

## **STRANGER BECOMES NEIGHBOR - EPISODE 5: The Need for Friendship**

**Andrea Smardon:** Under cover of darkness, ten Afghan fighters in full combat gear line up along the front wall of a house in Parwan province. One steps in front of the door, bangs four times, yells a warning, kicks the door open, then rushes in with his assault rifle drawn.

I'm watching rare footage of Afghan special forces in the midst of a night raid on a suspected Taliban bomb-making compound. This video from Al Jazeera is from 2013, but it gives me a glimpse into the secretive world of the Afghan National Strike Units in action.

These special forces, also known as the Zero Units are a clandestine antiterrorism force operating in partnership with the US intelligence community and the military, though the American government has released very little information about them. They captured and sometimes killed enemy targets from al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban, or Haqqani, and defended against incursions in government controlled areas. What we can say is that these Afghan special forces did much of the fighting and the dying in the war on terror in Afghanistan.

One former CIA officer told me that for every American casualty in the war, Afghans, including those in the Zero Units suffered 27 times as many.

Though we know so little about them, many of the Afghans who are now in our US communities served in these units. The father in one family I'm about to meet is one of them. In fact...

(car door closes)

**Andrea Smardon:** ...his family just moved into Jennie Hua's neighborhood.

I've pulled up in front of the address where Jennie sent me. I've driven 45 minutes south from Salt Lake City to this little town called Cedar Hills, a bedroom community built as high as possible on the slopes of Mount Timpanogos, one of the tallest peaks in the Wasatch range. This is the very edge of the population center. The end of the block fades up into mountain wilderness. Roads and sidewalks turn to trails and sagebrush. This quiet, well-groomed neighborhood is populated almost entirely by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Jennie isn't here yet, but I decide to go knock on the door of the basement apartment which is through a gate,

(Gate closing)

**Andrea Smardon:** and on the side of the house.

(Knock)

**Andrea Smardon:** There's no answer. I'm alone out here, except in the backyard, I spot a blond little head hiding near the swingset, a young spy, monitoring the stranger with headphones and a microphone. I think about how unlikely this situation is. To the east, trails lead up the mountains that are still capped with spring snow, to the west, there's a view over the whole valley descending into a deep blue lake. It's beautiful, but we're miles from refugee services. Why is this family living way out here?

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Andrea Smardon and this is Stranger Becomes Neighbor, episode 5, The Need for Friendship.

**[MUSIC ENDS]**

**Andrea Smardon:** The reason I was watching footage of Afghan special forces on a night raid was because the soldiers I've interviewed are tight-lipped about their experience. They don't talk much about it. Until the Taliban takeover and the evacuation from Afghanistan, these US-backed counter-terrorist forces were accustomed to secrecy.

(Speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** Speaking through a translator, this Zero Unit fighter, who we'll call Muhammad, just says it was dangerous work. He says his goals and those of the Americans were aligned. Muhammad who is Hazara, a persecuted minority in Afghanistan, says they had a common enemy in the Taliban.

Muhammed's wife, who we'll call Aziza says when her husband was working, she never knew if he would come back alive.

(Aziza in Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** Anytime there was a suicide attack in Kabul, she worried. He didn't have access to a phone when he was on missions, and it would sometimes be weeks before she heard from him.

They accepted these risks, but Muhammed never thought about what would happen if the Americans left.

(Speaking Dari)

**Translator for Muhammed:** No, we were not thinking of the day that now we see in Afghanistan.

**Andrea Smardon:** Muhammed was worried about his wife and their two children. And the baby they were expecting.

**Translator for Muhammed:** My biggest fear is their security, my family's security

**Andrea Smardon:** Until the evacuation in August 2021, the outside world knew very little about these secretive units, but now people like Muhammed are living among us. It was not what he planned, but his choice to work with Americans brought him to the US,

(Muhammed speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon (continued):** and landed him in Miami, Florida. Growing up in the arid land of Afghanistan, Muhammed had never felt such tropical heat and humidity.

(Muhammad speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** It was so hot, he says. Muhammed, Aziza, who was pregnant, and their two young children found themselves stuck in a hotel in Miami.

(Muhammad speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** There was no one to help us, he says. Well, there was the refugee agency, but what Muhammad means is he didn't have any friends in Florida. Refugees are usually at the mercy of the government and the non-profit agencies charged with helping them. But this family made another choice. After a month, they took a gamble. They abandoned the government resources offered to them in Florida, and decided to head to Utah. Aziza's sister lived there. And so did a couple men Muhammed knew

from the Zero Units. Basically, they jumped and just hoped their friends and family would be able to catch them.

[SOUND: Partying, music, dancing]

**Andrea Smardon:** Shortly after they arrived, in early Spring 2022, Muhammed and Aziza were invited to a party in a suburb south of Salt Lake City, where about 15 recently arrived Afghans were packed into a little duplex. Downstairs the women and children were dancing while the men gathered upstairs.

Muhammad and Aziza didn't know it then, but coming to this party would set their lives on a different course. While there, they met Jennie Hua, who just happened to drive up that night from her home in Cedar Hills for the party. She heard their story that they left Miami in a leap of faith and came to Salt Lake City. Aziza was obviously pregnant, and Jennie was worried about her.

The next day, she went to visit them where they were staying in a two-bedroom apartment with another Afghan family they knew from the zero units.

**Jennie Hua:** They came to Utah with, their only possession was three blankets. They were staying in the spare bedroom of one of the other new Afghan families who I've been working with

**Andrea Smardon:** Their hosts were recent arrivals themselves, and were dependent on government support.

**Jennie Hua:** They're staying in a spare bedroom and sharing food stamps, with a family, another family who has nothing. They had a spare bed and then they had the two kids sleeping on the floor. And then she was due in like, two and a half weeks - three weeks.

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie was determined to find them a home before the baby was born. But she didn't have a lot of time or options. There was an affordable housing shortage. She thought about her neighbors David and Aurora Ninow and their empty basement apartment. Jennie didn't have to say much to convince Aurora, a mother of four.

**Aurora:** When I found out the mom was pregnant, and I had just barely had my fourth baby, my bleeding heart was like, (gasp) they have no car, no caseworker, no

connections. How is she going to get to the hospital? And I was like, Okay, you need to move in, like now.

**Andrea Smardon:** But Jennie's neighborhood was far from the family and friends Muhammed and Aziza had in Salt Lake City. At first, they declined the offer.

But then they talked to Selim's father, the commander, who had seen Jennie in action. He convinced Muhammed that she and her neighbors would help his family with whatever they needed.

This was important, because the family would also be moving far from refugee services.

Normally, when a refugee leaves the place where they're resettled, the agencies are no longer obliged to provide resources, so when Muhammed and Aziza moved to Utah they had given that up. But they were lucky; another refugee organization, the Asian Association of Utah, agreed to help them. Jennie talked to the agency about the idea of moving the family to her neighborhood.

**Jennie Hua:** They were wary, because it's far away from their offices. And I was like, I will take, you know, we will take care of them, we will help them. I'll advocate for them and keep in contact with you guys. And I'm like, they're going to have a really nice experience integrating here. And we'll keep open communication and everything. And so they decided, yeah, okay, we'll let you guys go ahead and try that.

**Andrea Smardon:** The agency agreed to pay their rent for a limited time, and the family moved into the basement apartment. But when Jennie promised to help them with whatever they needed, she may not have realized just how intimately involved she would get.

**Jennie Hua:** I said, when you have the baby, do you want me to find a way to get your sister here so that she can be with you? She's like, No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I want you to come for the baby and my sister to watch the kids at home. And I'm like, how about your husband? Do you want him to come for the baby? And she's like, I guess he can come. (laughs) So I'm like, Okay, I'm like, let me get this, right. You want me to come when you deliver your baby, and you want your sister to watch the kids? And she's like, yes. And I'm like, Okay!

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie was surprised and honored to be asked, but for Aziza, it may have been a practical matter. She didn't know what to expect giving birth in a US

hospital. Having an American with her could be helpful. Aziza's children didn't speak English so having her sister watch them along with her sister's kids made sense.

Jennie was just hoping the baby would come at a time when she could slip away from her own family responsibilities.

**Jennie Hua:** It was a busy day. It was like tumbling and karate. And so I'm like, Okay, you go here, you go here and you go here and I just lined that up and told my husband to make dinner. I'm like, gotta deliver a baby.

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie told me it was a very intimate experience to have with someone she only knew for a couple of weeks.

**Jennie Hua:** It's like we grew up together since kindergarten or something. So yeah, the midwives like, husband, you go up there by her head and hold her hand. And she's like, you come down here and help me.

**Andrea Smardon:** At my request, Jennie made a recording on her phone at the hospital, but she didn't want to invade the family's privacy, so she just recorded her own thoughts when she had a moment alone.

**Jennie Hua (Voice Memo):** It's 11:05pm, and I feel so honored that my friends have asked me to come and experience this incredible moment with them. We've been waiting and watching and it's getting close to time to have the baby be born. Keep you posted.

**Andrea Smardon:** It was a long and difficult labor, but just as the doctors were considering interventions, the baby was born.

**Jennie Hua:** The doctors went out, and they give you that moment of peace.

**Andrea Smardon:** Aziza was exhausted and gave the baby to Jennie to hold.

**Jennie Hua:** he was just so sweet and precious, alert. Looking around. His eyes were open and just like his sweet soft cheeks were against my arm. And just looking at me and I just felt like wow, I'm your new auntie. How you doing? And that was a sweet, sweet, silent moment, together with a new family.

[MUSIC ENDS]

( Baby crying)

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Jennie):** Baby crying

**Jennie Hua:** It's a baby!

**Andrea Smardon:** About a month after the baby is born, is when I arrived in Jennie's neighborhood to meet the family for the first time.

**Jennie Hua:** You want to wake up and see the world?

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** Very new baby.

**Muhammed:** Yes.

**Andrea Smardon(Speaking to Muhammed):** Very young.

**Muhammed:** One month and 5 days.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** One month, five days? And Jenny was there the first day, right? (laughs)

**Jennie Hua:** Isn't he cute?

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie reaches out to take the baby, who is swaddled tightly with just his face and a tuft of hair sticking out.

**Jennie Hua:** I'm just going to get my baby fix and then I'll see you tomorrow.

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie's going to leave soon because it's time for English class.

**Jennie Hua:** Yeah. I have to hold him for a minute first, cuz he's so sweet.

**Andrea Smardon:** While Jennie coos at the baby, a volunteer named Carolyn has been setting up an easel with huge sheets of paper and large words printed on them with drawings along the side. It looks like something you might see in a kindergarten classroom.

**Carolyn:** What day is it today?

**Muhammed:** Wednesday,

**Carolyn:** It is, today is Wednesday.

**Andrea Smardon:** All I can think is this scene is a world apart from the video I watched of a night raid in Parwan Province.

**Carolyn:** Yes. And which month is it?

**Muhammed:** Monday, May and 25. Two zero 22

**Andrea Smardon:** Since this family is so far away from refugee services, Jennie has arranged for an English tutor to come to them.

**Jennie Hua:** She's a retired grade school teacher, and she also had training, teaching English language learning. So she comes three times a week in the afternoon.

**Andrea Smardon:** But Carolyn's tutoring is just one piece in a whole program that Jennie is putting together.

**Jennie Hua:** It's like three times a day. A couple of days are just two times a day. And then I think three times a week is three times a day. So they have a morning, afternoon and evening session... of English learning.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Jennie):** So, there's a volunteer basically coming every day?

**Jennie Hua:** There's more than one volunteer coming every day, yeah.

**Andrea Smardon:** As the English lesson comes to a close, Carolyn reads with the kids, and I get a chance to talk to Muhammad and Aziza. Though without a translator, our communication is limited.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** Are you learning a lot of English?

**Muhammed:** Yes, yes

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** You have many teachers now, yes?

**Muhammed:** Yes, good, yes, thank you



**Andrea Smardon:** Muhammed lists off other neighbors who have helped him with various things including babysitting, rides, donations. In fact, just before I arrived, a neighbor had taken them shopping to buy clothes for the family. Jennie says it takes many people, more than you might think.

**Jennie Hua:** I would say probably 12 people help them consistently on an ongoing basis. And still, I feel sort of swamped, just kind of guiding them and helping them to find their way and identify their goals, and then make plans to reach those goals. It's been a whirlwind.

**Andrea Smardon:** Their landlord Aurora who lives upstairs says she's constantly finding things on her porch - a box of diapers, or other baby supplies being donated. There's a steady stream of people coming by.

**Aurora:** Maybe we should, like, have visiting hours, or something. (laughs)

**Andrea Smardon:** Aurora says she's watched Muhammed's facial expressions change over the few weeks since he arrived.

**Aurora:** When he first came, he has seen so much war. And that that face of just that what he's experienced in his life, just that hardened, worn face and within like one month to see him smile so much, to see him laugh, to see him play with his kids - it's almost like he's a different person, even within like a month of being here.

[MONTAGE MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** Over the next few months, Jennie and the neighbors send me texts and photos. Someone takes Muhammed to a job interview at Walmart, someone donates a car, the 8-year-old girl upstairs is reading with the 8-year-old girl downstairs, there's a photo of Muhammed lying reclined in a dental chair. And then there are the fun things like a party in the basement apartment with platters of Afghan food and dancing, girls soccer games, kids sprawled on the trampoline, tie dying shirts in the backyard,

And in the summer, Jennie leaves me a voicemail saying she is taking Aziza and some of her friends to a lake.

**Jennie Hua:** Hi Andea, I just have to tell you about my latest adventure. Now, I'm taking three gals swimming for the first time ever in their lives.

**Andrea Smardon:** Aziza and her friends have watched their children play in pools, but they don't feel comfortable going swimming themselves in public.

**Jennie Hua:** They've never ever been. They insist on wearing long pants but they are going to get in the water, I just wanted to let you know how much fun we're having.

**Andrea Smardon:** Later, I talk to Muhammed and Aziza with a translator.

(Muhammed speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** They are very grateful to Jennie, to their landlords, and all the neighbors for everything they have done. Muhammed says he's surprised at how much support he has received in the US, coming here as a stranger. He says people don't even do so much for their own children in Afghanistan.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** So it was a good move?

**Translator for Muhammed:** Yeah, it was a good move.

**Andrea Smardon:** I ask them if they have had any moments of joy since they came to the US. And Muhammed's answer, given everything he's been through in his life, surprises me.

(Muhammed speaking in Dari)

**Translator for Muhammed:** Yeah, every moment is joyful for us.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** Every moment?

**Translator for Muhammed:** Every moment, yes.

**Andrea Smardon:** Every moment is joyful. This answer is heartwarming to hear. But it's also unexpected when you think about their inauspicious start in Miami. Their choice, which some might consider risky, to reject the path the US government laid out for them and put themselves in the hands of friends and then of perfect strangers, somehow worked out. But it might not have. I can't help but wonder, what about all the other evacuees?

It's a question that came up when I went to Jennie's neighborhood and talked with volunteers. Those helping with English classes actually hadn't met each other before,

and they were surprised to find out just how many people had been helping Muhammed, Aziza and their children. All these resources were being funneled to just one family; they wondered what about all the others?

In the spring of 2023, Jennie introduced me to someone who revealed a very different outcome for how things can go. His name is Arif Haidari, and his life situation is very similar to Muhammed's. He also served in the Afghan special forces, in fact the same Zero Unit. He and his wife have a young son, almost two years old, and a baby due in just over a month. He recently sent Jennie a picture not of a fun neighborhood event or a milestone achieved. It's a notice of eviction.

We'll meet this family after the break.

[BREAK]

(knocking on door)

**Andrea Smardon (At apartment):** Hello, I'm Andrea

**Andrea Smardon:** I'm visiting Arif's apartment with Jennie and a translator to find out more about his situation. He lives in a 2-story complex in West Valley City, the second largest city in Utah, just one block off from a busy road with two used car lots at the intersection. Not exactly like the waterfalls and snow capped peaks of Cedar Hills, but there are enough trees and grass amidst the pavement for some birds to make their home.

**Arif1\_IV.wav**

(Speaking Dari)

**Translator:** Thank you, come on in.

**Andrea Smardon (At apartment):** Ok, thank you.

**Andrea Smardon:** In Arif's living room, a deep red floral carpet covers the floor from wall to wall. The only furniture are cushions stacked up against the wall.

**2-year-old:** (Ahh!)

**Andrea (At apartment):** Ok, we have a little person here!

**Andrea Smardon:** We sit on the floor with Arif's son who plays with a few large legos.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Arif):** What is your son's name?

**Arif:** Ibrahim Bek

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Arif):** And your wife?

**Arif:** Nikbacht

**Andrea Smardon:** Do you want to come join?

**Andrea Smardon:** Arif's wife, who is almost eight months pregnant, declines to join the interview. Sometimes she hovers while we talk, and sometimes she's in the kitchen preparing food, while Arif fills me in on their predicament.

(Speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** Arif has been out of work for five months. A resettlement agency had been covering his rent until they stopped this month, and he didn't realize it until he got a notice that his rent is overdue. His apartment is about 1500 dollars a month and now he has a 900-dollar fine for late payment. According to an eviction notice, if he doesn't pay in 3 days, he will have to move out.

**Andrea Smardon (speaking to Arif):** Well that sounds really hard, stressful.

**Andrea Smardon:** Yes, he says, I don't know English. I don't know how to solve my problems. Jennie says she's worried about Arif's family.

**Jennie Hua:** Yeah, I mean, cause he got an eviction notice, so they're going to evict him, if he doesn't do something about it.

**Andrea Smardon:** The resettlement agencies have government funds to pay the rent for just about a year.

**Jennie Hua:** I think if you didn't get established during that, then you're in quite a predicament.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Jennie):** And Arif has been asking you for help?

**Jennie Hua:** Yeah, well help to find a job, and now help to figure out how not to get kicked out of his house.

**Andrea Smardon:** As I dig a little deeper, I learn that Arif's family has had some extra challenges on top of the language barrier and lack of work history in the country.

(Arif speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** He was employed at a hotel for 3 months, but his wife's health made keeping that job and getting her to medical appointments impossible. Communicating through a translator, it's not clear what her health issues are, but she is pregnant and has appointments every week, sometimes two in a day. Without family or a support system, he had to miss work to drive her and help her navigate the complicated American healthcare system. He's especially careful with her health as they've dealt with tragedy before. In Afghanistan, she was pregnant with their first child when she contracted COVID. And she was not allowed in the hospital. Their baby died at home in utero while Arif was at work. He's terrified that something like that could happen again and they would lose their baby.

(Arif speaking Dari)

Eventually, he had to make a choice, care for his wife or keep his job. He left the hotel job because he thought he could get another job, maybe one with more flexibility. But that turned out to be more challenging than he expected. He's applied for about 15 positions, but nothing has panned out. A couple of times, he says he thought he had a job, but after some training, he never started work and he didn't know why. That's how he ended up unemployed for five months.

But maybe his luck is changing. He says he's just landed a job with FedEx that starts the following week.

**Jennie Hua:** That's great! For this coming Monday?

**Translator:** Yes, this coming Monday.

**Jennie Hua:** That's awesome.

**Andrea Smardon:** He'll be a package handler, graveyard shift, so he can still drive to doctor appointments. But even with the promise of a new job, new stability, he won't get

paid for at least a week after he starts working. He still doesn't have the money to pay the rent. Their baby is coming soon, and they don't know if they will have a home.

I ask Arif if he knows his neighbors in the apartment complex, and he says no. The neighbors above him and to the right have all changed since he's been here.

Their son can't go out and play on his own, so he hasn't met any neighborhood children his age. The three of them spend most days inside their small apartment together.

Without a job, without a community to help them navigate this new world, they are limited to just trying to survive. If they do socialize, they gather with other Afghan families, but most of them don't live nearby. So they don't see friends very often, at least not on a daily basis.

It's like night and day when you compare it to Muhammed's situation. In both cases, Jennie is trying to help, but in one case, she recruited her neighborhood and built an entire network of support. Muhammed's family had a whole host of people coming by on a constant basis, giving them rides, taking care of their kids so they could go to job interviews and English classes, and inviting them to neighborhood gatherings. In Arif's case, she's tried to help where she could but she's just one person and she doesn't live nearby.

I ask Arif the same question I had asked Muhammed.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Arif):** Have you had any good or happy moments since you've come to the US?

(Arif speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** He says after they arrived in the US, his wife's mother died in Afghanistan. Then his aunt died in Iran. Understanding through translation is difficult, but I think he's trying to convey just how tough things have been. I'm not sure he can even contemplate my question. How can he think about moments of joy when he's not sure if his family will have a home in a few days. While they suffer through the heartbreak of so much loss, they're struggling just to survive.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Nikbacht):** What is this?

**Andrea Smardon:** After we wrap up the interview, Arif's wife lays a table cloth on the floor and sets out platters of food.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Nikbacht):** What did you make? This is a whole meal!

**Translator:** I can introduce...

There's onions, tomatoes, and eggs and this is beans and chickpeas for breakfast

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Arif's wife):** And this bread?

**Translator:** Yeah, it's homemade bread.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Nikbacht):** You made this? Thank you so much.

**Andrea Smardon:** As tasty as it looks, I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. They don't have the money to pay their bills, they're on the verge of homelessness, and they're giving me food which they can't afford. At the same time, I'm moved by their generosity.

**Jennie Hua:** Thank you so much. It was so, so good!

**Nikbacht:** You're welcome

**Jennie Hua:** Yeah, that's right! You're welcome.

**Andrea Smardon:** As we leave the apartment, Arif shows Jennie a message that's just come in on his phone. He doesn't recognize the number.

**Jennie Hua:** Oh, yeah, that's Luna

**Arif:** Luna?

**Andrea Smardon:** It's a message from Luna, a woman Jennie had contacted who works for the Muslim Civic League. It turns out Luna can help pay rent until he gets a paycheck.

**Jennie Hua:** Yeah, Luna says, can you go to her office to get the rent check?

**Arif:** OK

**Jennie Hua:** OK, so yes, you should go. Text her back and tell her what time you will come. Ok? Ok good, bye!

Hip, hip, hooray, yay, good!

**Andrea Smardon:** I wonder what would have happened if Jennie hadn't called Luna.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Jennie):** What would happen if you weren't here?

**Jennie Hua:** I don't know. That's crazy, right? Like, I don't know.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Jennie):** Like, would they end up homeless?

**Jennie Hua:** I guess, I cannot imagine being whoever would 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:** In the end, Arif ended up getting help covering the rent for May from another organization that helps immigrants and refugees. But that was only a temporary reprieve. Then they found out the rent was going to go up to 1800 dollars a month, and they needed to find something cheaper. Just like Muhammed's family the previous year, they were expecting a baby any day, but they didn't know where they would live when the baby came.

After this visit, I kept thinking about Arif's family. Their situation is so precarious, and they're just one family out of more than more than 80,000 Afghan evacuees in the US. They're trying to make it in a country where it's a struggle to find affordable housing for many people, let alone those who don't speak the language and have no US work history. Someone like Arif may have risked his life to execute night raids to further American interests, but now that he's here, that doesn't help him pay the rent.

Thinking about Arif and Muhammed, the difference in their experience - it begs an obvious question. Why couldn't more families have the support of an entire community like Muhammed's? Is Jennie's neighborhood a model that could be replicated? What if it could be organized and scaled? What if a larger entity- say the federal government - could provide a structure for groups like Jennie's neighborhood to support a family?

**Anthony Blinken:** The state department is launching the Welcome Corps.

**Andrea Smardon:** As it turns out, that is what's happening. In January 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the WelcomeCorps, an opportunity for regular Americans to privately sponsor refugees. Groups of ordinary citizens could now assume the responsibilities normally handled by professional resettlement agencies.



**Anthony Blinken:** The Welcome Corp will allow Americans to do what we do best: be guides and friends to our new neighbors, put them on a path to realizing their full potential, to the benefit, not just of refugee families, but all our families.

**Andrea Smardon:** This idea isn't entirely new. Americans had already been experimenting with it. When the Afghans arrived, there were pilot groups around the country testing out what were called sponsorship circles. Similar to what Jennie's neighborhood did, with more of a formalized structure.

According to the program website, more than 4500 people have contributed to sponsor circles across the country. Then when Russia invaded Ukraine, the Biden administration asked Americans to do more.

**President Biden:** We've already welcomed tens of thousands of Ukrainians and today, I'm announcing Unite for Ukraine. It will provide an expedient channel for secure legal migration from Europe to the United States for Ukrainians who have a US sponsor such as a family or an NGO.

**Andrea Smardon:** Under this program, Americans could simply meet Ukrainians over social media and invite them over.

**KSL Journalist:** It all started when they met that couple on Facebook, had no idea who each other was, and now they're living in their home.

**Andrea Smardon:** If the US sponsors could pass a background check, prove they had the financial means and the Ukrainians had the valid travel documents, they could come.

A year after the Russian invasion, more than a third of the 271,000 Ukrainians who had arrived in the US came through this volunteer program.

It seemed Americans had an appetite to welcome strangers from overseas into their homes and communities. The newly established Welcome Corps appeared poised to capitalize on this enthusiasm.

But it's not clear if this generosity will extend beyond the Afghan evacuation and the invasion of Ukraine, singular events that captured the attention of the public. Would Americans also welcome Venezuelan or Sudanese refugees in the same way?

**Aden Batar:** Resettlement is not an easy task, it requires a lot of moving parts,

**Andrea Smardon:** That's Aden Batar of Catholic Community Services. We heard his story way back in Episode 1. Batar and his family were refugees from Somalia when they arrived in the US in 1994, and he now has over 2 decades of resettlement experience.

**Aden Batar:** if you don't have an organization, a backbone organization, it's going to be very hard for someone to sponsor a family, and put them in their basement or to live with them, and then provide all the services. They have to find housing, they have to do all the things that our agencies do, you know, I think it's going to be a challenge. Rent alone is going to be a lot.

**Andrea Smardon:** Batar says he's all for volunteer help, but he thinks it makes more sense to coordinate with the resettlement agencies that are already in place. Why reinvent the wheel, he says, when the agencies already have the infrastructure, the staffing, the warehouses of donated items, and the training.

**Aden Batar:** People in our community who have the time to volunteer and to support the organizations, I highly encourage those individuals to work as a volunteer with the resettlement agencies. So that way, the volunteers, our staff, we are all working on the same goal.

**Andrea Smardon:** What Batar says makes a lot of sense, but then I think about Jennie's neighborhood, how they were able to come together and rise above these challenges. By all accounts, it was a success for everyone involved. Although, admittedly, they didn't have to pay for the family's rent. I wonder if there is something to be learned from the citizens who stepped up to fill the gaps for both Afghans and Ukrainians in this country. Is there a special role for regular community members? I asked Jennie about it.

**Jennie Hua:** Yes, I think there's definitely like this niche need for friendship, for someone to notice that you are a fellow human being and to listen, and to help you solve problems that are difficult for you to solve, because you're in a different country and trying to adapt to different language

**Andrea Smardon:** But Jennie acknowledges the need for structure, that for anything to be effective, someone has to organize it. She says the resettlement agencies like Catholic Community Services have volunteer opportunities not so different from what she and her neighbors have been doing.

**Jennie Hua:** It essentially is the same thing that I'm doing. But they just need lots, lots, lots, lots more people to volunteer.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Jennie):** And I imagine their programs are sort of designed so working people can say oh, I can make this commitment of a couple hours a week or so. You know, so they make it so it's doable for people...

**Jennie Hua:** Right, I think so.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Jennie):** But what you're doing is maybe not doable for some people.

**Jennie Hua:** like what I'm personally doing, it's not doable for anyone, unless they want a full time job, that doesn't pay anything,

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie is bringing up a point I want to dig into here. Most of us don't have the resources or let's be honest, the will to devote so much of our lives to helping. So what is driving Jennie? After about a year of interviewing her, she starts to open up to me about why she does what she does. A stay-at-home mother of five children, she says raising kids is fulfilling, but in modern America, it's also a solitary endeavor.

**Jennie Hua:** I found my role and my job as a mother to be fairly lonely. It's a lot of personal work that you can't necessarily do with other people. And I didn't realize it but I think I build up sort of, like a bitterness toward reaching out and, and like making friendships because of the failure to have that community.

**Andrea Smardon:** And with people moving for work, and more of our social interaction migrating online, it's only gotten worse.

**Jennie Hua:** And so you don't have this opportunity to dig deep and just have those really meaningful, personal relationships. And my loneliness and how I felt, it's an epidemic, like I noticed other people having that same look about them. And that same way of walking through life, and not wanting to get too close to their neighbors. Because maybe they're just going to be hurt more. It's just going to make them feel even lonelier. Somehow, we're sort of in this place where we're all stuck.

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie and her family moved to Cedar Hills on the edge of the mountains in Utah at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time that only increased the isolation. She met people at church and walking her dog, but she says the relationships didn't go very deep.

**Jennie Hua:** As I started to serve and and to help my new Afghan friends, I've just felt like gradually over time just becoming happier and happier and happier and having a level of deep relationships with them that is surprising... and so beautiful. So yeah, it's totally changing me. And I've seen it happening for all the other people who are helping as well. It's the most wonderful thing!

**Andrea Smardon:** Maybe for some of you, this is a little uncomfortable to hear, that the suffering of some could bring happiness and fulfillment to others, especially those who seem to have so much already. But there's another way to look at it. Our newest neighbors, fleeing their homes and stripped of everything they own, have reminded us of a fundamental truth that we've forgotten. We need each other. And helping is not just a one way street.

(Music)

**Andrea Smardon:** Muhammed and Aziza let Jennie and her neighbors into their lives in a meaningful way.

But the situation wasn't meant to be permanent. The Ninows - who never expected to be landlords - had plans for their basement which they had put on pause when Muhammed and Aziza's family moved in.

**Aurora:** So they had been there for about eight months, and their lease was coming up in December. And we had a woman in the neighborhood that does a lot of community help. And she came in and she begged me to let them stay. And I was already planning on letting them stay. And I was like, what's the reason? She's like, I've never seen our neighborhood pull together so tight. They've been able to find a common connection and really bind together. And she's like, Please, she literally was begging me like, what would it take to have them stay? Because I don't want to see them leave. Like there's so much good happening.

**David:** As much as they need us, we also need them.

**Aurora:** She said that. She was like they have done more benefit for us than any of us have done for them. And that was really inspiring.

**Andrea Smardon:** So the Ninows extended the lease for a few more months. In that time, Muhammed was able to complete some major dental work, his eight-year-old

daughter continued at the school that she loved, and Aziza got her driver's permit but all the while, they were trying to figure out where they would go next.

They preferred to stay in the neighborhood, but they were also confident they would be OK in Salt Lake City closer to family and some of their friends. They tried for several months to find a place to rent near Cedar Hills, but they couldn't find anything in their price range. In April 2023, just before their son turned one year old, they found a subsidized apartment in Salt Lake City.

(Muhammad, speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** He says the rent is the only reason they moved.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** Otherwise you would have stayed if you could.

**Translator:** Yes

**Andrea Smardon:** In fact, Muhammed's 8-year-old daughter told her father she wasn't going to move.

(Muhammed speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** She was not happy, he says. She told him, I'm not going. I want to stay here. When they came to the US, he said his daughter didn't know the alphabet in English, but with the help of the Ninows' oldest daughter of the same age, in just a year, she learned to read and write. Muhammed says he wants his landlords to know how grateful his family is for their support.

Now that they've moved back to Salt Lake City, I asked Muhammed if he misses anything about Cedar Hills. He says he misses his old neighbors. He also misses being surrounded by wilderness. He remembers coming back from work at night and seeing deer grazing in the neighborhood, it was a nice place, he says.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Muhammed):** So since you came to the US, did you ever feel alone or lonely here?

(Muhammad speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** Not that much, Muhammed says. Of course you miss your family, but I have lots of friends, he says.

But his wife Aziza who has been staying home with their three children - has a different response.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Aziza):** How about for you? Did you ever feel alone?

**Aziza:** Yeah, yes, sometimes. Every day, I'm in the house, no job, no party. Yeah, sometimes.

**Andrea Smardon:** Every day she's in the house, she says, no job, no party. It reminds me of what Jennie said, about the loneliness of being a stay-at-home mom.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Aziza):** And that's different than in Afghanistan you would have more people around more friends, family.

**Aziza:** Yes.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Aziza):** Yeah? So American life is kind of more lonely.

**Aziza:** Yes.

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie told me that she worries about the Afghan women here, that they are isolated. They're not getting the same interaction as many of the men who are out working and taking English classes. She says Aziza only started driving and going places outside the house with encouragement from the neighbors.

Aziza misses the English classes she took in Cedar Hills while other people babysat her kids, and she's hoping to start a class in Salt Lake City. She wants to get a driver's license, but since moving, she no longer has neighbor friends to take her out for driving practice.

(Aziza speaking Dari)

**Andrea Smardon:** Overall, Aziza says it's better in this country because in Afghanistan right now, women don't even count as human. But here, we are free, she says. We can live as we want.

Both Aziza and Muhammed say America is their home now, and they would not choose to go back. Their children are safe and able to go to school. Aziza says it's a better life. Her husband goes to work and comes home, and she doesn't have to worry whether or not he is still alive.

[MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** David and Aurora Ninow say the neighborhood without Muhammed and Aziza's family is not the same. They miss the smell of fresh bread baking downstairs and the sound of children playing in the backyard. Aurora says, even though she has four kids, it feels empty without them.

**Aurora:** Siblings are around each other all the time. But when you have your best friend that you share a backyard with, there's something magical about that, when one of the kids would frolic out, the other kids would frolic out and start playing. And when no one else shows up. It's really lonely.

**Andrea Smardon:** Aurora says their daughter Melia, now 9-years-old, cried for several days after they left.

**Aurora:** It's been a really big change, like, Melia would just walk downstairs and just spontaneously start crying because it was like, this is where we would play this. And this is where we had all these memories. I mean, she, it was a very, very, it's probably one of the hardest things she's been through is having her best friend leave.

[MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** The family had been gone for over a month, when the neighbors invited them back for a party. Aurora did not tell her daughter Melia that her best friend would be there.

**Aurora:** I wanted it to be a surprise because she's been begging me to bring her up there and we've had tons going on, So when I heard it was happening, I love surprises and so I knew she'd be really excited.

**Andrea Smardon:** The party was supposed to be in a park outdoors, but as dark clouds gathered, and the wind picked up, there was a last-minute decision to move it to the local LDS church.

It was a multipurpose celebration for high school seniors in the neighborhood who were graduating. It was also the weekend of Cinco de Mayo. Inside, everybody lined up for tacos, with several crockpots of home-made beef and chicken. Muhammed, Aziza, and their three children are sitting around a table. The baby is one year old, his head is shaved, and he's wearing a very small bow tie and button-up shirt, looking around, curious.

**Announcer:** We're ready to start so, welcome to our Cinco de Mayo...

**Andrea Smardon:** When the Ninows arrive, their daughter Melia comes through the door, peers through her purple glasses, and spots her friend who she hasn't seen in more than a month, and gasps.

**Melia:** Daddy!

**Andrea Smardon:** She looks up at her father, as she jumps up and down.

**Melia:** (Breathing excitedly) Daddy!

**Andrea Smardon:** The surprise was a good one. She runs over and squeezes her friend. As soon as the adults turn away, she grabs her hand and pulls her out of the room to play.

Later, Melia's mother Aurora and I find them playing outside. And we sit together under a tree by the parking lot.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Melia):** I heard that you didn't know you were gonna see each other tonight. Did you know?

**Melia:** I was so surprised that she was here because I didn't know she was going to be here because she lived all the way up in Salt Lake.

**Aurora:** We kept saying she only lives like 30 minutes away. We'll see her again. We'll see her again.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Melia):** But you hadn't seen each other, right? Until tonight?

**Melia:** Mm hm...



(laughter)

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Aurora):** She's giving you a look.

**Aurora:** See mom, you should have brought me up sooner.

**Andrea Smardon:** At 9-years-old, Melia is already a master of the side-eye.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Melia):** When she left, how did you feel?

**Melia:** I felt really sad. Because she was one of my best friends. And she lived in our basement. So I was really sad when she left.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Melia):** Because you were playing together like,

**Melia:** Almost every day. Well, yeah, almost every day except for Sunday.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Melia):** You'd come home from school and do what?

**Melia:** I would come home from school and read to help her read and then we would play together.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to Melia):** Your dad said that you learned English from her, is that true?

**Girl:** Mm hm.

**Andrea Smardon (Speaking to girl):** Yeah? How did you learn? Because you've only been here a little more than a year right?

**Girl:** Every day she was coming to my house and helping me.

**Andrea Smardon:** As the party comes to a close, Melia begs her mother for more time with her friend. But Aurora ushers the family through good-byes.

**Aurora:** Ok, tell everybody, bye.

(saying good-bye)

**Andrea Smardon:** and they pile in the car to go back home. Muhammed and Aziza's family get on the freeway headed in the opposite direction.

[MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** Though they no longer live in the same neighborhood, the families stayed in touch.

At the end of the summer, Aurora sent me a text with pictures of the two 9-year-old girls playing at a museum in Salt Lake City, digging for fossils in a sand pit and posing together in front of the open jaws of a huge model shark. There's another picture of the kids back together in Cedar Hills jumping on the trampoline in their swimsuits while being sprayed by a hose laughing in pure joy. "What I've realized," Aurora wrote, "is these families don't just need connections for the first few weeks, or months, or years that they're here. They need a community that will be there for them for life."

As for Arif and his family, they've moved apartments, but still can't afford the rent on his wages. In an encounter at a church tag sale, Jennie got connected to a woman interested in helping. This woman met Arif's family in time to assist with the delivery of their baby girl. Both mom and baby are in good health. She's been raising funds among her neighbors to help the family pay their rent until they can get on their feet.

**Andrea Smardon:** Next time on Stranger Becomes Neighbor, the personal becomes political.

**Matt Zeller:** You know, the people I was trying to help get out of the evacuation, I was only able to get out five of the 25 people that I was personally trying to assist to get on flights. 19 of them are still back there in hiding. One of them is dead. 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:** And we'll find out what happens for some of the people we've met in this podcast.

**Woman 1:** I'm personally so proud of myself. It's not easy, but I did it!

**Woman 2:** This family's life is in danger. The Taliban had been to their home. Searching for people to hurt and kill. If they don't get proof for asylum they would be sent back to Afghanistan.

**Woman 3:** For me, it's really big news.

**[CREDITS]**

**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 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.

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

For this week's bonus episode, we talk to a former CIA Intelligence Operations Manager, who has started an organization dedicated to supporting Afghan allies from the Zero Units like Muhammed and Arif now living in the US. She says many of them are struggling to keep up hope while their immigration status in America remains uncertain.

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