean to be part of a community?

From KSL Podcasts, I'm journalist Andrea Smardon, and this is Stranger Becomes Neighbor. Episode 1- Welcome to Your New Home.

(Music stops)

(Airport sounds)

**Andrea Smardon:** Back in the spring of 1994, a refugee arrived with his wife and 3-year-old son at the Salt Lake City airport, not knowing what to expect from this strange new land called Utah.

**Batar:** Right from the beginning, when I get off the plane, and we came to the gate, so many people were there, who wanted to welcome us.

**Andrea Smardon:** Aden Batar is from Somalia. Everyone just calls him by his last name. He and his family were greeted by a big crowd; family members, staff from a resettlement agency, and volunteers.

**Batar:** I have never seen such a welcoming in my whole life. My wife and I, we looked at it and say, wow, this must be a very welcoming community.

**Andrea Smardon:** And the welcome continued, as the crowd took them to their new home that was waiting for them.

**Batar:** Had everything we needed - beds, furnishings, even a warm meal was on the table, on the dining table. And we were all overwhelmed with this, all this hospitality and welcoming that we have received. From that moment, I knew that, you know, this is the place for us.

**Andrea Smardon:** OK, so Batar's first day in Utah was the polar opposite of what we heard from 16-year-old Baran. You might be wondering *why*. Well, that's what we're going to find out in this episode. How is the situation different for the newest arrivals to our communities? And what kind of neighbors *are we*?

**Andrea Smardon:** Getting back to Batar's story, he and his family settled in the small farming town of Logan in northern Utah surrounded by fields of alfalfa and cattle. The Somali family stood out.

**Batar:** They didn't have many refugees during that time, and everybody who stops us on the street used to ask us, where are you from? Hello, what's your name?

**Andrea Smardon:** They were... curious.

**Batar:** People were very interested in getting to know us, and also, wanting to help.

**Andrea Smardon:** People offered him rides when he didn't have a car, he was given a job, and his four children had educational opportunities far better than they could have had in Somalia or in a refugee camp. Batar's experience was so positive he decided to work for a resettlement agency, Catholic Community Services of Utah. He's been with them for more than 20 years, and is now the director of Migration and Refugee Services.

Utahns like to say this is a welcoming place for refugees and immigrants.

**Zion's Bank Pres. Scott Anderson:** Utah has always been a hospitable community for newcomers.

**KSL Reporter:** Salt Lake County is getting national attention for helping immigrants find resources to succeed, and it's the first county in the US to get this recognition.

**Overstock employee:** We really just want to make sure everyone knows they have a seat at our table here in Utah.

**Andrea Smardon:** I myself arrived as an outsider to Salt Lake more than a decade ago, though I was only moving from Boston, not a foreign country. But as someone who is not religious, I did feel like a stranger here, learning the ways of a new culture. It took me a while to understand why this red state is so interested in refugees. There are only about 3.5 million people in all of Utah, but Salt Lake City ranks in the top 15 US cities for number of refugees per capita. One big factor, more than 60% of the state's population are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

**Merinda Cutler:** We, as members of the church, we take it seriously the call to welcome the stranger.

**Andrea Smardon:** That's Merinda Cutler, part of an organization called Mormon Women for Ethical Government, a non-partisan group that I should say doesn't officially represent the church. Concern about immigration policies was one of the big reasons the founders started the organization in January 2017. Merinda's role is immigration advocacy manager.

**Merinda Cutler:** There's a lot of scriptures in the Bible about welcoming the stranger, and our modern church has invited us to do that too. We have that spiritual mandate, that we feel the call.

**Andrea Smardon:** Beyond this spiritual mandate, members of the church identify with refugees. Governor Spencer Cox points out that a history of persecution drove them to travel west and settle on the land that we now call Utah.

**Governor Spencer Cox:** It's part of our history, for sure. My, my own great, great grandparents, had their home burned to the ground because of religious beliefs, and fled to come here to seek refuge.

**Andrea Smardon:** So, given all of this, when Afghanistan was being evacuated, it's perhaps not surprising that Republican Governor Cox was one of the first to send a letter to president Biden to volunteer the state as a place for Afghans to restart their lives.

**KSL Reporter Garna Mejia:** For the last week, the governor tells me his office has been getting calls nonstop with Utahns wanting to help. It's why that decision to step up and offer Utah as a safe haven was a simple one.

**Governor Spencer Cox:** Republicans and Democrats, and unaffiliateds in the state, everyone that I've talked to just has thanked us, I mean legislators, mayors, county commissioners, citizens...

**Andrea Smardon:** It wasn't just Utah across the country, there was widespread support for Afghan refugees. According to an NPR/Ipsos poll, seven out of 10 Americans supported resettling Afghans who worked with the U.S. government or military.

**NPR Reporter Joel Rose:** Even among Republicans and older white rural voters, people who generally tend to support hardline immigration policies, and even in these groups we found a lot of support for Afghan resettlement.

**Andrea Smardon:** That level of support is unusual. During World War 2 the US turned away thousands of Europeans seeking refuge. In 1938, after the Nazis began attacking Jews, A Gallup poll asked if the US should allow a larger number of Jewish exiles here. 72% of Americans said "no".

Even at the height of the war, President Franklin Roosevelt and other government officials essentially closed the border, arguing that refugees from an enemy state posed a serious threat to national security.

At that time, resettlement was largely managed by private citizens and organizations. Government support was inconsistent and ad hoc, but after the fall of Vietnam in 1975, there were hundreds of thousands of refugees to resettle.

Congress realized it needed to create standardized procedures, passing the Refugee Act of 1980, establishing the system we have now with the federal government controlling the flow and local non-profit agencies doing the resettlement work on the ground.

Batar of Catholic Community Services says the country has successfully resettled many refugees during global crises over 3 million seeking asylum since 1980.

**Batar:** You know, this is not new to us. We have seen a large number of refugees coming into our country, regardless of who is in the office in the administration.

**Andrea Smardon:** Whether it was a Republican or Democrat in the Oval Office, the US was accepting 95,000 refugees a year on average. But suddenly, Batar says, everything changed.

**President Trump:** The United States will not be a migrant camp, and it will not be a refugee holding facility.

**Andrea Smardon:** In 2018, President Trump set the cap on refugees at 45,000 cutting by more than half the average number allowed. The following year, it was 30,000.

Then the next year, it dropped to 18,000 refugees a historic low since the program was established after the Vietnam war.

**Batar:** The whole program, basically, was shut down. Not only that, even the infrastructure of the program was, you know, destroyed.

**Andrea Smardon:** The next year, Mr. Trump dropped the cap to 15,000.

Then when President Biden took office, those restrictions were lifted. After several years of downsizing and record low numbers, suddenly the agencies had to turn the ship around and prepare for refugees again. They started ramping up operations, training people, hiring staff. They thought they'd be ready.

**Batar:** But we weren't expecting so sudden about the Afghan crisis.

**Andrea Smardon:** Nobody could have predicted...about some 80,000 Afghans would arrive all at once, when the resettlement agencies were trying to recover. That's the largest number of war time evacuees the US had seen since the fall of Saigon. And They were coming during a pandemic, a severe affordable housing shortage, and a tight labor market.

**Batar:** So I think this is a big challenge. We only had a few staff left that we were operating under. And now with all this influx, you know, we need to build our capacity back up.

**Andrea Smardon:** Utah was expecting more than 800 Afghans on top of the regular roster of refugees. Two agencies - Catholic Community Services along with the International Rescue Committee - each with a handful of case workers had to figure out how to resettle all of the new arrivals in a short time frame. And Batar says, these



Afghans were not following the path of traditional refugees who would normally live in a camp for years before arriving at their destination in the US.

**Batar:** Before, you know, this crisis, we have enough time. For example, when a family is coming to Utah, we would know ahead of time, so in that way we prepare for their housing and everything. But with the Afghan situation it is completely different. Everything is very quick. We get a notification of families arriving today and the family will be here at the airport today,

**Andrea Smardon:** You get 24 hours or less.

**Batar:** Or less notice, sometimes a couple hours.

**Andrea Smardon:** Okay, they're on the plane, they're on the way there, and get ready. Send your case manager out to the airport?

**Batar:** Yes, it is a very stressful situation, and when the families are arriving they need a lot of support.

**Andrea Smardon:** The welcoming crowd that Batar received on his first day in Utah more than 25 years ago, the furnished home with a warm meal on the table that's like a pipe dream for these new arrivals.

This conversation with Batar happened as the Afghans were just starting to arrive. In a couple months, 16-year-old Baran and her family would be arriving during a snowstorm.

One caseworker told me they were expecting new Afghans to arrive every day. So they would be doing constant pick-ups at the airport on top of everything else they were doing to resettle refugees finding homes, helping them access food, healthcare, legal counsel, transportation, English classes, work permits, getting the kids enrolled in school. And many of these meetings would require someone to translate. It seems an impossible task.

**BATAR:** I think Catholic Community Services alone cannot meet all the needs of these families.

These folks need friends in order for them to be successfully integrated into our community.

(Music ends)

**Andrea Smardon:** Will anyone step forward to help? That's after the break.

[Break]

(Music)

**Andrea Smardon:** In August 2021, while then 15-year-old Baran was waiting on the streets of Kabul for the gates to open at the airport, halfway across the world, a woman sat on a sofa in her air conditioned home in a suburb of Salt Lake City watching it unfold on the news.

She saw people trying to scale the walls covered in barbed wire. Families crushed in crowds and separated.

**Reporter:** Azim shared a video of his wife at a Taliban check point where he says she was tear gassed and beaten.

**Andrea Smardon:** People crowding around a massive US Air Force transport plane, as it starts down the runway, some even managing to hold on to the wings as it lifts.

Then bodies fall from the sky.

For most of us, it's impossible to fathom how someone could be that desperate to escape, but *she's* seen this story before. In fact, she's lived it.

**Nazifa:** What I saw in the news, it kind of triggered my memory

**Andrea Smardon:** Her name is Nazifa. She asked that we not use her last name. To this day, she is nervous about exposing her family. More than two decades ago, before the U.S. occupation, she also fled Afghanistan, her family part of a persecuted minority and a target of the Taliban.

**Nazifa:** We escaped, maybe not like through evacuation flights, but we went through the same route, you know, leave our home with nothing.

**Andrea Smardon:** It's a time in her life she prefers not to think about. But when the US withdrew in 2021 and Afghanistan fell back into the hands of the Taliban, it all came flooding back. She remembered the day her father never came home.

**Nazifa:** We couldn't find his body, we were waiting and Taliban was coming on our door looking for us.

**Andrea Smardon:** Nazifa, the oldest of 6 children, was 12 years old when her family crossed the border illegally into Pakistan. She remembered what it was like to be on the run, her family living in one room with one blanket among them, how she worked in a refugee hospital and her younger siblings worked as carpet weavers just to keep the family alive. Sitting on a big cushy chair in her living room, she lets herself go back to that time.

**Nazifa:** I didn't go to school or anything. So I just worked. Survived.

**Andrea Smardon:** This is making you emotional, what is it bringing up for you?

**Nazifa:** All of the hard work, you know, the life that I have lived. I'm grateful for the experience, I think that is what made me really strong, And that was, you know, why we work so hard here. Because I want to be really independent, educated, and I never want to live for survival.

**Andrea Smardon:** Today, you could say Nazifa has achieved the American dream. She works as a risk analyst in the financial industry, a job that allowed her to buy a home in a nice neighborhood at the base of a mountain canyon. How she got there is another story that we'll get to in the next episode. Suffice it to say, she didn't do it alone. Right now, there are new arrivals from Afghanistan who need help, more help than the resettlement agencies can provide, so she and others are stepping up to volunteer.

(Traffic sounds)

**Andrea Smardon:** Hi. I'm Andrea,

**Dane:** Hi Andrea, I'm Dane.

**Andrea Smardon:** Dane? Hi.

**Andrea Smardon:** On a sunny day in late fall 2021, I meet up with Nazifa and some of her neighbors in the parking lot of a hotel next to a busy road west of Salt Lake City.

**Dane:** Nazifa is just getting their room number and then we'll go meet them.

**Andrea Smardon:** There's a new Afghan family living here temporarily.

**Nazifa:** I met the husband at the mosque on Saturday. But I haven't met the kids and the wife. So we're gonna ask them what can we do to help them.

**Andrea Smardon:** The resettlement agencies are careful not to release refugee contact information except to volunteers who have already been trained and assigned specific tasks. But Nazifa feels like they can't cover all the needs of these families, so she's had to track them down herself. She's been meeting people at events organized by the Afghan American community. I first met her at one of these gatherings at a mosque. She attracted my attention because she was translating and connecting people with resources, writing down names and phone numbers that she keeps in a small book.

Today, she's brought some of her neighbors who she only recently met, including Dane Smith.

**Dane:** Nazifa came to our church, she lives just across the street from our church and just kind of alerted us to the needs. We're pretty anxious to help.

**Nazifa:** We visited a few families two weeks ago. And so this would be our second group of families that we're visiting.

**Andrea Smardon:** Dane is well over 6 feet tall, easily more than a foot taller than Nazifa. I found out later he's a commercial airplane pilot. He's here with his mother-in-law and the head of a women's group in his church. All four of them plus me with my recorder troop into the hotel.

**Dane:** Hopefully, we're not too big of a crowd, we're not going to overwhelm them.

**Andrea Smardon:** The Afghan father meets us in the lobby and takes us up the elevator to the room where his family of 5 is living.

**Leslie:** Hello, how are you?

**Yaser:** Pretty good.

**Leslie:** Tell me your name.

**Yaser:** My name is Yaser.

**Andrea Smardon:** Yaser is 9-years-old, and seems to be the most fluent English speaker in the family. His older sister is 11. And his baby brother is toddling around in a onesie. Yaser's father explains that his son learned some English in school.

**Yaser:** (speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** Yaser pipes up and Nazifa translates.

**Yaser:** (Speaking Dari)

**Nazifa:** (laughs) So in camp the kids were studying for an hour a day, but he went to ESL classes with his mom today and he said he all of a sudden he learned English today. (laughs)

**Andrea Smardon:** If you didn't catch that, Yaser apparently learned English just today. Impressive!

**Leslie:** Got it, magic!

**Dane:** That's awesome, high five, man, that's pretty great.

**Andrea Smardon:** Nazifa confesses that she learned English in part by watching cartoons, especially Spongebob Squarepants.

**Nazifa:** I remember watching SpongeBob with my brother! (laughs)

**Andrea Smardon:** The family sits on two beds, while the rest of us squeeze into chairs around the entryway. There's a small kitchenette by the door, one long bedroom, and a bathroom. It's a lot of people for a little, stuffy hotel room and I realize that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I haven't been so close with this many people in a while. I'm vaguely nervous that it's not a good idea, but we're doing it. Looking around, it hits me that everything they have in this room, a couple of bags of clothes, some diapers, one floral blanket from Afghanistan, a car seat. What most of us would take on a weekend trip is all they have.

It doesn't take long before the toddler climbs into Dane's lap.

**Dane:** Okay, I'm gonna take notes just so that we get everything we need to know. Do you want to ask them if they have been to the hospital yet?

**Andrea Smardon:** Dane sounds like he's in charge here, but the truth is he and the others—they're just regular citizens figuring this out as they go along, trying to identify where the professional agencies don't have the time and resources to meet the needs of these latest arrivals.

With Nazifa translating and the father doing most of the talking, they learn that the family has been in the hotel for 2 weeks - not a normal situation for refugees, who would usually be placed directly in a furnished home or apartment. But they are arriving with very little notice. And Dane says there is a shortage of affordable housing, so when they do get a home, they may not be near other Afghans.

**Dane:** The unfortunate thing about that is that well, not even that it's that they end up being so spread out from each other, when what they need is two things they need their community that they're familiar with. And then they need people like us who can help them integrate into American society.

**Andrea Smardon:** They learn that the kids are not in school. the leader of the church women's organization says she worked in the schools for decades and that's not normal.

**Allyson:** They're supposed to be enrolled within like 24-48 hours, I think.

**Nazifa:** No, some of the refugees I know they're stuck in an apartment for two months. No school for the kids yet.

**Andrea Smardon:** Nazifa says some of the families she's talked to have been in a hotel for more than a month, sometimes as long as 60 days, 2 months.

**Nazifa:** They have been in a base 60 days another 60 days in a hotel kids no school.

**Dane:** Well, and the men especially are so anxious. Like, they're anxious to get out and work. their top three things would be they want to make sure their family is taken care of. They want to feel productive, and they want to integrate into our society. Like they're just, they're just so hungry to do that.

**Andrea Smardon:** Dane points out that many of the men in these families have been working with American service members for years, in some cases risking their lives to do so. Nazifa says those who worked with the US military also had good salaries in Afghanistan. They're not used to asking for charity and may not be comfortable with it.

**Dane:** So a couple things I want to do now I want to if they feel comfortable with it, I'd like to look in their fridge and in their cupboards at their food, see how much they have. And then I'd love to find out how they're doing on clothing, including like underwear, socks, winter clothes,

**Leslia:** shoes, boots

**Dane:** shoes

**Andrea Smardon:** Dane goes into the kitchenette, opens the fridge and cupboards.

**Leslie:** They've got some infant food.

**Dane:** Yeah, they have quite a bit of infant food, and then they have some meat...a little bit like one day's worth.

**Andrea Smardon:** As Dane identifies what little food is in the fridge, I still can't quite wrap my mind around how you would live like this in a hotel. How *do* you get food and prepare it for a family of 5 when you have no way of getting around?

Even just doing laundry can be a complicated ordeal. Nazifa says she just met a family who hadn't washed their clothes for 2 months. Many of the machines don't take quarters. You need a cell phone and an app tied to a bank account in order to pay.

To function in the modern world, Nazifa says, they need phones, computers, and Internet access. These are the things she worries about, while the resettlement agencies are scrambling just to get them housing and food.

After more than an hour of talking, they've determined that the family needs more food, winter clothes, laundry detergent, and a teapot.

**Dane:** The next step is it sounds like we want to have probably a family - find a family that can sponsor them.

**Andrea Smardon:** They're thinking that a family from the church could sponsor them, take them shopping and buy them what they need. But Dane's mother-in-law is already raising her hand to volunteer herself.

**Dane:** Yeah. You want to?

**Leslie:** Yes!

**Dane:** Great.

**Andrea Smardon:** As the group gets ready to leave, 9-year-old Yaser holds up a picture he's been working on in his notebook. It's a profile of a woman's face with a tear on her cheek, a drawing in shades of gray except for some red tint on her lips and a bright red heart next to her face.

**Leslie:** Will you tell them that we're grateful that they're here? We know that they have suffered a lot and we can't make everything better but we can make some things better and we will become great friends.

**Nazifa:** (Speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** Dane and the kids use the universal language of high fives and fist bumps, and the father scoops up the toddler who blows a kiss.

**Dane:** Gimme five (laughter). Pound it (laughter)

**Andrea Smardon:** Standing at the door, Nazifa translates for the father.

**Father:** (Speaking Dari)

**Nazifa:** (translating) he is thankful from the President that the help them you know evacuate Afghanistan and then he also second thankful from all the military bases that helped them through the process and then thirdly, they're very thankful from all of you to visit them and then they're also fourthly they're thanking me to connecting everybody.

**Leslie:** Good-bye kids, we'll see you again, OK. Bye, bye!

**Yaser:** Bye!

**Andrea Smardon:** Outside in the parking lot, before they can rush off to the next family, I stop them.

(Outside)



**Andrea Smardon:** Why do you guys want to do this? Why do you want to spend your afternoons here?

**Dane:** Oof, let me take a deep breath. We when we saw the pictures and the videos coming out of Afghanistan, we prayed to be able to help them.

**Andrea Smardon:** Dane squints into the distance. Tears well up in his eyes.

**Dane:** and this is like an answer to prayer, I think for us. I know that there's a lot of need amongst people who already live here. But the the need just seems so acute with with those coming out of Afghanistan, and I, I think also, we know that they served alongside our military men and women. And so just knowing that they're just knowing that there's a need present kind of makes us want to run to them.

**Andrea Smardon:** And you found your opening through Nazifa

**Dane:** Yeah, she lived in our neighborhood. Little did we know what a blessing, yeah.

**Allyson:** You never know who your neighbor next door is

**Dane:** Yeah, yeah, really.

**Andrea Smardon:** As they drive off to meet another family located about 20 minutes away, I think about how unlikely this whole situation is, how easy it would be for it *not* to happen. It took Nazifa a former refugee who speaks the language to track down this Afghan family, then visit the church in her neighborhood to get help. And there are hundreds more Afghans coming. Like 16-year-old Baran who arrived in the middle of a snow storm to a cold, dark apartment separated from family, and without a friend.

**Baran:** Even you couldn't say a goodbye or even without anything, just go go in a place that you don't have family, the no one you can speak different culture. Everything is different.

**Andrea Smardon:** Baran thinks about her father left in Afghanistan, and the way he lives his life.

**Baran:** My father is actually so kind, I don't know why, but he's so good. So in Afghanistan, he said that every time he said, You have to help your neighbors, everybody and our street, everybody that you meet you have to help them. For

example, if we cook something in our house, and he said that, don't give it for ourself, go and get it to other people and help other peoples.

**Andrea Smardon:** Baran's father told her, maybe one day when *you're* struggling, someone will do that for *you*.

**Baran:** You have to help others. One day, Allah will send you someone to help you in a bad kind of situation.

**Andrea Smardon:** Coming up this season on Stranger Becomes Neighbor, we'll find out what happens for Baran, her sister and niece. For her family and many others their experience will depend on the regular people who step in to fill the gaps. On this podcast, we'll follow some of our newest neighbors as well as those who help them. As we uncover these relationships, we reveal the hidden ways we're connected. We'll hear from those who served in the military...

**Carl Sullivan:** They were people who served our country for over 10 years. And -saved countless American lives.

**Andrea Smardon:** A single mother a young woman who fought the Taliban in a secret unit of Afghan special forces.

**Becca:** These women, against all odds, joined the military, joined the Special Forces, and then like, fought for their freedom, alongside US soldiers, which is like, more than 99% of Americans can say.

**Andrea Smardon:** But even those who risked their lives with Americans are not safe from eviction notices and job losses and eviction notices.

**Jennie:** I cannot imagine like being whoever evict them, like the manager or whoever's job it is to roll the rugs up and throw them out into the street. I can't imagine actually like going through with that.

**Andrea Smardon:** For many, their status in this country is uncertain.

**Emily:** it really is having another person's life in your hands. If they don't get approved for asylum, they would be sent back to Afghanistan, you know, they'd be in danger of their lives.

**Sima:** She said I get a lot of stress and the only thing that can help me I'm just crying and it's helped me feel better.

**Andrea Smardon:** You're crying a lot?

(Crying)

**Andrea Smardon:** But what can one person realistically do to help?

**Jennie:** You want *me* to deliver your baby?

**Baran:** You are both my mom and my best friend.

**Kerry:** But it's they're like family so I just do the things I would do for my family.

**Matt Zeller:** We have this ethos in the military, you're supposed to leave it better than you found it. This is the only way I know how to leave it better than I found it.

**Andrea Smardon:** You see your fates as tied together,

**Matt Zeller:** They're completely intertwined at this point.

**Andrea Smardon:** We promised to be a welcoming community, but can we/do we fulfill that promise?

Stay with us on Stranger Becomes Neighbor to find out.

[MUSIC ENDS]

**Andrea Smardon:** 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 Earnist. 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, Feliks Banel, and KellieAnn Halvorsen. Special thanks to Tanya Veal, Stephanie Avis, Candice Madsen, and Matt Elggren.

Each week we're releasing bonus content with extended interviews if you subscribe on Apple Podcasts. 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](http://Strangerbecomesneighbor.com).

Stranger Becomes Neighbor is a production of KSL Podcasts.