

Afghan Allies, Now Neighbors
Profile by Susan Holcombe, September 2022

More than a year ago the United States pulled out of Afghanistan. Americans watched as Afghans scrambled to enter Kabul International Airport and board the planes that would take them to safety. Many of us were troubled not only about the fate of ordinary Afghans, but especially for those who worked for or were associated with the U.S. Government.

Luckily, Abdullah, Khanbadshah, and Rahmanuddin were among those who made it to the Kabul Airport and onto a flight to safety. Today they are ensconced in White River Junction with jobs at Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital and the Hotel Coolidge. With help from the Welcome Fund, established by CommunityCare of Lyme, and many volunteers and contributors across the Upper Valley, the men are settling well into our community and becoming independent.

Abdullah, Khan, and Rahman each served as soldiers in the province of Khost, a stronghold for Taliban resistance following the U.S. invasion. The men were equipped and paid by the U.S. Government and embedded with U.S. forces in Khost. They were assigned to watch rebel movement on roads, clear mines, and capture guns. They engaged in nighttime operations. Their families were in villages about an hour away, and they were able to see them one week out of every four. The men explained that they always “knew that the U.S. would leave one day and that they would go back to their homes”. But when the U.S. departure accelerated in August of 2022, the men were in imminent danger of retaliation from the Taliban. U.S. Government colleagues evacuated the men, narrowly avoiding an ambush by Taliban forces. There was no time to return home and say good-bye to family or gather belongings. The men were among tens of thousands to arrive at Kabul Airport, where they spent four days in chaos before they were placed on a flight to Qatar and then, via circuitous routes, made their way to the U.S. They spent four months in an overcrowded U.S. Army base in New Jersey, before the settlement process brought them to the Upper Valley at the end of January.

The men were welcomed by the Upper Valley Neighborhood Support Team, formed in partnership with Ascentria Care Alliance in response to the crisis in Afghanistan, extending extremely limited settlement resources in New Hampshire and Vermont. The team was spearheaded by CommunityCare of Lyme, whose work—involving neighbors to ensure everyone’s well-being—expanded to welcome refugees to the Upper Valley. Volunteers helped the men find housing and jobs, coordinated English and driving classes, assisted in shopping for food and clothing, and continue to provide support in navigating complicated immigration, money, and healthcare systems. The men work long days and are slowly becoming financially independent, as well as contributors to the Upper Valley—their presence being particularly welcome at a time of labor shortages. All three are able to send some part of their earnings back to their families in rural Afghanistan.

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Transition to a new country is more than financial independence. Many community members have pitched in to help the men adjust to their new home. Local families have welcomed them to their homes for meals and companionship. They have been embraced by the Upper Valley Muslim community. Interestingly, they've built friendships with other evacuated Afghans in the Upper Valley whose backgrounds are very different and with whom they would not have associated in Afghanistan. They're learning to navigate the Upper Valley bus system and, importantly, preparing for driver's licenses. Moving to a new home is challenging for an adult, and particularly for these men from rural Afghanistan, torn away from all that they had known, learning a very different language and culture. Each man has shared how grateful they are to be part of this supportive community.

The road ahead is uncertain. The Taliban has made life in Afghanistan even more difficult, and now the country is enduring drought and serious food shortages. The men say that their families, living largely in rural villages, are "okay" for the time being, though they are missing one another deeply. Fortunately, modern technology enables them to have access to their loved ones, and they have frequent video chats with their families.

Rahman, the oldest of the men at 49, has nine daughters and one son. Five daughters are married and two live in Kabul, not the family village. Khan, at 32, has two sons and two daughters. He explains that his family is financially stable and lives in a relatively safe rural area. Abdullah, the youngest at 29, has three children, two of whom are daughters. His parents and one of his children have health issues. All remark about how quickly the children are growing and are concerned about their education, particularly the girls'.

Looking into the future they see many unknowns. They want most of all to be reunited with their families. They know that it will take them a long time to get green cards and begin the process of getting citizenship. Already, they see possibilities for happy and secure lives in the Upper Valley. At the same time, in their hearts, they are still Afghans and hope that the future might bring about circumstances that will change the politics in Afghanistan and allow them to return. Now, they are happy to be in White River Junction. They are having new work experiences, finding new ways to relax and recreate (when there's time!), and meeting new friends. They are truly contributing members of the community and are learning to be part of the U.S., for which they risked so much.

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