

## **STRANGER BECOMES NEIGHBOR - EPISODE 6: Small Hands**

**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.

(Sound: sorting pencils in a cup)

**Kerry:** Boy, that's a lot of pencils.

**Ava:** Put your eyes closed!

(Andrea and Kerry laughing)

**Andrea Smardon:** 5-year-old Ava is on the floor rifling through a large can of colored pencils, in an elaborate game she's devised of choosing colors and writing letters. She's playing with Kerry Wickman, a neighbor who's been helping the family since she discovered they lived in her neighborhood.

**Ava:** Kerry, you first.

**Kerry:** Oh, I get the pink.

**Ava:** Uh huh, you get the pink.

**Kerry:** I love pink.

**Ava:** Ya' love pink.

**Andrea Smardon:** When Kerry first met this family, Ava was living with her aunts Mina and Baran, expecting her mom and dad to arrive any day on an airplane from Afghanistan. But by the fall of 2022, they're still in the same situation. It's been over a year since Ava has seen her parents in person, she started kindergarten, and she already knows some of her letters.

**Kerry:** Can you do a K? Or an M for mom?

**Ava:** M?

**Kerry:** M or K?

**Ava:** I'll do K.

**Kerry:** K, okay.

**Andrea Smardon:** Sometimes Ava calls Kerry Mom like the rest of her family does. But for Ava, it's complicated. She has three Moms depending on the day, her mother back in Afghanistan, her aunt Mina who takes care of her daily, or Kerry who comes to visit usually a couple times a week.

Kerry, a social worker by profession, says it's hard to know how Ava is processing the trauma she's experienced, but when she first arrived, she refused to speak to her parents on video chats.

**Kerry:** She'd see their faces and hear their voices, but wouldn't look, would turn away. This was happening every time they tried to communicate in the early days. She now will look at them, and she will talk a little bit with them. But I think that she - not understanding what happened - believes that they abandoned her. You know, she wasn't important enough for them to come along. I don't know how you rectify this damage until this family is reunited again. It's really difficult, and I don't know how this is going to end up for Ava.

The expressions on her face are what often make me so sad. It just looks like a child who feels bereft. And sometimes when she cries, there's just such a deep sadness.

**Andrea Smardon:** The sadness is not apparent to me while Ava is playing with Kerry. Many of her baby teeth have recently been extracted because of numerous cavities, so there are holes in her mouth where the grownup teeth haven't come in yet, but it doesn't stop Ava from flashing her gap-toothed smile.

**Kerry:** And she's resilient. It's just that those holes inside, they're never really truly filled.

[THEME MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** In the final episode of this series, we find out what happens for Ava's family and for others we've been following. We also come back to the central question of the podcast, when the world around us is in upheaval, what can one person do?

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Andrea Smardon and this is Stranger Becomes Neighbor, Episode 6: Small Hands.

**(Music fades)**

**Andrea Smardon:** One night while Kerry was visiting, Baran and Mina's mother called from Afghanistan. Kerry couldn't understand what she was saying, but she heard the terror in her voice.

**Kerry:** Their mother called in hysterics, when I heard her voice. I thought that someone had died.

**Andrea Smardon:** Earlier that day, the Taliban had entered their rental house. The family had already left the house that they owned in Kabul soon after the evacuation, worried that the Taliban would target them, particularly since they had family in the US. But the Taliban found them. Baran and Mina's parents were taking a midday nap in one room. Ava's mother and 7-year-old brother were in another.

**Baran:** It was an afternoon around maybe 12 or one o'clock. And like my mom was sleeping, like everybody's sleeping at home. Just to open the door and enter and start searching the house.

**Kerry:** They come looking for anything that they can take - money, jewels, anything that's important.

I think you guys or we had just sent some money to your family right before they came. So we were pretty sure that they probably got all the money that we sent.

**Andrea Smardon:** They also took their cell phones, which had pictures of Baran, Mina, and Ava in the U.S.

**Kerry:** Yeah, we're not sure if they came because they knew that you were here. But there could be a concern that now they do know.

**Andrea Smardon:** They found Baran's parents first, and asked them who else was in the house. Baran's brother was away at work, but her father tried to prevent them from finding his daughter-in-law Ava's mother.

**Kerry:** Their father was standing up to them as much as he could. He was the only man in the home. And he did say later it was good that your brother wasn't there. Because it could have been bad to have a younger man there trying to defend the family. Your

father is about 78-76, he's on oxygen. He has difficulty from having COVID. He's been on medications. He's been struggling. But he is so brave, still so brave.

**Andrea Smardon:** Kerry had heard the stories about how Baran and Mina's father taught women in medical school in the 1990's, even under threat from the Taliban.

**Kerry:** That's why they broke his back when he was teaching because he was protesting at the university to try and allow them to keep teaching women.

**Andrea Smardon:** Decades later, as the Taliban entered his home, he was trying to protect the family, though he was old and sick.

**Kerry:** And he was trying to stand up for the women in the home and the child, and they beat him. You know, he was bloodied. I'm not exactly sure what happened, but he was beaten by them.

**Andrea Smardon:** Then they grabbed Ava's 7-year-old brother and took him out of the house. They demanded that the family hand over whatever valuables they still had not given up.

**Kerry:** The Taliban took him. I mean, it was terrifying, they took him and told the family that if they didn't...

**Baran:** They say anything that you have, you have to bring valuable anything. His mom started crying and my mom started crying.

**Andrea Smardon:** And you just don't know what they're going to do, right? So there must be so much fear there. You don't know if someone in the family is going to be taken.

**Baran:** You don't know what will happen.

**[TENSE MUSIC]**

**Andrea Smardon:** An hour and a half passed, and then the Taliban returned the boy.

**Kerry:** They brought him back. And he's now very, very scared to go anywhere alone, even into the bathroom.

**Andrea Smardon:** The family has no way of knowing if the Taliban will return. They've already left their home once. They have nowhere else to go.

**[MUSIC FADES]**

**Andrea Smardon:** When Kerry first learned that Ava, Baran, and Mina were all here without their parents, she did everything she could think of to reunite the family.

**Kerry:** We were absolutely looking into - in the early days - ways to completely skirt the system. We were prepared to get money to pay for a rescue operation for this family, for maybe former military to go in and privately somehow get this family out of Afghanistan. And I had met people who were willing to fund it. Everyone has their own morals. I felt completely fine about the fact that we were investigating this route, because this family's life was in danger. The Taliban had been to their home, and were searching for people to hurt and kill who had family members in the U.S. It was incredibly dangerous. It still is.

**Andrea Smardon:** But this route came to a dead end. Kerry and the family were informed this kind of evacuation was no longer an option. They would have to go through official government channels.

**Kerry:** We had to completely abandon that idea. So just waiting like everybody else.

**Andrea Smardon:** While Ava is separated from her parents and the family navigates the constant anxiety of living under Taliban rule, Baran and Mina have been advised by lawyers, if they want to bring their family here, they need permanent status themselves. They arrived in the US under humanitarian parole, which expires after 2 years. They have to apply for asylum in order to get a green card that will allow them to stay in the country long-term. There is a lot riding on their asylum application, whether they can stay in the US legally, and whether they can bring their family to join them.

**Baran:** So everybody's nervous because you don't know what's going to happen.

**Andrea Smardon:** After a year in the US, they were granted an interview for asylum. They had already filed all their paperwork, and everything they said to the interviewer, including dates and other details needed to be accurate. They each had to do their own separate interviews, and if their stories weren't consistent, they might risk rejection. Kerry drove Mina to the attorney's office, but she was not allowed in with her.

**Kerry:** She went in with a lot of nerves. So I just said to the attorney, I said, we'll be right back. And I just took her around the corner and I said, you're gonna be just fine. Everything's gonna go perfectly. You're going to remember everything you need to remember. And you're gonna get asylum, you know, it's gonna be fine. And she was near tears. And I just said, come here, come here, come here. I just gave her a big hug. She kind of cried on my shoulder, and I said, Do you want me to say a prayer of peace for peace for you? And she said, Yes.

**Andrea Smardon:** The two women do not share the same faith. Mina is Muslim and Kerry is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but in this moment of extreme pressure, prayer was the only thing Kerry could think of to offer and Mina was comforted by it.

Baran translates for her sister.

**Baran:** So she explained that this interview was I think the hardest one, because this is like the beginning. If they don't approve our case, maybe the lawyer said that you have to go back to your country.

**Andrea Smardon:** It was hard to know what was true. Kerry says they were hearing conflicting messages from different lawyers and resettlement workers about whether or not they were at risk of being deported if they didn't have asylum by the time their parole ran out.

**Kerry:** That information that they were going to be sent back was, you know, it's really scary for all of them. They were told from the minute they arrived here that if you don't find an attorney, you don't make this case happen, you could be sent back. When I would talk to the attorney at CCS, she was saying things like, they don't have to worry about that, we're going to take care of them. Let the family know that they're not going to be sent back.

**Andrea Smardon:** I asked Aden Batar of Catholic Community Services about this, and he said, Afghans should not worry about being deported. The US has put in the effort and resources to evacuate and resettle them. Why would the country reverse course?

I can't help but wonder, though, if there's a change in power or a shift in public sentiment, what would protect them from being sent back to the country they had fled?

With the asylum interviews behind them, Mina says she has faith that it will work out. As for Baran, regardless of what anyone says, until their application is officially approved, she will not stop worrying.

## [MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** The family kept asking Kerry what was going to happen and she had no answers. Once they had applied for asylum, it seemed there was nothing else they could do.

**Kerry:** They would ask me how are things going? Did you find out any more information? I would think, I don't really know what to do. I don't know, we're all in this waiting game.

**Andrea Smardon:** Kerry had already talked with Utah's governor, who attended the same church. She even helped to organize an event with him to raise awareness about Afghan arrivals in the community. But she eventually realized that state officials had limited power to change anything. So she started writing letters to members of Congress.

**Kerry:** I haven't been someone that's been politically involved. It's just not been my area of interest or my cup of tea. So I'm kind of thrown into something and realizing the frustration that comes in trying to get anyone to listen to your story.

**Andrea Smardon:** In August, 2022, a bipartisan coalition in Congress introduced new legislation called the Afghan Adjustment Act. The bill was designed to streamline the process to obtain lawful permanent residence for evacuees. And to clear a pathway for those eligible in Afghanistan to come to the US.

In this bill, Kerry saw a chance to help her friends secure their status in the country, and a path to reunite Ava with her parents. She joined forces with a nonprofit, nonpartisan group called Mormon Women for Ethical Government to try to get the Afghan Adjustment Act passed. Together they met with US Senators and Representatives and their staff. She told anyone who would listen about the family whose struggles she knew so well.

It wasn't Kerry's intention to become politically involved, but this is about family.

**Kerry:** But it's really just watching Ava, the tragedy, the trauma of what's happening in her world that is propelling all of us forward.

**Andrea Smardon:** At the same time that Kerry started advocating for the Afghan Adjustment Act, a group of military veterans were doing the same thing, traveling the country, meeting with representatives in their home offices.

**Matt Zeller:** All righty, you ready?

**Andrea Smardon:** On an afternoon in October 2022, three vets are filming themselves on a phone in front of a federal building in Salt Lake City. They call their cross country tour a Firewatch. That's a military term referring to a constant patrol to protect lives. By the time I met them, they had already traveled 3000 miles.

**Matt Zeller:** How's everybody doing? It is the one o'clock Firewatch update. We're here at Senator Romney and Senator Lee's office at the federal building in beautiful downtown Salt Lake City. Some of the community have come out to support us in our efforts to help get the Afghan Adjustment Act passed.

**Andrea Smardon:** Matt Zeller, a veteran of the war in Afghanistan told me, over the noise of road construction, he's here because he's trying to uphold a promise.

**Matt Zeller:** I'm only standing here talking to you right now, because my Afghan interpreter saved my life in a battle 14 years ago, when he shot and killed two people who are about to kill me. He was standing next to me because he believed that the American people were honorable people who kept our word.

Our community feels that we left behind a generation of our fellow veterans and it's our obligation to get them home. And the reality is that so long as we continue to fail to keep that promise, veterans are going to suffer from a profound moral injury.

**Andrea Smardon:** According to the US Department of Veterans Affairs, a moral injury can happen in response to acting or witnessing behaviors that go against an individual's values and moral beliefs. It is the distressing psychological, behavioral, social, and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure to these kinds of events.

**Matt Zeller:** Take moral injury to its natural conclusion, moral injury often manifests as suicide and veterans. And we have an epidemic of veteran suicides in this country. I know of five veterans that killed themselves over the last year because of the guilt. (pause, emotional) Because the guilt that they felt, having left these people behind to die, and not having any viable option to help them get home. Well, the Afghan



Adjustment Act is one such viable option that actually helps these people get out of Afghanistan and get to safety.

**Andrea Smardon:** When the Iraq and Afghan Veterans of America, polled their members, they found that 41% were suffering a moral injury as a result of the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

**Matt Zeller:**

That moral injury, I'm telling you, I didn't get it. At first I really didn't. I'm going to be completely honest, I'd heard all about it from Vietnam vets. I didn't understand it in the way that I now live it and have been living with it for the better part of the last year. 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 (speaking to Matt Zeller):** You see your fates as tied together.

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

**Andrea Smardon:** Military veterans like Matt Zeller and people like Kerry Wickman found themselves in common cause on this bill.

A representative from Mormon Women for Ethical Government joined the vets at the federal building to try to get a meeting with Senators Mike Lee and Mitt Romney.

Neither of Utah's Senators met with the small group that day, but they did get a meeting with their staffers.

After making their pitch, they asked "Would the Senators support the bill?" But the staffers wouldn't give them a definite answer.

Would Congress act on this issue? Or would Afghan friends and neighbors be stranded in limbo?

That's after the break.

[BREAK]

**Andrea Smardon:** As 2022 was coming to a close, those fighting for passage of the Afghan Adjustment Act were thinking it was now or never. Congress was about to go into winter recess, and when they resumed the next year, advocates feared newly elected Congress members would not take up this issue.

That December, Kerry wrote an editorial in the Deseret News, targeted towards the publication's primary readers, her fellow members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. She told the personal story of the Afghan family who calls her Mom, and she urged citizens to contact their Congressperson to help this family and others like them get permanent residence and to bring their family members to join them. She closed with an appeal for love.

**Kerry:** These are real people with real needs. I urge Utah to be on the right side of history as we demonstrate Christian love this holiday season. Let's find it in our hearts to assist in passing the Afghan Adjustment Act this year, showing our Afghan friends we accept and trust them, allowing them to experience the gift of safety, security, dignity and peace they so richly deserve.

**Andrea Smardon:** I read the comments at the bottom of your editorial. There were several people blaming President Biden for the hasty evacuation, which separated and traumatized families and left the Taliban in power. Some people responded and said former President Trump and previous administrations started it by reducing U.S. troop numbers, closing bases, making an agreement for withdrawal. So, I mean, basically, regardless of who you blame in this argument, I think the implication is we should not be obligated to help as Americans because of poor decisions by our leaders. What would you say to these kinds of comments if you could respond?

**Kerry:** It just seemed like nobody's really looking at the issue. And we're all just wanting a place to lay blame and point fingers and be angry and scream. Does anyone care? Did this touch anyone's heart? I shared a very personal story about, you know, this wonderful family. No one said anything about how they can act, or ask any questions about how they can actually help

And you know, the issue of refugees coming from war torn countries, this is, this is not ending here. It's only going to get worse. And we really do have to figure out where we stand.

**Andrea Smardon:** The Afghan Adjustment Act was a bipartisan proposal with Democratic and Republican co-sponsors, but 10 Republican Senators opposed it. That was enough to prevent the legislation from even coming up for a vote. In the end,

Congress left Washington without making a decision. Which in effect, was a decision to maintain the status quo for Afghan arrivals and for their family members still in Afghanistan. For Kerry and the family she was trying to help, it was another dead end.

**Kerry:** I said, you know, I don't, I don't know what else I can do. And I think, I think we're just gonna have to wait. And there's something about just saying the words that I think it was, it was hard for all of us, they haven't asked me since, like, Mom, how are things going? You know, they just, we're just waiting.

**Andrea Smardon:** While the family waited I got news about another Afghan woman we had been following in this podcast. Sima, the soldier who worked with US special forces, had met with a lawyer.

**Emily Nuvan:** I, you know, had been watching the Afghan situation and thinking like, I wish I could help.

**Andrea Smardon:** Emily Nuvan was fresh out of law school, graduating in 2020, and still looking for training opportunities.

**Emily Nuvan:** I got an email just in my inbox one day, I think, from the Utah Bar Association, that was like, hey, there's going to be a seminar about helping all these asylum seekers coming in from Afghanistan. And we just don't have enough attorneys to deal with them. So you don't even need to have immigration experience, but we just need help. Just come and listen to this presentation for like an hour, and then you can sign up to help a family if you think you can do it.

**Andrea Smardon:** Once she got some basic training, a resettlement agency matched her with Sima along with her nephew, and set up a meeting with a translator.

**Emily Nuvan:** The whole point of this initial meeting was, I needed to get all of the background information on this family in order to be able to file their asylum application.

To be a refugee means, you know, your life has been difficult. So it's basically sitting down with someone for the first time that you've ever met them, and asking them, please tell me the most horrible things that have ever happened to you in your life.

**Andrea Smardon:** Sima told her about the violence she had seen, fellow soldiers who had died on the job, how her husband, also in the special forces, was killed shortly after they were married and she had become pregnant, how her mother got caught in the bomb blast at the airport, and didn't make it through the gate with her.

**Emily Nuvan:** I mean, they were showing me pictures from their cell phone that I was not prepared for. The aftermath of bombings, and you know, things like that, it was a really emotional interview.

**Andrea Smardon:** The interview lasted several hours.

**Emily Nuvan:** You can kind of have second hand trauma from hearing about the trauma from others. I just kind of...(getting emotional) sorry,

I just like went into my office, and closed the door.

cause I needed a minute to regroup.

**Andrea Smardon:** An office manager who had been copying the files and photos for Sima's case came into her office.

**Emily Nuvan:** So she knew what was happening and, and came in to talk to me about the documents, and then she just just hugged me. (emotional) She just hugged me for a long time and I cried. And then it's like, okay, let's move past it, we've got to get this application filed.

**Andrea Smardon:** For Emily, who had worked in securities litigation and white collar crime, this was new territory, and she felt the weight of the responsibility.

**Emily Nuvan:** It really is having another person's life in your hands. I mean, every other case that I've worked on since becoming a lawyer, it's, you know, money's an issue, people get upset about things, but it's fine. Life goes on, no matter, no matter what outcome you get in your case, but this is genuinely, if they don't get approved for asylum, they would be sent back to Afghanistan, you know, they'd be in danger of their lives. So this is, yeah, a lot of weight on my shoulders.

**Andrea Smardon:** How do you feel about the fact that you're doing this as a volunteer? Like, does that feel right to you?

**Emily Nuvan:** I liked that I was volunteering for it. That did seem right from my perspective, that I wanted to be able to use my legal degree to help people. And being able to pick up a case like this just made me happy.

**Andrea Smardon:** Even with how traumatic it is, I mean, to hear about all this trauma.

**Emily Nuwan:** Yes, because, you know, at the bottom of it, there's hope. There's hope that they're going to live a better life here.

**Andrea Smardon:** Shortly after Emily started working with Sima, she realized she was not alone.

**Emily Nuwan:** It started out with just the refugee agencies and just recognizing how much work IRC and Catholic Community Services do. It's incredible. Then I started getting contacted just kind of out of the blue by the Sisters of Service group.

**Andrea Smardon:** The Sisters of Service is the volunteer organization we learned about in episode 3, American soldiers helping women from the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon or FTP's who had been placed all over the country.

**Emily Nuwan:** And they were like, you've got one of our FTP's. So there's that entire network, and they are incredible. They gathered a lot of documents that we were able to use in the application that were specific to the female, Afghan soldiers.

**Andrea Smardon:** Emily became part of a network of lawyers across the country working to help the Female Tactical Platoon.

**Emily Nuwan:** And we all kind of had to like email and band together to make sure that, you know, we were telling a similar story.

**Andrea Smardon:** And of course, there were the locals.

**Emily Nuwan:** People just kind of come out of the woodwork and just show up and help. So Jennie, who you spoke with, I still don't 100% know where she came from, or what all she does. I know she does a lot. She's amazing, but I was like, what agency are you with? And she's like, I'm not with an agency, I'm here and I help!

**Andrea Smardon:** But even with all of these people who wanted to help Sima, she was still stressed out. She didn't know how she would pay her expenses or support her family still at risk in Afghanistan, her son was not doing well in daycare, and she didn't know if her asylum application would be approved before her humanitarian parole ran out. And where would she find time to learn English?

Yet another group of volunteers offered to help her, but they were located 2000 miles away in Virginia. The Blacksburg Refugee Partnership, could pay her expenses for a

year, including rent and childcare. That would free her up to take intensive daily English classes. To top it off, she would get to live in a community with fellow soldiers from the Female Tactical Platoon. But it meant she was going to have to leave Utah, and start over once again to try to make a home for herself and her young son. It also meant leaving her nephew - the one family member who had made it out with her - and the friends she had made in just over a year.

(Jennie Hua speaking in background)

**Andrea Smardon:** Moving day happened in November, a thin layer of snow coated the ground. Jennie Hua and her family were there, plus some volunteers who brought a truck to deliver Sima's furniture to other refugee families. Sima was inside the apartment, now pretty empty, except for boxes lining the walls, and a playpen in the middle of the floor.

**Andrea Smardon:** How are you doing?

**Sima:** Good. How are you?

**Andrea Smardon:** Doing well. How do you feel about the move?

**Sima:** Oh, I'm so, so excited.

**Andrea Smardon:** Yeah? It seems like an amazing opportunity.

**Sima:** Yeah.

**Andrea Smardon:** Jennie is on the floor, struggling with a halfway collapsed pack n' play, when Emily Nuvan arrives, Sima's lawyer. Turns out this is the first time Jennie and Emily are meeting in person.

**Andrea Smardon:** So you came to help out?

**Emily Nuvan:** Yes, I was here the other day, packing up all these boxes, taping everything shut. I've got to get them to the FedEx Office now.

**Andrea Smardon:** Wow! So on top of the legal help, also moving help?

**Emily Nuvan:** Yup (laughing)

**Andrea Smardon:** For several minutes, Jennie and Emily work on folding up the play pen, but it is not working.

**Andrea Smardon:** They didn't cover this in law school Emily?

**Emily Nuvan:** No, they sure did not.

(Laughing)

**Emily Nuvan:** I did cover this in mothering though, I remember fighting with many a Pack 'n Play in my day.

**Andrea Smardon:** It all feels light hearted, until all the furniture is cleared out and it's time to actually say good-bye.

**Jennie Hua:** Sima, good-bye!

**Sima:** Bye, Jennie:

**Jennie Hua:** I'm going to miss you.

**Sima:** I miss you too. Thank you so much

**Jennie Hua:** Have a good trip, be safe, call me if you need anything.

**Sima:** Ok, thank you...(crying)

**Jennie Hua:** You're always welcome to stay with me OK? If you need anything, call me OK, if you need any help (crying) It's hard to say good-bye so many times, right?

**Andrea Smardon:** Sima's son looks up quizzically at the two women in a long embrace, not letting go.

**Son:** Ba bye?

**Jennie Hua:** We're saying bye bye

**Sima:** (whispering) thank you

**Jennie Hua:** When I see you again, you're going to be a professor of English.

**Andrea Smardon:** A few days later, Sima's lawyer Emily drove her to the airport in the early morning, as the sun was beginning to rise. She got a special pass to help Sima and her son through security and to her gate. And then it was Emily's turn to say good-bye.

**Emily Nuvan:** I couldn't go past the gate door. So we scanned her tickets and I hurried and pulled her off to the side. We just hugged for a long time. I told her I'd miss her. She told me thank you that she'd miss me too. And that I was going to miss her little boy.

She finally walked down the tunnel and I watched her go and she turned around and waved. And then I left the airport - everyone kind of staring at me like, why is she crying? What's what's going on here?

**Andrea Smardon:** Did you have any idea before you started all this that it would be like this?

**Emily Nuvan:** No, no idea

**Andrea Smardon:** You've only known her since March. But it's such a tearful goodbye.

**Emily Nuvan:** Yeah, well, I mean, think about it, how many times you sit down and tell people your deepest, darkest moments that have happened in your life. It just brought us really close really quickly.

**Andrea Smardon:** Part of the reason the relationship was meaningful, Emily says, is because she was open to it.

**Emily Nuvan:** You have to be open yourself. Because you have to get beyond your preconceived notions of, you know, how a community should be and who its members should be and how we should all behave, because you're dealing with people who are coming from a completely different culture. You have to be willing to accept the differences.

**Andrea Smardon:** Those differences can show up in little ways, like when Emily would come to Sima's house just to take care of some business.

**Emily Nuvan:** A lot of times I was coming and saying, like, I just need you to sign this document or I just need this and it's only going to be for a second and then I've got to hurry and leave because I've got like five other appointments. And so I'd come and



every time she'd say, will you stay? Do you want to come in and I'll make tea? And the times when I had to say no, I've got to go, I have other things to do, I could tell that would kind of hurt her feelings.

**Andrea Smardon:** Emily decided she couldn't refuse Sima's hospitality every time, so she would carve out time to stay.

**Emily Nuvan:** And those were my favorite times, you know, because she'd make me tea and we'd like to sit on the floor like they did in Afghanistan, and I'd sit on the floor with them. And even though there's a language barrier, we still were able to have fun with each other. And she'd always, you know, bring out like a tray of nuts and dried fruit, and we'd just sit there and enjoy each other's company for a while.

**Andrea Smardon:** It strikes me that there is something healing about this on both sides. Because when we saw the footage of the evacuation of Afghanistan, we could only imagine the trauma, but having tea on the floor, laughing, the feeling of hope that Emily has described - that part we only get to experience through personal relationships.

As Emily was driving home from the airport, after saying good-bye to Sima, she started to piece together the meaning of her experience.

**Emily Nuvan:** When I left the airport that morning I started driving home and I was listening to some music. And a song came on by Jewel. Love her.

**Andrea Smardon:** For the uninitiated, Jewel is a singer/songwriter who became popular in the nineties.

**Emily Nuvan:** I was playing my nineties playlist so she popped up. But she has a song that's called Hands, that's basically just recognizing that I am aware that my efforts are so small in the context of how big these problems are, but I'm still going to do them. And there's one phrase in that song - and I've listened to that song a million times - but that that phrase just really popped up and caught my attention. But it says, I won't be made useless. I won't be idle with despair. Which (gets emotional, voice shakes) was just so striking. That, yes, I'd seen the chaos and the problems in Afghanistan, and, you know, just the horror of war. And you think, what can I do? It's not like, I can go over there and, you know, remove the Taliban and make it so these people aren't refugees. And so because the problem is so big, it's easy to get lost in that despair, and just kind of close ranks or something and think all I can do is just keep my own family safe. And that's a completely normal reaction. I don't fault anybody for that. But seeing, you know, just this

army of people helping and just that we all do little pieces of things. You know, we don't let despair stop us. But it has to be a choice. You know, it's a choice. I'm not going to let the evil that's out there in the world stop me from the little bit of good that I can do.

[MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** Sima had been living in Virginia for six months when I contacted her by video call in early June 2023. She had an English class to get to, so we talked in the early morning, and a volunteer named Gary was there to help her troubleshoot technical issues on her laptop.

**Sima:** Gary, can you help me?

**Andrea Smardon:** It was not the best audio, but Sima seemed to be happy and thriving in her new situation. And she was clearly getting more comfortable with English.

**Sima:** I see my friends all the day, because we are together in English class, and we are so close. Our apartment is too close, so close.

**Andrea Smardon:** The other FTP's and their families live in the same apartment complex with her. She's also in regular contact with a pair of volunteers who are there to support her.

**Sima:** I like here, because I have a lot of friends in here, so many kind people in here, they so help me.

**Andrea Smardon:** The stress that was so heavy for her last time we spoke, paying her bills, sending her son to daycare where he was unhappy and always sick, that seems to be gone now. She says her son also likes the daycare here. He too is making friends, and doesn't want to leave when she comes to pick him up.

**Sima:** I'm happy too because my son is happy.

**Andrea Smardon:** When I talked to her, she had recently returned from a trip to Washington DC with a group of FTP's and the Sisters of Service. They visited with officials at the Pentagon and with Congressional representatives, telling their stories about their uncertain immigration status and separated families.

Sima still hasn't heard anything about her asylum application. She is hopeful though, because she knows of other FTP's whose asylum has been approved.

As of this recording, 16 of the 43 FTP's in the US have so far been granted asylum.

[MUSIC]

I went back to visit Baran, her sister Mina, and their young niece Ava in the spring of 2023, but there was still no update on their asylum case.

**Baran:** We are still waiting on our case. We talked with so many people, with the governor, with lawyer - attorney office. But they just say wait, wait and wait.

**Andrea Smardon:** As time went on, and they were approaching the two year mark of their evacuation, Baran started to think her family may never be reunited. They still didn't have permanent status for *themselves* in the US. Baran learned there wasn't even a U.S. embassy in Afghanistan to process documents any more. And they didn't know any other Afghan evacuees who were able to bring over their family members.

**Baran:** Personally, I lost my hope. And I say no, it's not going to happen.

**Andrea Smardon:** But that spring, out of the blue, Mina and Baran got an unexpected call from home.

**Mina:** For me, it's very big news.

**Baran:** I think it's kind of a miracle because everybody lost hope and everything, but we don't know exactly what happened.

**Andrea Smardon:** It was their brother. Someone had called the family and told them to pack their bags. They were cleared to get on a flight out of Afghanistan.

**Baran:** Nobody could believe it. And we say yeah, go and try maybe it's like, true.

**Andrea Smardon:** They were afraid to believe this might actually be for real.

**Kerry:** I don't know about you guys, but I was thinking that was this a hoax? Was this something fake? Was it even real? Yeah, that was and there was nowhere to check and in on whether it was real or not. And so your, your brother, his wife and their little boy, they just sent a picture from the airport, right? It was like we're flying out, and they kept saying to me, yeah, we'll believe it when we see it.

**Andrea Smardon:** Mina says the next day she got a call from her brother again. This time they were at the airport. It was real. Mina just started crying.

**Mina:** My brother said what happened for you? We are coming, you're crying? I'm crying because I'm very, very more happy.

**Kerry:** It's just been so crazy, because we don't know anything that's going on behind the scenes. No information.

**Andrea Smardon:** It's just kind of amazing that there's no one official that's like, yeah, your family is going to be coming to you.

**Baran:** That's the part - it was so crazy for us, every day just waiting, like for two years, and only in one day to just receive a call, be ready - go to airport.

**Kerry:** But we really don't know if a lot of the things that we were doing had impact or not.

**Andrea Smardon:** because you had talked to the governor, Congress people, right?

**Kerry:** Trying to bring attention to the Afghan Adjustment Act, but in any of those meetings, I was always talking about this family, saying their names specifically, trying to make sure that they were known and that they were a priority, but of course we have no idea if that had any impact or not.

**Andrea Smardon:** Talking to an attorney, they did learn that the U.S. was prioritizing reuniting minors under 18 with their parents, so that may have worked in their favor.

After we've been talking for a while, Ava comes home, and demands that Kerry get up and play with her.

**Ava:** Get up, Mom!

**Kerry:** Get up, why?

**Andrea Smardon:** I notice she calls her Mom this time. I wonder what that will be like for Ava to see her own mother when she arrives. Would she call her 'Mom'? Or has that role been replaced in her mind after being separated for so long? They have not told Ava that her parents and older brother are coming. Because they still don't know when, and they don't want to disappoint her any more.

The other thing that remains unknown is whether Baran and Mina's parents will be able to come. Because their father has health issues, he has not been cleared to fly. This is a cause of great concern to the family because none of the younger generation is left there to take care of him.

Meanwhile, Baran has been diligently working on the dream of becoming a doctor like her father. When we first met Baran at the beginning of the podcast, we learned that she finished high school in Afghanistan 2 years early because she wanted to take the exam to get into medical school as soon as possible. But she never got to take that exam or attend her graduation ceremony.

**Baran:** So the last time, I just finished high school, there was no graduation or anything. And we just came here. So this time, there's a graduation ceremony and officially I'm done with school, and it's exciting.

**Kerry:** Yeah, Baran, what do you want to do?

**Baran:** I'm your future cardiologist.

**Kerry:** Yes you are! I have heart issues. So we've talked about the fact that you know this is my future cardiologist right here. Yes. (laughs)

**Andrea Smardon:** Baran had already landed a job working at a women's clinic as a medical assistant, but she and thousands of others were living in uncertainty as their humanitarian parole that allowed them to live and work in this country was about to run out. Then on June 8th, 2023, the Biden administration announced a fix, an extension for Afghan parolees for another 2 years, so they could remain here legally. But this was a temporary solution. It did not get them any closer to permanent status in the country. By mid-summer, another version of the Afghan Adjustment Act would be re-introduced in Congress, and is still up for debate today. In the meantime, Afghans like Baran just keep pushing forward on their goals.

The day after President Biden announced the extension of parole for Afghan evacuees, was Graduation Day for Baran. At their apartment, everybody was busy getting ready for the ceremony. Kerry was there to pick up Baran, but Mina was still working on the graduate's makeup. Ava was excited to get dressed up for the occasion and showed us the dress she was planning to wear.

**Kerry:** Are you excited?

**Ava:** Yup.

**Andrea Smardon:** Are you going to the graduation?

**Ava:** Yup.

**Andrea Smardon:** Have you been to a graduation before?

**Ava:** Yep, it was my graduation.

**Andrea:** Your graduation? You already graduated?

**Ava:** Yeah.

**Kerry:** From what?

**Ava:** From my school.

**Kerry:** Kindergarten?

**Ava:** Yeah.

**Kerry:** Can you show her your hat and shirt?

**Kerry:** Salt Lake City School District graduate class of 2035. And a cute little graduation cap. Oh, look how cute you are.

**Andrea Smardon:** Mina says Baran's graduation is a big day for the whole family. She spoke to their parents that morning.

**Mina:** My mom is very lots of crying, and also my dad, we are everybody today happy for my sister.

**Andrea Smardon:** Mina drapes colorful cords around her neck, gold, white, and red signifying special honors and advanced courses that she completed.

**Baran:** Looks good?

**Kerry:** You look amazing!

**Andrea Smardon:** In the car, Baran is a little nervous because they are running behind schedule. She was hoping to be early. She says she always likes to be first.

**Kerry:** So yes, apparently there are a lot of firsts today. First time graduating from an American High School. First time wearing a lot of makeup out in public is that true?

**Baran:** Right

**Kerry:** First time wearing very high heels.

**Baran:** So I am excited because almost after 13 years, finally I graduated from school. And the thing is that I am personally so proud of myself, because I just came to a new country and just graduated from school in here. It's not easy, but I did it!

**Kerry:** It's huge.

**Andrea Smardon:** Baran fades into silence as she gazes out the window. It is because of the support of her parents that she believed she could be a doctor. Her father was committed to the idea that women should be able to get medical training. It's partly for this reason that they are not safe in their own country. She doesn't seem to want to dwell on the fact that her parents are not here with her, and she doesn't know when or if she will ever see them again in person. Today, she is taking the next step forward, and all the family's dreams are pinned on her.

**School Principle:** It is my great honor and pleasure to present to the Salt Lake City Board of Education, the West High graduating class of 2023, Congratulations! (cheers)

(Graduation music, fade under)

**Andrea Smardon:** At Baran's graduation, the principal looked out at the several hundred graduates in the vast stadium. He talked about the school motto engraved in Latin on a seal near the entrance, where students pass every day. It reads "non nobis solum" which means not for ourselves alone. This is your charge, he told the graduates, to work for the benefit of others and to make the world a better place.

(Cheering, graduation music fading away as go outside)

It was not the high school graduation that Baran imagined for herself at 15 when she was home watching TV and teaching herself English just for fun, having no idea that the

world as she knew it was about to collapse. Still it was a moment of triumph not just for herself but shared with all those rooting for her at home in Afghanistan and in her new home in America.

Meanwhile, another person we've met in this podcast - Nazifa - was also finding a way to push forward with her goals. Last time we heard from her, she was taking a break to heal after getting seriously ill. But once she felt strong enough, she resumed work with her organization HOPE for Afghanistan. Though the school she originally supported has closed, her organization is funding three new classrooms of boys and girls. When a student sent her a video thanking her for a chance to go to school, Nazifa was reminded why she does what she does.

**Nazifa:** He's 6 years old, no parents. He has to work to make money for the family. The only happiness he gets when he goes to class. And that made me really cry.

**Andrea Smardon:** At the beginning of this podcast we asked what can one person do? And each person we've followed has shown us what the answer looks like in their lives.

**Nazifa:** The help that I received, these family deserve too.

**Emily Nuvan:** I am aware that my efforts are so small in the context of how big these problems are, but I'm still going to do them.

**Ellie:** We need to show these women, we will continue to be at their side amidst all this uncertainty no matter what happens.

**Matt Zeller:** This is the only way I know how to leave it better than I found it.

**Baran:** You have to help your neighbors, everybody in our street, everybody that you meet, you have to help them.

**Carl Sullivan:** We love these people and we're not going to give up until they get out.

**Andrea Smardon:** A single individual can't change immigration policies or solve a humanitarian crisis on the other side of the world. They've all run into the limits of what they can do alone, but in doing what they can, they find they're part of something larger and more powerful.

**Aurora Ninow:** I've never seen our neighborhood pull together so tight.



**Jeff Loria:** As we reach out to lawmakers you know, hopefully there's enough voices that can make changes.

**Emily Nuvan:** But seeing, you know, just this army of people helping and just that we all do little pieces of things. You know, we don't let despair stop us.

**Jennie Hua:** It's the most wonderful thing

**Emily Nuvan:** But it has to be a choice. You know, it's, it's a choice.

**Mohammad (translator):** Every moment is joyful.

**Emily:** ...but it has to be a choice. You know, it's a choice.

**Andrea Smardon:** Every moment?

**Mohammad (translator):** Yes, every moment.

**Andrea Smardon:** Just a couple of days before publishing this episode, I got a text from Kerry.

[SOUND: Text notice]

"Big news," it said. Baran's asylum was approved. Things are finally happening, she wrote, even if at a very slow pace. We feel very grateful.

In the meantime, Ava's parents and brother have been living in wait since they got on a flight from Kabul to Qatar. It's been five months, and they don't know when they'll be cleared to come to the U.S. to live with their daughter.

As for Ava, she's started first grade and loves her teacher. She's also recently tried swimming for the first time which Kerry says she adores. She reportedly has been wearing her new goggles in the bathtub for fun.

[MUSIC]

**Andrea Smardon:** Like many people, I get overwhelmed when I read the headlines in the news; it can seem like endless waves of crises, crashing at an ever faster pace. But working on this podcast feels like an antidote to the helplessness that can overtake us.

Just being around people connecting with one another is empowering. And that is contagious. When a stranger becomes a neighbor, everyone in their orbit is affected.

To make a personal confession here, I've lived in Salt Lake City for more than a decade, and I'm still trying to figure out how to be a contributing member of my community. I've been following people with my microphone as they help others, but I'm still not sure how to do it in my own life. I bet there are a lot of Americans like me, not quite sure how to reach out. If the United States doesn't seem very welcoming right now, maybe it's because our networks are frayed and fragile. We are strangers to each other. Maybe that's where we can start, by shoring up the connections we already have.

What does it look like to be there for one another? As we've seen throughout this podcast, when people respond to other's needs, they forge the bonds that they most need in their own lives. If we let them, our newest neighbors can teach us not only how to give but how to receive. We all need a welcoming community. But who will make that happen if not you and me?

## **[CREDITS]**

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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, I talk to one of the co-founders of the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership, the all-volunteer group that helped Sima and other FTP's. He shares the secrets to their success - how regular citizens without any prior experience pulled together to form a community of support.

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

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