

STRANGER BECOMES NEIGHBOR - EPISODE 2: Personal Connection

Andrea Smardon: This episode contains descriptions of violence, war and trauma. There are also conversations about suicide and suicidal ideation. Please take care when listening.

Andrea Smardon: 16-year-old Baran and her older sister woke up in their new home in Salt Lake City thinking they needed to find help. It was winter, their power was out, the heat wasn't working, their 4-year-old niece didn't have warm clothes, and they had no phone. No way to reach anyone.

But in order to understand what happens for Baran and her family, we need to back up and trace a series of events that goes back decades.

It all starts with Nazifa, the volunteer we met in the last episode, who has a unique understanding of what these new arrivals need because of her own personal experience. As you'll recall, Nazifa fled Afghanistan with her family after her father was killed, and arrived in the US as a refugee 20 years ago.

Nazifa: and getting here with no language, nothing, start from zero to make a life.

Andrea Smardon: You could say Nazifa has "made it" in America and she's busy with a high-powered job that is more than full time. So *why* does she take it upon herself to help the Afghans arriving in Utah? We're going to dive deeper into Nazifa's story to find out what happened to her when *she* first arrived in the US and why she's driven to help these latest arrivals.

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Andrea Smardon and this is Stranger Becomes Neighbor. Episode 2 – A Personal Connection.

(Music ends)

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa was 15-years-old when her family got a call telling them to pack their bags. They were finally going to leave Pakistan where they had been living as refugees. Three years earlier the family was forced to flee their home in Afghanistan as the Taliban took control. A refugee organization had plane tickets for them to the US. First stop New York City. All they had was packed in a single suitcase for the entire family of seven.

Nazifa: We only had like maybe two pair of clothes. We were making enough money to pay monthly rent and put food on the table. That's about it.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa, her mother, and five younger siblings were ready to start over in an unknown land. But they did not make it to New York that day.

President Bush: Two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center in an apparent terrorist attack on our country.

Andrea Smardon: Their plane tickets were for September 11, 2001. Every plane in North American airspace was grounded for the first time in history.

The attack prompted the US to start a war in Afghanistan, a country that was harboring 9/11 mastermind and Saudi-born Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. By December, Taliban fighters surrendered to Northern Alliance forces. The group that had persecuted Nazifa's family was defeated or so it seemed. As we know now, the war would last for much longer. In fact, it would be the longest war in American history.

By early 2002, Nazifa and her family were booked on another flight. This time, they made it to New York, where the twin towers had been erased from the skyline. They went through extensive screening.

Nazifa: Security was really tough. Then we got stuck in JFK for six hours, and it got really dark at night by the time we had all our fingerprints.

Andrea Smardon: After 3 days of travel, they were descending into their final destination. Nazifa's mother looked out the airplane window, and saw a valley surrounded by mountains covered in snow.

Nazifa: It was all mountain and my mom said, Oh my gosh, after all this three days are sending us back to Afghanistan. (laughs)

Andrea Smardon: For a moment, the terrain looked so much like her homeland, that Nazifa's mother thought they were headed back to the country they had fled.

Airplane speaker: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Salt Lake City. The local time is.... (fade under)

Andrea Smardon: They had trouble believing they were really going to live in the US.

Nazifa: That's how we felt, because, I mean, we never heard of a refugee program when we were coming, so everybody was actually laughing at us in Pakistan making joke that nobody can go to America for free.

Andrea Smardon: But there they were. A case worker dropped Nazifa and her family at an apartment in Salt Lake City.

Nazifa: And then he was gone. And we were left by ourselves for like the whole weekend.

Andrea Smardon: They were safe and they were free. But they were also utterly alone.

Nazifa: We didn't know how to speak English. There were no Afghan family next to us. There were no phone, So that's how I experienced the first two days of America.

Andrea Smardon: Really, for the first 20 days, Nazifa says they only communicated with their caseworker, who would stop by about once a week and help them go to appointments like the Social Security Office.

But then Nazifa says, one of the few Afghan families that already lived in Utah found out they were there, and brought them the familiar tastes and smells of home.

Nazifa: They came in and they brought you know, the Afghan rice, they brought us oil, they brought us food they brought us halal meat. So that's the first time we felt like we were welcomed, cuz like some of the community member came in and visited us.

Andrea Smardon: In March, they were invited to a Persian New Year's celebration called Nowruz that happens in the spring, a time to celebrate renewal and rebirth. There Nazifa says she met a woman, a doctor from Iran along with her husband from Germany.

Nazifa: She took us under her umbrella and said I'm gonna volunteer this family and then she was like, you know the biggest, I say, godmother/godfather to our family.

Andrea Smardon: She tutored Nazifa and her siblings in math and chemistry. But she also had first hand knowledge about achieving success as an immigrant.

Nazifa: Everything that I learned was from her because she said, Don't focus on getting a job or making money, only focus on how to get educated.

Andrea Smardon: She even helped the family move to the east side of the city where she thought the schools were better. She wouldn't let Nazifa and her siblings watch TV. During the week, they spent their time doing homework and learning English

Nazifa: And then she would come and pick us up on the weekend and take us around Utah. We saw all the parks, we did all the activities that was possible. swimming, skiing. Like everything that we were able to embrace the American life I think that was through volunteers.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa had missed several critical years of school as a child, but she was determined to go to college. Yet another volunteer stepped in to help, this one an attorney.

Nazifa: She took over some of the responsibility, hired a private tutor for us to have to learn English. writing classes for me prepare for college applications. We had maybe for the first 10 years, a lot of people were jumping in to help us.

Andrea Smardon: It sounds like these mentor relationships really made a big difference.

Nazifa: Yeah, really, really, I don't think we would have succeeded if we didn't have good mentoring. But I was really strict on myself. I worked when I turned 16, got a job, worked full time and go to college and worked really hard. And all my sisters kind of followed the same. They all work full time and went to college. And every one of us actually had a college degree including my mom.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa shows me in her dining room where other people might display artwork, there's a wall of more than half a dozen framed diplomas.

Nazifa: So that's kind of some of our diplomas on the wall, yeah, (laughs) (fade under)

Andrea Smardon: By 2016, Nazifa had both an MBA and an accounting degree; and was working in the financial services industry. Her sister had become a medical device engineer. All the mentoring and the hard work had paid off. For the first time since they had fled their homeland, Nazifa, her sister, and her mother traveled back to Kabul. They decided to set up a non-profit foundation to sponsor education especially for girls and women. They called their organization HOPE for Afghanistan. But in 2021, everything they had worked for would come crashing down.

Nazifa watched Afghanistan fall back into the hands of the Taliban just as it had when she was a child.

Nazifa: My mom was crying because her sisters are still in Afghanistan, and then two weeks that they were doing evacuation, I have reached out to everybody. I probably called the senator's office every day say, Hey, can you get a visa for my family? You know, my mom's sister, my cousins, that their lives are in danger.

I don't think they even bother returning your phone call. You know, situation was changing everyday, right? We didn't have the time to wait for them to return your voicemail in two weeks when evacuation is already over.

Andrea Smardon: As the window was closing to evacuate people, Nazifa realized she could not help her family, and she could not help those she had been supporting in Afghanistan with her foundation. After all she had achieved, she was powerless.

Nazifa: I was like, so disappointed. I thought, I all my hard work in America is worth nothing. If you have, you know, no connection, no power.

Andrea Smardon: The teachers and the female students Nazifa had been sponsoring were in danger if they stayed in Afghanistan, and she could not protect them.

Nazifa: I was like, Oh, my gosh, I can't even help anybody. Like these teachers that, you know, served in our nonprofit, they're reaching out to me, and I have no answer for them, right? Because we can't help them.

Andrea Smardon: It seemed there was nothing she could do but then she thought about what it was like for *her* when she first arrived in Utah, starting from zero, and the people that showed up when she was most alone.

Nazifa: You know, with all my anger and frustration and disappointment, maybe it's time to focus on these new families to give them the experience that I felt in America 20 years ago. The help that I received that I succeeded, these family deserve too.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa worked hard to get where she is and to achieve the independence that she's so proud of, but this is not one of those bootstrap stories. She insists she could not have done it alone. Nazifa wants to give these new Afghan arrivals the same kind of welcoming and mentorship that she received But with hundreds coming, she's going to need help.

After the break, Nazifa attempts to mobilize an army of volunteers and we find out what happens for 16-year-old Baran after her first cold night in Salt Lake City.

[Break]

Andrea Smardon: When Nazifa told me she was organizing a Thanksgiving dinner to introduce the new Afghans with people here, I thought it would be a great opportunity to find some subjects to follow for the podcast, and I thought Nazifa could make introductions and translate where needed. I pictured an intimate gathering - one long table with a few refugees and a few community members.

Andrea Smardon: Hi, how are you?

Andrea Smardon: But when I arrived in the parking lot at an Islamic Center south of Salt Lake City on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, it was clear *this* was something else.

Nazifa: Hi, hi, thanks for coming!

Andrea Smardon: There are a lot of people here and it's lively.

Afghans are picking through piles of donated used clothes, shoes and jackets. Kids from Afghanistan and kids from Utah are running and swinging on the playground. Nazifa wearing a bright green dress is flitting about, meeting people, introducing others.

Nazifa: We tried to tell the community to invite everybody so that's how everyone is here.

Andrea Smardon: Yeah, how many do you have?

Nazifa: I think about 400 people maybe?

Andrea Smardon: Oh!

Andrea Smardon: This is way bigger than I thought, and Nazifa is quickly moving on to talk with others. There are new Afghan arrivals, more established Afghan Americans, volunteers, and military veterans.

Nazifa is talking to one veteran to see if he could help her with the teachers she's been supporting who are stuck in Afghanistan.

Carl: So I'm doing the kind of rescue part is what I'm involved in.

Nazifa: Oh my gosh, I need to talk to you!

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa and her green dress disappear inside the Islamic Center, but then I meet a woman named Jennie Hua. If Nazifa is amassing an army of volunteers, Jennie might be the informal general, wearing a floppy newsboy cap, and armed with a winning smile.

Jennie: Yeah, I've been helping Nazifa. I just met her at an Afghan event, And she needed a ton of help. So I'm like, Okay, I found my spot.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie is a stay-at-home mom with 5 kids. Her family only recently moved to Utah from the east coast for her husband's job at the very beginning of the pandemic.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie lives about an hour's drive south from the city, but even though she's far from where the refugees are housed, she's been mobilizing her neighbors, many of whom she's only recently met.

Jennie: And she asked if we could find volunteers to help, you know, kind of partner, a family with a family so that we could help them with that. Of course, the agencies are doing that as well, but they're so overloaded because so many people came at the same time. So my friend Audrey, Audrey.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie waves over 17-year-old Audrey who is here with her father.

Jennie: Audrey helped us, like her family is moving soon. And so since they're moving, they gathered so many things, to donate, and to help.

Andrea Smardon: Then Jennie introduces me to another volunteer she's recruited, her husband's colleague, who tells me she's been handling the back-end tech support.

Hanna: I'm the wizard, the organizing of the Google Docs and just gathering and disseminating information.

Andrea Smardon: So you'd like with all the contacts all the donations?

Hanna: Yeah, exactly. Yep. (fade under)

Andrea Smardon: This group of self-appointed volunteers is already getting so big that they need a wizard to keep track of all the connections. I'm realizing Jennie is not just any volunteer. She's a connector who functions like a multiplier making things happen. Jennie is also the one who used her church connections to introduce Nazifa and Dane who visited the family in the hotel in the last episode.

It's gradually sinking in that this isn't just a few individuals volunteering a few hours of their time. This is a network. Even though there is a whole system that already exists to help refugees, I'm witnessing what seems like a parallel grassroots organization forming before my eyes.

Even with federal funding and the existing local agencies dedicated to the task, there is still a need for people to make human connections at the ground level.

I start to head inside the Islamic Center when I run into the military veteran that Nazifa was talking to earlier.

Carl: I'm Commander Carl Sullivan, US Navy retired.

Andrea Smardon: Carl says he and his wife made the two hour drive from their rural home in central Utah to deliver donated clothes and to support these Afghans who he views as allies.

Carl: I was there in Kandahar and long story but I did quite a bit there.

Andrea Smardon: Carl is standing in front of the playground, kids playing all around him. But this lively gathering that has so far felt a bit like a day at the beach was about to head out into some deep waters.

When Carl served in Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012, he relied on local translators.

Carl: I worked every day with my interpreters who saved my life, and who did everything for us. They were the heroes.

Andrea Smardon: Carl says when the US was withdrawing from Afghanistan, he tried to help evacuate the interpreters he worked with when he was there.

Carl: When the airport was falling, we were waiting on messages we got from the State Department. Please stay and we're going to get you out. Never came. And then finally the 30th of August came so we figured out a way to get them on a bus that was German

sponsored. We had the way to get in the gates and the contacts that we had at the airport fell through the State Department that the DoD would not help us so we had the bus to freedom and I have all these photos of them. And then they had to go home. And so it was just the most heart wrenching thing.

Andrea Smardon: After several failed attempts at evacuation, he says he's been trying to keep 8 families that he knows in Afghanistan alive.

Carl: Now we have what's called shepherds, and we have flocks. And there are over a thousand shepherds, like myself holding on to X amount of people, every day trying to figure out how to get them out. And the flocks are there starving to death. So now I'm sending \$2,000 a month to keep my families fed, \$300 per family. And if they don't get it, they will die. There are many, many like me that are trying to hold on, desperately trying to keep people alive, and find a way to continue the funding until somehow they're able to find a way out of the country.

Andrea Smardon: Carl says every Afghan here is close to someone who didn't make it, and they've been asking for his help.

Carl: I've had non-stop people here since I've been here telling, please save me. What can you do to help me because I'm kind of the rescue connected guy.

There's three or four husbands today that say my wife's trapped over there on the run, they're going to be killed. My brother was just killed last week. One gentleman here, I just talked to.

Everybody has a story of someone that is on the run trying to fight for their lives.

It is incredible this is a disaster and what's amazing is no one covers it. Why is that I wonder?

Andrea Smardon: Now that evacuations are over, he says public attention is already fading, but for military veterans like himself who made a commitment, they cannot let their Afghan allies go.

Carl: They were Command Sergeant Major. They were people who served our country for over 10 years. And saved countless American lives and did all kinds of things for us. And now we've turned our back on them.

Andrea Smardon: Carl says the Taliban are targeting those who worked with Americans, and they are documenting what they do to US allies. He knows one Navy Seal who has the footage.

Carl: They sent a video to him the Taliban did they videotaped the beheadings of his shepherd families. And then they told him that we're coming for you in the United States.

Andrea Smardon: Carl and others like him feel like they are the only ones keeping these people alive, and for some, it's too much to take.

Carl: We have had four Navy SEALs, in the last two weeks take their lives.

Andrea Smardon: It's hard to process the weight of what Carl is saying, But it feels like he just handed me this heavy rock and I don't know what to do with it, but I can't put it down. Later, I'll do some research and find out that most veterans who served in Afghanistan are suffering. In a population that already had mental health struggles, one survey revealed that since the Taliban takeover, 75% of Afghan vets polled were experiencing new or worsening symptoms of depression 64% new or worsening thoughts of suicide.

Andrea Smardon: Veterans like Carl are connected in a way that is hard for a civilian like myself to grasp. Connected doesn't even seem like a strong enough word it's more like he's bound. He cannot forget. And his fate is tied to his allies.

Carl: Myself, my life is just completely unended [sic] with this. But we love these people, and we're not going to give up until they get out.

Andrea Smardon: Carl moves on to talk with more Afghans who want his help, but I need a minute to process what I've just heard.

Many of us were moved when we saw the evacuation of Afghanistan, but even though our country waged war there for 20 years, most of us don't have that same sense of commitment. For Carl and others who we'll meet in this series, it is the personal connection that changes things. When you meet someone, look them in the eyes and make a promise, it redefines who you are and what you stand for. It happens in the military where soldiers put their lives on the line, but as we'll hear in this podcast, it happens among neighbors too.

Nazifa: You guys want to come inside?

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa ushers the last of us inside, where the shelves for shoes are already filled, so I just add mine to a pile on the floor. We enter into a big open space normally used for prayer, and I realize just how many people are here. Maybe a hundred folding chairs on the carpet are filled. Everyone else is sitting on the floor or standing.

Nazifa stands near the back between two of her sisters looking out on the hundreds of people she and others have assembled.

I thought we were coming in to eat, but there is a presentation with slides projected on the front wall.

It's about the Hazara people. Nazifa and most of the people at this gathering are Hazara an ethnic minority in Afghanistan that has been persecuted as far back as they can remember. I realize, these refugees have never really felt at home anywhere in the world. Many allied themselves with Americans in hopes of transforming Afghanistan into a more inclusive home.

Some leaders from the Hazara community offer advice for how to succeed in the US, encouraging the new arrivals to work hard and become self-reliant. I notice that Nazifa is quietly approaching all the new Afghans she hasn't met, putting their names and phone numbers in her book.

Finally food is served in another room where there are long cafeteria style tables. I guess I was expecting the traditional turkey and mashed potatoes, but it's traditional Afghan food chicken in a thick sauce, greens, flat bread, rice, and salad everything cooked and served by volunteers.

While I'm in line for food, I ask Nazifa what she's hoping to do here.

Nazifa: We just wanted to introduce all the community member, especially the newer getting introduced, the ones that's been here longer so they can get the resources, you know, help and I didn't there's a lot of people that I know I haven't seen them or I don't know them it's hard to get everybody's home right? So it was nicer to just get them all here. And they get to eat the meal and then get to know everybody.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa says she'll introduce me to people after the meal, but then she disappears.

I must look lost after I get my food, and an old woman beckons me to come sit next to her. She does not speak English. I set down my recorder, while I try to eat chicken off the bone with a plastic fork, and struggle to figure out how to overcome the language barrier. I meet a young woman who has lived here for a bit. I try to ask her about herself, but she either can't or won't answer my questions in English. If this Thanksgiving event is about making connections with the new arrivals, I feel like I'm failing.

Down at the other end of the table, I notice that Hannah, the tech support wizard with the Google Doc, is talking with an Afghan friend, one of the new arrivals. When I get closer, I can see they're using a translator app. The woman is trying to teach her some basics in Dari.

Afghan woman Hari: Good afternoon, baad az zohr bekheir

Hannah: Baad az zohr bekheir

Afghan woman Hari: Baad az zohr bekheir. zohr

Hannah: zohr (fade under)

Afghan woman Hari: Since I've lost Nazifa, I'm looking for a translator and I meet Selim, a tall, thin 14-year-old who says he arrived almost 2 years earlier just before the beginning of the pandemic. His father worked along with the US military as a leader of Afghan special forces.

Selim: When we came here the pandemic start, the COVID pandemic and we were at home for like eight or nine months and it was really hard but anyways, we passed it. We survived. It was bad days.

Andrea Smardon: I think about that scary, isolated time when everything was shut down and we were deciding who to include in our small bubbles. I'm trying to imagine being a new immigrant on top of it all. Selim says it was very lonely, but it's better now that more of the Afghan community have arrived.

Selim: Every weekend they come to our home where we go into their home so they don't get depressed. That's why we and that's why I mean my family we're always trying to help the newcomers. So they don't feel like you're really alone. Right now, we're like a family.

Andrea Smardon: I spot Jennie's newsboy cap in between tables and it looks like she's managing to communicate. Some teen girls are helping to translate. She's on a mission to connect people with sewing machines.

Jennie: Because almost everyone I've met has asked me for a sewing machine.

Andrea Smardon: The women are having trouble finding modest clothes that cover their bodies. Many of them have sewing skills and Jennie says they can make clothes for themselves.

Jennie: First they want a rug, and then a sewing machine. Those are, and also bicycles. Because bicycles and bike trailers is a great way to go grocery shopping when you don't have a car. It's so hard to like take the bus to the grocery store. So we're trying to collect bicycles and bike trailers.

We've been here a couple hours, and once the food is done, a lot of people have left. Outside a core group of organizers are still chatting.

Nazifa: They all give me their phone numbers.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa and Jennie are coordinating on the next steps. Nazifa has many more names and numbers in her book now.

Jennie: we could, you know, create a list of the steps that people need to take, and then give that out so that other people can go and help each family.

Nazifa: Yeah, yeah. Okay.

Andrea Smardon: They talk about how they have established the model helping a few families, but Jennie lives far away, and Nazifa has a full time job. They need to figure out how to scale it.

They worry about what will happen when the agencies stop paying for cell phone plans after 3 months, especially since most new arrivals don't have bank accounts to pay for service.

Nazifa: Especially like Internet, right? Wi Fi. Cell phone, like who's gonna pay for these?
Jennie; Yeah... (fade under)

Andrea Smardon: There are problems yet to solve, but there is also this sense that they're working on it together.

Nazifa: So we'll talk to you later, thank you!

Jennie: See ya!

Andrea: Really good to meet you.

Nazifa: Thank you, thank you Andrea.

Andrea Smardon: As I drive home, I realize this sense of togetherness, this solidarity, feels refreshing. It wasn't just one person helping another person, it was a whole community coming together.

I think about 14-year-old Selim, how excited he is that he has more friends now to spend time with on the weekends. I think about Nazifa, who had earlier felt hopeless and powerless to help, standing at the back of the Islamic Center in her bright green dress with her arms around her sisters looking out on the 400 people she's assembled. Jennie beckoning to her teenage neighbor and scheming to get bicycles and sewing machines, And Carl, the US navy veteran, on the edge of the playground, who bears such a heavy weight of responsibility, who feels like the world has already lost interest. On this day at least, he's not bearing it alone.

After months of isolation, It is our newest neighbors who have brought us together.

(Door sound)

When I get home, I'm exhausted.

And I realize I've been living at a distance, monitoring the world's dramas on my laptop, sequestered in my home where it feels safe, but I don't think I know what it means to be part of a community that is there for one another in a time of need. In any case, something makes me want to follow these people

It started with Nazifa, who led me to Jennie, who eventually led me to 16-year-old Baran.

When Baran told me the story of her terrible first night in Utah, it was the spring of 2022 and the snow had melted. She was sitting in a comfy chair, the apartment was warm and fully furnished. She was there with her older sister who we'll call Mina. Baran and Mina talked about how alone and scared they felt on that first night in Utah,

The next morning, they ventured out onto the snowy walkway connecting the apartments to try talking to neighbors in the complex.

Baran: When we go outside, we see that there is an Afghan family and they say that to each other goodbye, goodbye in our language. And my sister said oh, they're Afghans.

Andrea Smardon: Not only were they Afghans, they spoke the same language.

Baran: And when we go there we talk with them. And they know a woman by the name of Nazifa.

Andrea Smardon: The Afghan family contacted Nazifa. And Nazifa called Jennie.

Jennie: She asked me if I would like to go visit with her. And she said that they were in a little bit of a dire situation.

Andrea Smardon: By that afternoon, Nazifa and Jennie went together to visit Baran, her sister and their 4-year-old niece.

Jennie: They did not have winter clothes. Their little niece did not have a winter coat. and the blankets that they were given on their beds were very thin and their power was out. So they were cold. It was dark. They were just pretty frightened of being, like, in this completely foreign place, all alone and not knowing how to navigate at all.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie had been planning to meet her own family at a restaurant that night, but she didn't want to leave this family alone in their cold apartment, so she invited them along.

Jennie: At least it was like, in a warm building. You know, you're not in a dark hole. So that was nice, you know, like kind of lift their spirits and then Nazifa went shopping for them and brought them food the next day.

Andrea Smardon: Over the next couple of weeks, Jennie gathered donations from her neighbors furniture, wall hangings, warmer bedding. Then one neighbor who always donates to a family every Christmas season gifted them \$1000 to go on a shopping

spree. And when the 4-year-old developed an eye infection, Jennie's family got her medicine.

Jennie: I went back to visit a few times. And Baran said to me, she said, Please come back, please don't forget us. And it just like, the arrow just shot through me. I'm like, I live 45 minutes away from you, like, I cannot come here. It's just not realistic. Like, I probably am not going to be able to come here and fulfill the needs that you need met.

Andrea Smardon: Jennie thought they needed help from people who lived closer, from their neighbors. She didn't know it, but just two and half blocks away from Baran and her family lived Kerry Wickman, a social worker. A couple of years earlier in 2019, Kerry went to Greece with her daughter to volunteer with Yazidi refugees fleeing from ISIS in Northern Iraq. She said it was life changing.

Kerry Wickman: I'll just say the predominant feeling in the camp was of love and gratitude, I don't know that I've ever felt it sustained over that amount of time. With that much intensity, and it changed me. It absolutely changed me.

the most beautiful feeling of this is exactly what you're supposed to be doing right now. And these people need you and you need them.

Andrea Smardon: The way Kerry describes it, a spark had been lit.

Kerry Wickman: It begins to feel like this flame inside you, that you, you just want to help where help is needed.

I remember before I left talking to an acquaintance and she said, Oh, you're going to go, you know, be like white savior Barbie. And she just started talking about people that go over there and put in their, their weekend or their week of time helping people and just feel so good about themselves and can come back and share the story. And I said, wow, I don't even know what that feels like. No, this doesn't feel like it's some weekend project. We were there for two months.

Andrea Smardon: But when Kerry returned she was drawn back into her regular routines and responsibilities in the US, back to her job helping people with their problems as a social worker, leading the women's organization in her church, and parenting two young adults with challenges of their own. Shortly after that, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down life as we knew it.

Kerry Wickman: You know, life is busy, and it's crazy and all through COVID I wasn't, you know, reaching out or doing much.

Andrea Smardon: Then, around Christmas time, she got a call from a church leader, letting her know there was an Afghan family in her neighborhood who needed help.

It was just like, oh, this family just moved in, you know, if you have some time, and you could go check in on them was kind of the and I thought Oh yeah, sure, I can do that. We will, we'll get that done. And then I think a week or two went by and I hadn't done anything.

Andrea Smardon: But then Kerry got a personal call from Jennie Hua. Jennie contacted Kerry directly because she was president of the Relief Society, the women's organization in her LDS Church, which often helps families in the neighborhood.

Kerry Wickman: I think it was a Sunday or something like that. And she took me over to their home, two and a half blocks away from me. And that was all it took. I met them, fell in love with them instantly. But it is amazing how even having had that experience in Greece that it took me a minute.

Andrea Smardon: You had to meet them in person

Kerry Wickman: I did, that's it. That's it.

Andrea Smardon: At that first meeting in January, Kerry was amazed as she learned about Baran's ambitions to be a doctor, how she had planned to take the exam to get into medical school 2 years early, and how she had taught herself the English that she knew watching Prison Break. Kerry couldn't understand why Baran wasn't enrolled in the local high school yet.

Kerry Wickman:

We just said immediately. Let's get you going. Why are we wasting time? And then once I met her two days later, she was registered for school, and then got a phone call.

Andrea Smardon: The refugee agency called Baran. They were concerned that a strange person was enrolling her in school, something that is supposed to be handled by an authorized person from the agency.

Baran: They called me, why did you go with them? Do you know which kind of people is this? In America, we have different kinds of people. You shouldn't trust anybody in here.

Don't allow anybody to come to your house. And don't go to school with her alone. Your sister have to be with you.

Andrea Smardon: I asked Aden Batar of Catholic Community Services about this, and he explained that the resettlement agencies want to make sure children are enrolled in the proper grade for their age and education level. And they have these policies in place to protect refugees. They're in a vulnerable position, not knowing the culture or the laws, and could become victims of fraud or abuse by someone pretending to help. Volunteers who work with the agencies have to undergo training and get a background check before they're connected with refugees.

But Kerry didn't go through the agency. She met this family through Jennie. She sees herself as a regular person trying to help her neighbors in her own way.

Kerry: They're like family so I just do the things I would do for my family.

Andrea Smardon: How would you describe your relationship with Kerry?

Baran: She's our mom. (laughter) And You're both my mom and my best friend. But just, there's I don't know there's a kind of relationship. We are really close with Kerry.

Andrea Smardon: What has Kerry done for you?

Baran: A lot of things. Even we think that if we didn't meet Jennie and if Jennie couldn't help us or introduce Kerry for us. Just my sister decided to come back to Afghanistan. Because it's really hard. If Kerry was not in here, we couldn't do anything.

Andrea Smardon: On the day I visited, Kerry was arranging rides for Baran to go to school. She was also helping her sister Mina figure out how to complete a background check so she could get a job at a daycare. She's raised money for the family from her network on social media, she's taken them to appointments with workforce services and legal offices.

Kerry says it's a big commitment on top of an already busy life, but it's a relationship that she values.

Kerry: They fill my heart every day I'm with them. I come home and my husband says you're glowing.

Andrea Smardon: Kerry does a lot of things for this family, but it's not clear what she can do about the fact that their 4-year-old niece, who we'll call Ava, is here without her parents. Remember Ava went through the airport gates in the arms of her aunt Mina. Her mother, father and older brother never made it.

Ava: Ready go, get it, catch!

Andrea Smardon: On one visit, Kerry and Ava were throwing a large bouncy ball around the living room.

Ava: Starting over again, bring overhead, then it's coming to you.

Kerry: OK (ball noise) (Laughing) Good job

Ava: Are you kidding me?

Kerry: Did you hear what she said, 'are you kidding me'? Are you kidding me? Where does she learn this stuff?

Andrea Smardon: She's clearly learning English and adapting at a rapid pace as children do. But no one can replace her parents, and while Kerry is doing everything she can to love and support the family that is here, reuniting Ava with her mother and father is something she doesn't have the power to do on her own.

Baran says they've sent Ava's parents videos of their daughter speaking English, a language they don't speak themselves, and they are amazed.

Baran: Actually, they can't believe it, because even before we came here, she couldn't speak our language very well.

Andrea Smardon: But when they call home, Ava doesn't want to talk to her parents. Baran says the 4-year-old doesn't understand why her mom and dad are not with her, and she's still holding out hope that they will come for her.

Baran: For example, when she sees an airplane, she say that, Oh, my mom and my dad is coming to home, and let's go to the airport.

Andrea Smardon: Meanwhile, Ava is afraid of losing the only people she has left. She doesn't like to go anywhere without Mina or Baran. One time at the grocery store, Baran lost Ava, and she did not take it well.

Baran: And she was crying. And when I like, found her, say why do you left me behind? Why do you left me? And even like, for a day she, she didn't talk with me.

Andrea Smardon: Baran suspects that Ava thinks her parents abandoned her.

Baran: And I think maybe this is the reason and she felt like her family left her behind.

Andrea Smardon: Speaking in Dari, Mina explains she's under a lot of pressure to be the caretaker for her niece and younger sister, which is hard in a foreign country especially when you don't speak the language. Baran translates for her older sister.

Baran: Yeah, it is really hard because you feel that you're alone and you're the guardian of two children and you don't have anybody to talk with them or to ask a question from them. And it was really hard. It's a lot.

Andrea Smardon: But Mina says, she doesn't feel so alone now that Kerry is there.

While their life in Salt Lake City has gotten better, Baran and Mina are worried about their family back in Afghanistan who fled their home because they're afraid of what will happen if the Taliban finds them. And they are especially worried about their father who has had trouble breathing after contracting COVID, and needs oxygen. Kerry has been collecting money from her contacts to send back to Afghanistan. But Baran says, her father doesn't want to use all the money on himself.

Baran: When we talk with my father, he say that. I know that I need oxygen, but there is our neighbors, there's lots of people that need the money. And just he say that you have to help the other people too.

Kerry: He's so kind. Oh, that's just who he is. That's who he is.

Andrea Smardon: Baran says she's been thinking about what her father told her, that you should always help where you can, because maybe someday someone will help you when you need it.

Baran: I think God send Kerry for us because every time that we need something, or we faced with a problem, she comes and help us as we help other people in Afghanistan.

Andrea Smardon: Kerry is an honorary member of the family now, and that means facing challenges together, but also joys and milestones. She's been sending me recordings she makes on her phone. Mina learning how to drive

Mina: Stop, the light is red!

Kerry: My light, I'm turning left

MINA: OK, turn left

Andrea Smardon: Ava learning English with help from Kerry who she calls Mom.

Mina: Mom, mom, thank you so much!

Ava: Mom, mom, thank you so much!

Mina: You help me

Ava: You helfie

Mina: Thank you, thank you so much.

Ava: Thank you, thank you so much.

Kerry: You're welcome, baby.

Andrea Smardon: As I said earlier, this is not a bootstrap story. It's about the impact of personal connection.

And there are people like Baran, her sister and niece all over the country, maybe in your neighborhood. They could be a block and a half away, and you wouldn't know it.

Even someone like Kerry who is motivated to help might not have met this family, if it weren't for a phone call from Jennie. And Jennie wouldn't have known if it weren't for Nazifa. And Nazifa might not be in a position to help these new arrivals if it weren't for the mentors she met when she first arrived 20 years ago in this country.

It would be so easy for one of these links in the chain to fall through. To be a welcoming community takes more than one person being motivated to help. It's a good start, but it requires a whole series of connections. It takes a network.

In the next episode of Stranger Becomes Neighbor, we meet a young woman who you might meet checking out your groceries at Walmart. You would never know she was an Afghan soldier trained to work with American special forces.

Ellie: They had to ultimately be willing to sacrifice everything to do this position. Like they knew they will always be in danger from not only the Taliban or ISIS, but really from just regular people in Afghanistan that don't agree with women working outside of the home, let alone working in an elite unit, working alongside American soldiers.

Andrea Smardon: We'll meet American female soldiers who served with them.

Ellie: You can't walk away and leave something behind like that. We will forever care about these women.

Andrea Smardon: But the bonds of a sisterhood forged in war will be tested once they reach US soil.

[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.

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