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## A new life in Southwest Virginia, much uncertainty, but hope after escape from Afghanistan

By Heather Rousseau

Shrouded in a black head-to-toe burqa, Muzhda peeked through two eye holes and got into a taxi as the hot August sun started to rise. She did not have time to think about leaving her entire life behind. At age 25, this was her first time wearing a burqa. She had to conceal her identity from the Taliban.

The typical 20-minute drive to the airport took hours. She was afraid for her life. She thought the Taliban might arrest or even shoot her. She said she had done many interviews with journalists in Kabul as part of her work with the U.S. military that occupied Afghanistan. She was scared someone would report her. As the taxicab sat in a traffic jam with others heading in the same direction, she held her breath at each checkpoint.

Her older sister Shekiba was already at the airport — both were serving with the U.S.-supported Afghan military — and they had received a phone call from connections that would help them escape. [The Roanoke Times is withholding their identities for the safety of their family members still in Afghanistan.]

When she arrived at Kabul International Airport, already chaotic amid the U.S. withdrawal and pending Taliban takeover, Muzhda used WhatsApp on her phone, her only belonging, to connect with her sister. But there was more sitting and waiting outside and the August sun grew extremely hot. Hours went by with no food or drink as they waited to get word for entry to the base. They periodically changed locations to avoid suspicion. Parched, hungry and sweating under the long thick garments, they sat on the ground with their teenage brother. They watched horrific scenes just on the other side of the gate. As members of the military, it was hard for the sisters to feel so helpless in the situation.

People ran toward planes while waiting for entry. Muzhda saw a woman get trampled because her burqa got caught in a crowd as she tried to climb a fence. She saw people hiding in the wheels of an airplane, and then falling to their deaths when it took off.

As the day turned to night and their sweat began to feel like icicles, their military connections reached out, and escorted them onto a U.S. Air Force plane. An American lieutenant colonel of Afghan origin arranged for assistance for the sisters to be taken onto a departing flight.

“He didn't know who I was, except that I had served in the Special Forces. He wanted nothing in return except our safety,” Muzhda said.

Sitting shoulder to shoulder on the floor of a C-17 with nearly 100 other people, they flew from Kabul to Qatar. Still without food or drink and now freezing, they could not see through the windowless transport aircraft the home they were leaving.

They also could not imagine that their journey would take them across the world to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

It was not supposed to be this way. On a Friday, just days before, the sisters both dressed in long, colorful, elegant gowns while attending a friend's wedding at one of the most elite wedding palaces in the city. They danced in a giant ballroom with golden chandeliers and an imperial staircase.

Muzhda wore stiletto heels, her long hair dazzled up into a ponytail, as she wore a striking patterned gown of yellows, blues, purple and green. On the way to the wedding, the sisters discussed that this could be their last time seeing good friends for a while. People were worried. The Taliban had taken over all the provinces of Afghanistan. But they also thought things would be OK. They knew Afghanistan had a good military that could stop the Taliban.

"I am like, 'When they come we just shoot them. No need to be scared or run,'" Shekiba said.

By Sunday, when Muzhda reported for work on the American base, hardly anyone was there. She received a phone call from her sister that the Taliban was taking Kabul and would be searching their homes. Her commander gave her permission to go home. They tore up all their military certificates and documentation, deleted all the photos from their phones.

And then Muzhda looked out the window and saw something she still cannot believe.

"I saw the flag of the Taliban. I see it with my eyes, but up to now, two months or more, I can't believe it. It was very difficult."

The sisters and their younger brother were aboard the military plane for almost 18 hours, before landing in Qatar. They stayed two weeks in that country, before arriving at a makeshift military base filled with white tents in New Mexico. While at the U.S. resettlement camps for Afghan refugees, they were vetted and vaccinated.

On a brisk October evening, they arrived at Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport.

Volunteers with Blacksburg Refugee Partnership, including Scott Bailey, the group's president, and Jennifer and Dale Pike with their two sons, were ready to welcome them.

Dale Pike knew the sisters had no money during their travels so he reached out to the volunteer desk at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport where they had a three-hour layover and arranged for them to have a place to rest at the MinuteSuites and have dinner.

They reached the Roanoke airport at 11 p.m. "Muzhda?" Bailey said, getting her attention as the sisters left the terminal area. Muzhda looked up. The reality of their escape was just starting to sink in.

"We lost our everything," she said.

The sisters and their brother waited for their luggage containing some clothes that were donated to them and an oversized blanket they did not want to leave behind in New Mexico after having been subject to the desert's extreme cold nights, as if the cold they felt when escaping Kabul never left. Muzhda showed photos of her 3-year-old niece still in Afghanistan, sent to her on WhatsApp from her other sister. The child was not speaking to her at the time because she was upset with her aunts for leaving her behind.

### **Concern for women under the Taliban**

Drinking green tea at the Inn at Virginia Tech, the sisters sat with Bailey as they waited to meet members of the Muslim Student Association. They stayed at the hotel until Blacksburg Refugee Partnership made

their new apartment ready for them in the New River Valley. In the meantime, Bailey was doing all he could to help the sisters feel more comfortable in their new place by helping to arrange the meeting.

Three young students approached, smiling. The strangers seemed to hit it off right away. One student asked, “Do you speak Urdu?” No, they speak Dari, the sisters replied, but the languages are similar, so they chatted in their native tongues, laughing and smiling. They discussed the recent Virginia Tech football game. The students invited the sisters out to eat at a local burger place and to the mosque. They hugged before saying goodbye.

As they undertake a new life in the United States, the sisters are telling their story because they hope it helps the people left behind in Afghanistan, especially women, who have seen freedoms gained during the last 20 years evaporate under the reemergence of Taliban’s harsh religious regime. They are not using their real names and discussing details of their military backgrounds in order to protect their identities and family and friends back home. They also prefer not to state publicly where they have resettled in the New River Valley.

“I need attention about the women because the men in the last year have been working on the first line of the missions, and the Taliban, they killed them,” Muzhda said.

“So right now [the women] have a lots of babies and no husband. Right now how can she work because in the Taliban government they have no place to work for a woman, so how can she work? How can she cook some food for their children?”

Their older sister still in Afghanistan had to quit her job as a chef because the Taliban does not allow women to work, and their nieces were pulled out of school after the Taliban takeover.

Shekiba shows a disturbing video sent to her on WhatsApp from her military peers still in Afghanistan. The video shows members of the U.S.-backed Afghan military found dying on a floor after fighting broke out with the Taliban.

The sisters want the world to know people are still there who need help.

### **Starting a new home**

Muzhda had slept well for the first time in their temporary housing since fleeing Kabul. She had been staying up late to talk to her family in Afghanistan, where it was daytime. Perhaps she felt a comfort in knowing today she was moving into her new home, or because of the local Afghan families who delivered Afghan food the night before. Now, the sisters would have a stove for cooking and a place to make their home.

Tears came to Muzhda’s eyes when they entered the apartment. Her sister and brother looked around and explored each of the three bedrooms. Muzhda stayed in the entryway in silence.

The moment did not last long. It’s down to business, as a refugee partnership volunteer who drove them to their new home helped the sisters figure out some paperwork. She let them know other volunteers would arrive shortly to move in items for a fully furnished apartment.

The sisters sat on the empty living room floor in silence. Birds chirped outside the open window where a slight breeze wafted through from the forest behind the building. The muffled noise of a television could be heard from another apartment. “When did she say they would be here?” Shekiba asked. They are not sure.

Fifteen minutes later, someone knocked at the door. A continuous stream of volunteers entered with boxes of all sizes, carrying beds, dressers, kitchen supplies, blankets and rugs.

“Where do you want this bookshelf?” a volunteer asked. Here...here... “No here,” said Shekiba. She quickly found a drawing made for them by a young girl who lived across the street from one of the temporary houses where the sisters and their brother lived after they arrived.

The drawing shows three hearts, ice cream cones and a little blond-haired girl in a purple dress, her arms wide open with the words, “Welcome Home!” Shekiba taped it to the side of the bookshelf.

The Pikes, the couple who met them at the airport in Roanoke, had been storing many of the donations for Afghan refugees from the community at their house. Jennifer Pike was relieved as she watched a blue couch squeeze through the door. She had stayed awake the night before as she fretted about the logistics of moving the heavy furniture.

“I was worried if it would fit through the door, would volunteers be able to lift the heavy couch bed, could it fit on the trucks?” Pike said. “I did not want it to get dirty or anyone to get hurt.”

Some volunteers started to unpack boxes filled with kitchen items and food.

“Do you know how to use these?” someone asked the sisters, holding up coffee filters. They do.

Shekiba saw a small sewing kit and was excited. “Wow! In Afghanistan I have this, but big and a lot.”

As two volunteers worked to make sure a dresser drawer fit just right, Muzhda remembered her room in Kabul. “Lots and lots of things,” she said, recalling all her clothes and accessories.

“And now it’s all gone,” Shekiba said.

“Do you want to keep this?” a volunteer asked about a donated painting of downtown Blacksburg. “Yes,” Muzhda said as she picked a place front and center on a wall in the living room.

They hung a football poster for their brother who loves sports and was happy to have it. I can get you more of those, said the volunteer. “Any other kind of artwork you like?”

Muzhda said she loves Barbie and dolls, specifically Cinderella. She likes the Disney character because, “She was a good person, even when being treated so badly and God rewarded her,” she said.

Another Afghan refugee who recently moved to the apartments came by with his 1-year-old son. He asked Bailey about finding work.

“As soon as we get everyone moved in, let’s talk about what jobs you might like and what’s available,” Bailey said, adding: “It takes time.”

It takes about one month for a work authorization, one month for a Social Security card and a year or more for a green card, which allows non-US citizens to get permanent residence.

Three hours later the move-in wrapped up. “Are you going to be OK staying in one place for a long time?” Bailey joked with the sisters. Over two months had passed since the evacuation. Since then, they had been relocated at least five times.

Before saying goodbye he said, “If it’s important to you, it’s important to us. We can’t do everything quickly but we’ll get it done.”

### **Waiting for new beginnings**

The smell of garlic filled the air of their new apartment as Muzhda fried the minced cloves with eggs, tomatoes, onions and salt. The siblings sat down with a soft loaf of bread and broke off pieces to eat with the savory eggs.

“We eat a loaf of bread between the three of us for breakfast,” Muzhda said.

After breakfast they listened to music on YouTube by a famous Afghan singer-songwriter Aryana Sayeed. Muzhda said she likes her because she sings a lot of songs for women.

A feeling of unsettledness began to sink in with the newfound stillness. Their bustling lives in Kabul were rich with family, friends, work and school. Now all they could do was wait. Wait for Social Security cards, insurance cards, change of address. Wait to learn what would happen with their education, wait for volunteers to take them grocery shopping or for food and clothes. Wait to learn how to use the bus.

Shekiba got lost for a couple hours when she went for a walk. They had their phones, but no internet service yet to use GPS.

Muzhda sent a message on a WhatsApp group thread with the refugee partnership that she was bored, and that afternoon a few BRP volunteers stopped by to keep her company on a walk.

“They are so kind, they are really caring about us,” she said, adding that she will not send a similar message again. “I feel bad. I know they are all very busy.”

Partnership volunteers were more than willing to help. One drove them an hour to Bethlehem Grocery in Roanoke where the sisters could find the specific rice they wanted. The Thai rice from the area Kroger cooked too mushy, another brand of rice from the local market was better but not quite right. They wanted Aahu Barah, a brand of basmati rice, and Roanoke was the only place to find it.

Volunteers brought them to stores in the New River Valley to help them pick out their own clothes. The sisters love to shop, but it was hard to find their style in the college town. “All the shirts are too short,” Muzhda said.

She showed some longer form fitting tops she found online: A tan-colored one with a cowl neck, the other, blue with a short V-neck.

### **A group effort**

Marnie Mills, the Mission Advancement Associate with Commonwealth Catholic Charities said in an email to The Roanoke Times that, since mid-September, CCC has welcomed over 130 Afghan adults and children to Roanoke and surrounding areas. All three CCC office locations across Virginia have resettled more than 550 Afghan adults and children. The nonprofit is one of the largest resettlement organizations in Virginia.

“We are so grateful to have the support we have in Roanoke,” Mills said about the additional support from community groups, religious organizations and volunteers.

“One of the biggest challenges we continue to face is affordable housing in this unstable and uncertain housing market,” Mills wrote. There is also a need for household items and bedding.

The sisters found their way to the New River Valley through a network of tireless people that included U.S. military personnel who served with them in Afghanistan, CCC, BRP and The Secular Society.

The Secular Society is a Blacksburg-based organization that has worked closely with BRP and is paying to support five of the refugees and their families as they pursue the completion of their education and careers. The refugees being supported by the society are called The Secular Society Scholars. One additional scholar is undergoing a standard background check and is expected to arrive soon.

When the Taliban took over in August, BRP and The Secular Society wanted to help women who could no longer attend college.

“We were seeking out women who were forced out of the country, and who were not able to complete their education goals,” Bailey said.

He reached out to many contacts, and it was Atia Abawi, an author and former reporter with CNN and NBC and a foreign correspondent based in Kabul, who put him in contact with the military women.

Abawi had worked with the lieutenant colonel at the Kabul airport to help the sisters and their brother escape as the city was falling to the Taliban.

Muzhda helped, as well, by introducing some of the families to BRP and The Secular Society. “They are so kind, and accepted and do their best for every family,” she said.

The Secular Society Scholars include military women who were working to further their education, some of them with younger siblings and children. One was an officer, others were serving in the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon. One had three semesters remaining to get her Ph.D. in political science and wanted to be a judge.

BRP is also helping a married couple with a 1-year-old son. The father was working as a guard for the U.S. embassy for six years, and the mother was an elementary school teacher. He is the same man who asked Bailey about possible jobs as Muzhda, Shekiba and their brother moved into their new apartment.

“The new families are all educated, where the first families we worked with did not have any education, and many of them could not even write in their own language,” Bailey said.

“It's just a lot different, because we are going to be able to work with them over a longer time period, and they're going to be able to do more with their scholarships.”

Bailey explained that refugees arrive at their resettlement with only a \$1,000 stipend for each person from the U.S. government.

BRP called out for donations of home furnishings for all the families, and volunteers and the community responded. Volunteers stored the furnishings in their home garages and organized move-ins and logistics for the newest six families.

“We have a lot of great volunteers,” Bailey said. “Blacksburg is an incredibly welcoming place. We are called the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership for a reason.”

Currently BRP is looking for help with transportation and, in some cases, childcare. “We're trying to get them all working, or in school. And there's still a lot of doctor's appointments and stuff like that,” Bailey said.

### **Setting new goals**

Being around friends and knowing they are safe feels comforting, still the sisters' future is uncertain and they reminisce about home.

“Before, I had a very good life, my job, my home, my university,” Muzhda said. She showed a photo of her niece, the one who refused to speak to her before, but is now chatting with her and her sister daily.

Muzhda was one semester from completing her degree to be a midwife. Shekiba was almost done completing her degree to be a dentist.

In Afghanistan, the sisters spent their free time shopping in the large city market square and vacationing at Kapisa Province where they swam in the river.

“The Kabul was not the Kabul before 20 years [ago],” Muzhda said, describing the Afghan capital in the years that followed the United States invasion after the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

“We have a lot of universities, a lot of schools, a lot of journalists, and families gives permission to their daughter to go to the media to go in front of the camera and talk. We have a lot of singers, a lot of pilots.

“The situation was not like it was before the 20 years ago when the Taliban was the government.”

Shekiba remembered the first time she saw a woman on television driving an army vehicle in uniform. “I saw them and after that it would be me with gun and with helmet. At that time I like it.

“In my opinion it was very important [to join the military]. It was our wish. You guys [Americans] are open minded, and I like that.”

Muzhda saw her big sister in service and also wanted to join. She liked the good benefits and the opportunity to learn English and about computers. She wanted to be a pilot.

Her mother hesitated, saying she already had to worry about one daughter in the military. She eventually relented, asking Muzhda to please finish her high school education first.

In her last year of high school, Muzhda attended the Air Force University in Afghanistan and became an officer and a mechanic on PC-12 passenger and cargo aircrafts with the main goal to become a pilot. She had been taking classes for six months of the 18 to 24 month program when the Taliban regained control of the country.

Still, she hopes to continue her military career. “One day I hope I can do something for the U.S. government because they have done so much for Afghanistan for 20 years.”

Shekiba wants to become a dentist, having been inspired after seeing a peer who was shot in the mouth and needed major dental work.

“I like the dentist because in Afghanistan all men and women have tooth problems and tooth is the beauty of the face,” she said, adding “dentistry should help for this. If your tooth is good, you are eating good. You are strong.”

### **Sisters of Service**

One Friday morning in November, Muzhda was excited. She had just returned from the apartment gym and was making chicken kebabs with onion and red pepper.

“I hope they taste good,” she said. She was trying to make them just like her younger sister who is still back home in Afghanistan. Vegetable oil splattered in the pan as she turned the skewer.

“Our mentors are coming,” she said, referring to two women she and her sister served with in Afghanistan. The women were also in their 20s, born in the United States. They are active duty soldiers based at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. They are also a part of a Sisters of Service, working to empower and resettle the Afghan females who fought by their sides.

Muzhda tried a bite of the sizzling, steaming dish. “Not enough spice,” she said. “Needs more garlic, more salt.”

When the women arrived, everyone hugged and smiled. Shekiba had not yet returned from an appointment. Muzhda served ginger tea and she and the two soldiers sat in the living room catching up.

Muzhda talked about her worry of competing for her education in the states and about being one semester short of completing her midwife degree in Kabul.

“If they say start from beginning I cannot do that, it will be very boring for me,” she said, concerned that her college credits will not transfer to the United States.

The mentors want to remain anonymous for safety reasons. However, one spoke about the importance of mentorship. “They crossed so many barriers in Afghanistan,” one of the soldiers said, adding “They fully have the potential to succeed in the United States. This is why it’s so vital to have a mentor who can help navigate this new system.”

Muzhda joined the military when she was 19 and in 12th grade. She was scheduled to begin college the next year as a journalism major, but her mother died unexpectedly. Muzhda put some of the burden on herself, thinking she had caused her mother so much stress by joining the military. She wanted to honor her mother’s wishes that she become a midwife, so she changed her course of study.

In January, the sisters and other Afghan refugees began their education journey with English classes five days a week. When they have completed those classes, they will have an opportunity to pursue their education goals.

The future is still unclear for Muzhda and Shekiba. They still don’t know how many of their college credits from Kabul will transfer to U.S. schools.

Muzhda returned home to the apartment from English class excited to share what she learned about Martin Luther King Jr. She had not heard of him, and she liked that he stood for equality.

Her college track is uncertain but the military expert and midwife-in-training has settled for a cashier’s job. Muzhda still has sleepless nights, as she worries about her family stuck in Kabul, but like a typical



college student, she battles her fatigue with a cup of coffee in hand as she leaves for class, and as for her uncertainty, she battles that with hope.

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'I'm here, but my dreams and my soul is there' Ukrainian war refugee in Roanoke Valley: 'I'm here, but my dreams and my soul is there'

By Heather Rousseau

Jenya Yevheniia Shulym stepped outside the terminal of Dulles International Airport and saw the U.S. flag boldly lit on a flagpole against the evening sky. She pointed to the Stars and Stripes and raised her arms.

“Welcome to America!” she called out with a cheery smile, using the few English words she knew. Jenya did not feel particularly cheery but wanted to be strong for her then 7-year-old son, Egor, who looked around with nervous excitement, clutching his white and brown stuffed cat, a special companion he refused to leave behind in Ukraine with the rest of his belongings.

Jenya and Egor came to Roanoke County in August through Uniting for Ukraine, a pathway for Ukrainian citizens fleeing Russia’s invasion of their country to come to the United States.

Their family was torn apart in May when Jenya and Egor left her Russian-occupied city of Enerhodar in southeast Ukraine. Her husband, Maksim, Egor’s father, remained behind, holding on to all their hopes and dreams in their recently purchased home.

“Everyday I listen and scared,” Jenya said in a recent interview, describing what it felt like being amid the Russian invasion of her city. Her English has markedly improved in the few months she has been in the United States.

“My life stopped on Feb. 24. For eight months we have been living in hell, I never could have thought my child be a child of war.”

She thought about it for a month and changed her mind three times about leaving everything behind and coming to the U.S., but the situation kept getting worse. They would listen to sounds of sirens for hours while sitting in shelters. Humanitarian aid was not allowed in, store shelves were empty, and there was shelling in the streets.

“This journey was so long and scary, just into the unknown, but I had a goal, to save the life of my child and my own,” she wrote on the Instagram app.

The night before their bus departure, Jenya stayed up all night trying to save images from her treasured photo albums on a digital thumbdrive, not knowing if she would have a home to return to.

The following morning the bus station where evacuees gathered was crowded and chaotic. The driver yelled for Jenya and Egor to board.

“I forgot to kiss him goodbye,” Jenya said about her husband, tears welling up in her eyes, a memory that haunted her on the 33-hour bus journey to Zaporizhzhia, a trip that would typically take two hours.

Jenya said Russian checkpoints lined with mines and barricades delayed the ride. Egor sat on Jenya’s lap the entire time because they could not afford tickets for two bus seats. At checkpoints, Russian soldiers holding automatic weapons boarded the bus, and Jenya pleaded with them to allow her to continue her trip.

“When they approached, Egor tightly squeezed my hand and asked, ‘Mom these soldiers will not kill us today?’” Jenya recalls. They had no food, water or toilets during the journey. In the dark, the bus windows rattled.

“We heard bombing going all night,” Jenya said. “It was the worst night of my life.”

At Washington Dulles International Airport, Jenya found herself in the loving embrace of her good friend, Anna Miroshnychenko. Anna and Jenya grew up in Nikopol, Ukraine, and met while attending college there. Anna introduced Jenya to her cousin, Maksim, whom Jenya would marry.

The newly formed family of five huddled in a circle at the airport when Jenya and Egor arrived. After a decade of physical distance, but having remained close in communication, Anna introduced Jenya to her partner Travis Grunz, and their 3-year-old son, Emmett. They would all be living together in a three-bedroom apartment in Roanoke County. Emmett and Egor studied each other as the adults made introductions.

Anna was making plans to visit Ukraine with Emmett and Travis when Russian forces invaded her homeland in February. Instead of visiting friends and family, Anna spent sleepless nights doing all she could to help her fellow Ukrainians. She, alongside a dozen or more Ukrainian-Americans living in Roanoke, led support rallies for people still living in Ukraine. They held prayer vigils and sent care packages to troops and victims of war.

In late April, almost two months into the Russian-Ukraine conflict, President Joe Biden announced that the United States would welcome up to 100,000 Ukrainian citizens and their families fleeing Russia’s aggression. The Uniting for Ukraine program allows Ukrainians fleeing war to live and work legally in the U.S. for up to two years and requires applicants to have a passport and a sponsor living in the United States to provide financial support. Sponsors undergo a background check and are required to show proof of sufficient income or financial resources.

Anna turned her efforts toward raising airfare money that would bring family members to Roanoke under the program, and she applied to be a sponsor. She received approval from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to be a sponsor, along with Travis’ stepfather as a co-sponsor for Jenya and Egor. Anna also raised money from multiple friends and Roanoke residents who donated money to help pay for their flights to America.

Jenya and Egor are two of about 77,000 individuals who have arrived in the United States as part of Uniting for Ukraine, according to the Department of Homeland Security. Another 35,000 Ukrainians have

been authorized to come to the U.S. through the program. Another 111,000 Ukrainians arrived in the U.S. without the program's assistance.

Virginia has received 2,739 Ukrainians since the end of October through Uniting for Ukraine, according to Virginia Department of Social Services. Roanoke and Roanoke County have received five people through Uniting for Ukraine, according to the regional resettlement agency Commonwealth Catholic Charities, which has helped 51 people who arrived in Roanoke, Richmond and Newport News through the program.

### **Jenya's decision and the journey**

Jenya had never wanted to come to America.

"I had everything" in Ukraine, she said. "I'm here, but my dreams and my soul is there."

Jenya and Maksim were working to fix up the home they had purchased and to take a family vacation to Egypt. Egor participated in freestyle wrestling and break dancing for fun. As a family they loved to go for walks in the park and to the market for fresh fruits and vegetables. Jenya, an artist and a photographer, was trying to save money for a new camera and an iPad to use for her illustration work.

Their home is in Enerhodar, now a Russian-occupied city in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast province and across the Dnipro River from Nikopol. Jenya and Maksim had jobs at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station, located near Enerhodar. Maksim was an electrician and Jenya worked in the telecommunications and communications department for three months before Russia invaded. She had long sought a job at the plant, the biggest in Europe, which is now under Russian control and has been cut off from the Ukrainian power grid, according to news reports and correspondence Anna and Jenya receive from friends and family.

Jenya and her family were terrified the night their city was captured. She describes shooting at the nuclear plant and boat locks on banks of the Kakhovka Reservoir.

"We were so worried that there would be repetition of the Chernobyl accident," she wrote using her Instagram account. Some of what she wanted to say was too difficult for her to describe using English, so she used a translation app to help. "We saw red shells through the window at night as they burst, we heard shooting, it was so near. I squeezed my child, and did not let go. I tried to control myself. We slept in the same bed with our clothes on, with our things packed in case we needed to run for cover."

### **Adjusting**

After the February invasion, Ukraine banned men between the ages of 18 and 60 from leaving the country in case they are called to fight. Maksim, who is 38, remains in Ukraine.

With knowledge that Russian aggression would worsen in Enerhodar and the belief that Russian troops would force Ukrainian men to fight on the Russian side, Jenya's husband fled Enerhodar not long before the city lost power. Maksim informed Jenya that the Russian troops required Ukrainian men 35 and younger to remain in Enerhodar. Just a few years older, he was allowed to leave and now spends his time between Zaporizhzhia with his family and in Nikopol comforting Jenya's mother and grandmother. Maksim hopes Ukrainian soldiers will take back his city and he can return to his position at the nuclear station and to their home.

Their lives teeter between two worlds. Jenya prepares her family to succeed in either one. Jenya and Egor have their needs temporarily taken care of by their sponsors, but she wants to get a job and become independent in America. Before her job at the power station in Ukraine, Jenya worked as a portrait and wedding photographer. She said she was also using her degree as an economist specializing in corporate finance for the city of Enerhodar.

Now in Roanoke County, she hopes portrait and wedding photography can be viable work for her, but needs to build up a clientele. She is also doing design work and writing for a social media company called Vaikau that teaches parenting skills and was started by a Ukrainian friend. She also keeps busy creating still-life photos and illustrations for image-sharing websites such as Adobe Stock and Shutterstock. Finding a job, she said, is a challenge because she cannot drive and is still learning English. She also needs to be home for Egor when he returns from school.

“Ukrainian people work, work, work,” she said. “I want to work, I want to make money.”

Jenya studies English every day to help herself and her son succeed. In one month she went from knowing a few English words to having conversations in English with Anna and Travis and with Egor’s teachers at school.

“I want to learn English and speak and feel good and relaxing,” Jenya said. “I want to find new friends and new people in my life and I say thank you to everyone who helped me come to America.”

During the first week of September, Egor returned to school for the first time since the war began, just as students were doing in Ukraine. Unlike his peers still living in Ukraine, he was trying to fit into an American school system where he did not speak the language.

He looked out the sliding glass window from the living room of their Roanoke County apartment. One month had passed since his arrival in Virginia.

“It’s raining,” he said in Ukrainian.

Anna gave a comforting reminder, telling him that rain is good luck. Jenya embraced her son.

He headed to school wearing his Ukrainian school uniform, consisting of black dress shorts and a black T-shirt with an icon of a trident, the national symbol of Ukraine. He had a Hot Wheels backpack and a lunch box sporting Marvel Entertainment characters, including his favorite, Black Panther. Jenya had reassured her son the night before.

“Everybody wants to help you.”

Egor is a second-grader at Oak Grove Elementary School in Roanoke County. When he returns home each afternoon, Jenya sits with him at the computer to do his online Ukrainian classes and homework through the virtual learning system his Ukrainian school first used at the beginning of the pandemic and then continued to use when the war broke out.

Egor struggles in school while straddling divergent worlds and learning English. Jenya said he excelled in his classes in Ukraine and she knows it will take time for him to adjust in America. She said school subjects such as math are taught very differently in Ukraine.

“Every night he cries before bed, but wake up and smiles again,” Jenya said.

She has seen improvement each week. They agree that pronouncing American names is very challenging.

Jenya said her son, who typically is not shy, took a while to warm up to a boy his age he saw playing outside the apartment complex. One day, Egor mustered up the courage to introduce himself, Jenya recalled.

“He say, ‘My name is Egor. I am Ukrainian. My English is bad.’”

### **New family, new place**

Egor and Emmett wrestle in the playroom as Jenya cooks pancakes for an evening snack. Anna arrives home from work. Travis sleeps upstairs after traveling for work.

The women sit around a table drinking tea and dress the pancakes with honey and Nutella.

“We have crazy traditions in Ukraine,” Anna said. “We drink lots of tea and lots of desserts after every single meal.”

She had not kept the traditions alive after more than a decade living in America.

“But they’re back,” she said. “I’m so grateful. I love it.”

When Emmett had a cold and could not stop coughing, Jenya helped with an old Ukrainian tradition.

“She boils potatoes, Anna said. “Mix it with honey and baking powder and put it on his chest, so it sucks all the infections.” She said that Emmett slept well that night for the first time since he had the cold.

The boys break out into an argument over an airplane.

“Emmett but you have your own one,” Anna said.

“Our biggest issue is the sharing,” she explained.

### **In Ukraine**

After dinner, the conversation turns to Ukraine. The Roanoke Ukrainian community, along with friends and family of the business Atlantic Compressors Inc., located in Salem, raised \$7,300 in donations for medical supplies delivered to Ukrainian troops and citizens. The boxes of medical supplies and daily needs were sent overseas.

“They sent pictures of the kids and soldiers and everyone saying thank you,” Anna said, “And looking at the pictures, all the soldiers, how skinny they are and it’s stressful and it’s cold and they don’t have proper clothes or comfort foods.”

In Enerhodar, the situation worsened for citizens after missile strikes knocked out power in the city.

“People can’t prepare to eat, they go to the street and make fire for hot water and something to eat,” Jenya said.

Anna adds: “Lots of stores don’t have power, so the food spoils.”

Jenya explained that there are still hostages in the nuclear power plant in Enerhodar. Others decided to work seven days a week without light or heat.

“They are heroes,” Jenya said. “They are doing everything possible so there is no nuclear accident.”

In Nikopol, the sound of shelling keeps her mother and her 86-year-old grandmother awake at night.

“I check the news every night to see if they flee from the house, whether they live,” she wrote on the Instagram app. “At night they feel the terror. There is no longer a single residential building in which there are whole windows.”

On a brisk October morning, the lights from a school bus making its way up the hill silhouetted Jenya hugging and kissing Egor goodbye. The bus stopped outside their apartment complex and Egor got on. Jenya made a video call to Maksim and held up the phone so he could watch the bus pull away.

In the dark, the sunny afternoon light from Ukraine shone bright on Jenya’s face through the phone. They chatted about the war and Maksim told her that a Ukrainian missile stopped a Russian rocket. Maksim asked how Jenya’s and Egor’s English is progressing.

Jenya blew a kiss and hung up as she headed inside for a morning meditation before working on her English lessons and continuing to create a new life for herself.

She dreams of a time after war.

“So at night I think, oh maybe I can have money, work and then visit my husband somewhere, travel and meet in another country, or maybe war stop, and it’s that dream that make me happy,” she said.

*Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2022-23 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.*

THE ROANOKE TIMES

MAY 29, 2022

In Roanoke schools, new students learn English, and a new culture

By Heather Rousseau

Donat Jean was in tears as he ended his first day of middle school in the United States at the principal’s office.

Moments before, he was flowing with the stream of children headed outside to the line of rumbling buses. Donat was excited to go home after a tiring day and prepared to board the bus, but a school official stopped him and took him to the office.

It turned out that the new student’s name had not been added to the bus list. School officials tried to reach his parents as the 12-year-old boy waited in the office. Time ticked by, and he began to cry. Donat was just beginning to learn English.

Ashley Cayton, his English learner (EL) teacher, sat with him.

“As a sixth-grader, [missing the bus] probably would have made me cry alone,” Cayton said later. “But I, also, in sixth grade had enough English to communicate with people to fully understand that you’re OK.”

Cayton explained the situation to Donat, telling him that he would make it home safely, but she did not know how much the boy understood about what was going on.

“To him, there’s just a big problem,” she said.

Donat was unfamiliar with buses. Just a year earlier, he was walking to school in the Tanzanian refugee camp where his family lived. He was born in the camp, years after his parents fled civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Donat, who speaks Swahili and can understand his parents’ native Bembe tribe language, had only begun to learn English since he moved to Roanoke with his family in March 2021.

On that first fall day, a network of helpers sprang into action while the buses began to depart. Donat’s mom was at work, but school librarian assistant Madhu Chibbber — a Liberian who speaks Swahili — explained to Donat that an adult would drive him home.

That driver was Corey Allder, Roanoke City Public Schools supervisor of English learner and world language programs.

“Sometimes it feels like almost half of the job is outside of the job descriptions,” Allder said, referring to the library assistant who helped Donat calm down. “She did not wake up that morning thinking she was going to do that, but she was so happy to do it.”

Building the capacity for all teachers to help serve EL students is a main goal, said Allder, who has been in the position since the 2012-13 school year.

Roanoke has more than 1,630 students eligible for EL services, which is nearly 12% of about 14,000 students in the division, according to data from May provided by the city school system. The number of EL students has grown by 50% over the past nine years. With that increase the number of teachers and the amount of government funding allocated for English learning have grown, as well.

Some of the rise in EL students can be attributed to refugee resettlement in the Roanoke area, according to Katie Hedrick, bilingual support specialist with Roanoke’s city government.

“We’re one of only three cities in Virginia with refugee resettlement organizations,” Hedrick wrote in an email to The Roanoke Times. “And the number of refugees admitted has grown with both the upheaval in Afghanistan and the change in federal administration. Additionally, Roanoke is a fairly small city with accessible public transportation, affordable cost of living, and is centrally located within the state. We have also seen that once there is a concentration of families from one cultural or language group, more families are attracted to it because of the familiarity and sense of community.”

Hedrick took the position with the city last year as a result of her efforts to build a language access program for area residents. “We’re hoping to leverage that to benefit students and families in the schools,” she wrote.

To support the growing EL population, the school division has worked with partner agencies including Commonwealth Catholic Charities, a nonprofit that helps refugees resettle in Virginia, to provide refugee liaison positions and translators.

As the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan last summer, CCC notified Allder that the school system could expect an increased enrollment of students from Afghanistan.

Allder partnered with refugee liaisons at CCC, training faculty to work with incoming students.

“Presenters from RCPS and CCC provided cultural and linguistic background information and engaged participants in a dialogue to build our division’s capacity to serve these new students and their families,” according to information the school system provided.

The number that CCC helped resettle has more than doubled in the past three years. There were 92 in 2019, and 199 so far in the 2021-22 fiscal year that ends Sept. 30.

“For many years, Commonwealth Catholic Charities has supported refugees who are escaping violence, war, and persecution in their home countries,” Marnie Mills, the mission advancement associate with CCC wrote in an emailed response to questions.

“We are proud to help them as they start over in Virginia. The Roanoke Valley is a warm and welcoming community, and we are incredibly thankful for the continued generosity and support that our neighbors show to the refugee population here. Since 2019, CCC has assisted 438 refugees to resettle in the Roanoke area.”

Roanoke schools’ students combined speak more than 70 languages. Spanish is predominant, spoken by almost 70% of EL students. Dari, one of the most widely spoken languages in Afghanistan, is next at 5%, with Nepali at 4%. Swahili, the language of students who are primarily from Africa, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, is spoken by 3% of English learners.

“When a student comes in, they have to feel welcome and comfortable and go through some certain phases of not only language acquisition, but also just social adjustment,” Allder said.

“The goal for our kids is to develop English proficiency and the content knowledge that all other students are learning simultaneously. And it does happen.”

Donat, who had the tumultuous end to his first day of school, lives in the Woodrow Wilson Middle School attendance zone in southwest Roanoke, but he attends John P. Fishwick Middle School, three miles away. At Fishwick, the division offers EL services for students who recently arrived in Roanoke and are at beginner-level English proficiency.

Problems can happen with the bus system on the first day of school, especially for EL students who are zoned for different schools. The school division’s transportation office worked with the school to create a new bus stop for Donat. A few mornings later, as the sun rose, Allder waited at Memorial Avenue with Donat, just to make sure everything went smoothly.

### **Feeling welcome in Roanoke**

On a chilly Saturday afternoon in February, Donat played games on his phone while in his family’s living room. Nursery rhymes from the American children’s show “CoComelon” played on the television. His sister Mertha’s eyes were closed as their mother moved her fingers under and upward in a continuous



motion through the girl's dark curly hair. Every few moments, Mertha opened her eyes and smiled at her siblings and cousins as they ran around playing in their Roanoke home.

In Africa, the children's mother, Mwasi Binge, 29, would braid her daughters' hair twice a week, to keep it looking neat and fresh. In America, where she and her husband both work full time jobs, once a week has to do, though she would prefer to stay home with their five children.

Her husband, Mwenebyake Alebelebe, 34, works nights so he can care for their younger children, Pier, 2, and Meshak, 4, during the day.

"I chose to do this so that during the day I can deal with their appointments since their mother's English is limited," he said through a translator, "I can struggle and make people understand what I'm saying in English."

Alebelebe cuts door frames at Ply Gem in Rocky Mount. Binge sews handbags in Roanoke.

Mertha cringed a bit as her mother braided close, but not too tight, to her scalp. Binge smiled and kept focus as the soft window light touched her cheeks. "They usually fall asleep when I braid their hair. They are relaxed and they are having a nice time," Binge said.

"When you're making the hair you don't make it too tight at the roots."

The couple speaks in Swahili. Susan Wilhelm, a translator with Commonwealth Catholic Charities, translated to English.

When the family arrived in Roanoke a little more than a year ago, Mertha Mwenebyake, 6, and her sister, Teelecha Mwenebyake, 7 — like their brother, Donat Jean — did not speak or understand English. The girls have their father's first name as their last name. Donat has his grandfather's name as his last name. In the Bembe culture parents choose a last name for their children.

"Previously they were saying that the teacher is talking and they don't understand what the teacher is saying, and so now they don't say that anymore which means they understand what the teacher is saying," Alebelebe said about his children.

Alebelebe and Binge lived very different lives when they were their children's age.

At age 8, Alebelebe watched men with guns invade his family's small fishing village located along Lake Tanganyika, in the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He remembers being scared and running to hide with his mother. It was 1996.

As Civil War engulfed the DRC, Binge and her family fled the country when she was 3. Her only memories from Africa are the years spent in a refugee camp in Tanzania. The couple met at the camp in 2008 and married the following year.

They lived there 26 years, before the International Organization for Migration sent them to Roanoke.

The parents speak Kibembe, which is their Congolese Bembe tribal language, and Swahili, Tanzania's national language. They speak some French, the DRC's official language, and Lingala, one of the many native Congolese languages.

Learning English is important to Alebelebe and Binge and they hope to progress along with their children.

The couple attended English classes at Blue Ridge Literacy in Roanoke, an organization that provides language skills for adults in Western Virginia. They stopped going in order to work full time and take care of their children.

They now use Google Translate to help them communicate and study English using various language-learning apps on their phones.

Alebelebe said his family has felt welcome in Roanoke.

“Here we’ve come as refugees, but how we’ve been received here we don’t feel like refugees,” Alebelebe said. “Initially you know first you would see a white or Caucasian person and you will have so much fear because that is something so foreign ... but we have come here to speak with you. We eat with you. We work together. We live well together.”

He worked in construction in Tanzania, but said refugees there were not given freedom to own things such as a car or a bike and they had very little food.

Alebelebe was somewhat concerned about coming to the United States. “I heard people here would look down on us because we’re from Africa and we talk differently,” he said, “but then I came here and I discovered there were many of us who don’t speak English.”

War has been a primary reason that refugees have left their homelands.

The family resettled from the Nyarugusu Camp, which opened in November 1996 to host people fleeing the ongoing civil war in DRC, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency.

The agency reported that in 2018 the camp hosted 153,024 refugees and was in the process of resettling Congolese who arrived in Tanzania between 1994 and 2005.

The organization also published a 2013 report that described the camp’s poor living conditions.

“The mission reported insufficient infrastructure in primary schools, specifically referring to a lack of furniture, a laboratory or a library, and the use of pit latrines. There are limited opportunities for higher learning after secondary education,” according to the report.

Alebelebe recalled the camp’s strict regulations.

“Eight o’clock, everybody has to be asleep,” he said. “No walking around, not doing anything. If you’re arrested outside, you’re going to be beaten [with] a lot of strokes.”

The report also stated: “There are considerable risks to refugees who leave the designated area. The risk of rape, exploitation, and conflict with local communities is present.”

The children enjoyed school in the refugee camp, but hunger made it hard for them to learn and focus. The availability of food in American schools has improved his children’s ability to learn, Alebelebe said.

“Here you go to school for maybe eight hours and there is food,” he said. “Sometimes when they come home from school, they don’t even want food.”

The children have their favorites.

“I like apples and bananas,” Teelecha said.

“My favorite food is gummy bears,” Mertha said.

The parents are wary about their children’s access to sugar in the United States. They would prefer only fresh foods for them.

### **Learning in practice**

The sisters’ hands shot upward with excitement.

“Me, me” they said, each wanting the first chance to describe a photo.

A group of four level-one English learners gathered around a horseshoe-shaped table with their EL teacher, Casey Redd, in a small, EL-specific classroom at Virginia Heights Elementary School. A screen showed a pug dog wrapped in a blanket, sitting on a trail in the woods. Redd called on Mertha and asked her to say what she saw in the picture.

“A dog,” Mertha said.

Doing what?

“Blanket and a tree.”

What do you think that dog is thinking?

“He’s cold.”

“For the newcomers,” Redd said, “it’s really helpful to pull them out [of class] for those 30 minutes, or however many minutes you have, to really focus on learning English and practicing it because they don’t always have time or feel comfortable and confident to speak English in the classroom. It sort of gives them a little safe bubble to learn and to practice, and then go back to the classroom.”

Redd was a general education teacher for eight years at Virginia Heights Elementary School and was already used to working with EL students in her classes. Last year she saw a flier promoting EL certification. It’s part of a program encouraging professional development for classroom teachers who wish to help serve EL students — a goal that city EL supervisor Allder sought to attain.

Redd liked the idea of working in smaller groups, so she took the eight-week class, passed the test and this year became an EL teacher at Virginia Heights.

She said that it’s a challenge for a general education teacher to find time to work closely with the EL students.

“You have so many other students and so many other subjects to teach, you can’t be as dedicated to work on the language piece. You’re still trying to teach them science, math, reading all the things,” Redd said. “But as an EL teacher, your main job is to support their English learning.”

She said she has seen tremendous growth in the sisters.

Teelecha sometimes slept during class at the beginning of the school year. But now she is anxious to participate.

“This has been a humongous change in this child’s life,” Redd said. “They’ve left everything they know. You have to give them that space to just take it in. It’s very exhausting to their brains to be hearing a different language they don’t know, all day long.”

Redd began to see Teelecha’s confidence and comfort level pick up in late fall.

“I think listening is kind of the first skill that they get, they can understand a lot by hearing,” Redd said. “But having the confidence to say something in English, I think took a little bit longer for her.”

The sisters wore matching shirts adorned with a young girl dressed in pink and blowing a kiss alongside letters written in blue cursive that said, “Always and forever.”

They laughed freely at the images of unexpected juxtapositions on the screen.

Mertha jumped up and ran to the screen that showed an image of animals sitting around a table drinking coffee.

“A duck,” Mertha exclaimed, pointing to three yellow ducklings walking across the table.

“She is such a little free spirit, kind of spunky, in a good way,” Redd said of Mertha. “So for her, she was never shy. She has adjusted well to classroom rules and procedures and kind of how we behave at school in America and things like that.”

Mertha is showing more confidence in speaking, her teacher said.

“She’ll say things unprompted. Like she’ll say, ‘Oh, Mrs. Redd, I really like your hair,’ ” Redd said. “Which I think is huge. It’s not academic but it’s great. It’s kind of a milestone, because she did it on her own.”

Redd stays in close contact with her students’ family members and guardians, and she likes that many of them feel comfortable asking for help with such things as getting their children eyeglasses or accessing food donations.

Over the past 10 years, the division has maintained a lower student-per-EL teacher ratio than required by the state, allowing them to focus more attention on their students. Currently, Roanoke schools employ 32 full-time EL teachers, two more than the state requirement for a division of Roanoke’s size.

“That’s been vital, because that’s been instrumental in some of our success,” Allder said. “It’s not just about the ratio. We’ve been able to do things more specialized and more specific to our student needs, because we’ve always had more staffing than what was required by the state.”

One way the system addresses specific needs involves Donat attending Fishwick Middle School, where services for beginning English learners are consolidated for the middle school students. Teachers do not have to visit multiple schools. At Woodrow Wilson Middle School, services are in place for more advanced English learners who do not need so many daily support services.

The division administers tests to students at the beginning of the year, to identify who is eligible for EL services. Then a state standard test is given yearly to measure English language proficiency.

“In Virginia, students are eligible to receive services until they reach a threshold score of 4.4 on a six-point scale. Once they reach the threshold score, they are still monitored for four years,” according to a school division statement.

### **Recovering lost learning**

Donat bit into a treat he’d never tasted before.

“Was it crunchy?” Cayton asked. Donat nodded his head. Yes.

“Was it sweet?” Another nod.

The group of sixth-graders made s’mores in an after-school program for English learners at Fishwick Middle School.

Teacher Teresa Martin brought in her portable s’mores-making oven, as students used the treats as a learning opportunity.

The week before, she and Cayton covered sequence words with the English learners, and now the students put their knowledge to work.

First, you place a graham cracker, the children were instructed. Next, you add chocolate, then you add a marshmallow.

“Finally, you can enjoy it,” Cayton said.

The program, which takes place every Monday during the school year, helps meet the needs of EL students at Fishwick, some of whom struggled during the pandemic.

Virtual instruction was a challenge for some families, such as Alebelebe, Donat’s dad, who said he was not familiar with using a computer.

“External pressure on families was also a challenge — some parents/guardians were unable to work or had severely limited hours and that led some older students to seek employment to help support their families,” the school division said in a written statement.

Returning to classrooms in fall 2020 helped EL students overcome barriers they experienced during virtual learning.

In-person instruction is particularly important for students learning English because they learn from visuals, body language and other non-verbal communication, the school division said in its statement.

While after-school tutoring has been available for students in the past, all funding for the program now comes from one of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Unfinished Learning (ESSER II) grants, which were passed by Congress as part of COVID-19 pandemic aid in 2020. Funding will continue through September 2023.

“With the expanded needs due to the pandemic, it has been extremely beneficial to have the new grants to help meet those needs,” Allder said about the Unfinished Learning grants.

The program, which draws as many as 70 students, helps reinforce what is taught during the day.

Allder was an EL teacher for four years at William Fleming High School, starting in 2008. Through conversations with general education teachers there, he came to recognize the need for such programs. He started an after-school program for English learners at Fleming in 2009, intending to help with both academics and engagement.

“If you came from a refugee background, or limited or interrupted schooling, you really need someone to take the time to lay the foundation with language and just content basics,” Allder said.

The school system receives federal money to cover many costs of English language instruction.

Additional funding comes through Title I, which helps schools with high percentages of minority students and children from low-income families.

After-school programs, summer programs and professional learning for teachers are part of Allder’s agenda, as he tries to level the playing field for English learners. He thinks of his own children, who know English and whose parents are teachers, and he wants children coming from elsewhere to have a starting point closer to theirs.

“What we were trying to do is move the line of scrimmage, like a football analogy: You don’t want to start from your own goal line and try to go 100 yards,” he said.

### **Reaching out to families**

Student faces light up with recognition when Allder visits the EL afterschool programs. Some run over to say hello. They see him not only when he substitute teaches or helps with afterschool programs, but when he makes home visits.

During the height of the pandemic, Allder went to students’ homes, delivering meal kits and books that the school, volunteer organizations, churches and community groups had provided.

Recently, he visited homes where there are concerns about kids dropping out. Karina Altamirano, a bilingual assistant, joined him.

“We tried to make phone calls, but numbers change a lot,” Allder said. “It’s a lack of stability sometimes and being able to pay cellphone bills.”

The two educators talked to parents or students about what the school division could do differently to help the student re-engage with their high schools experience and get their diplomas.

“What advice do you have for us to welcome your beautiful family?” he asked Alebelebe during a home visit.

“Continue to show the love and support like you have shown me,” Alebelebe answered, through a translator.

Alebelebe said the teachers reaching out to him in Swahili helped make his family feel welcome. The division’s teachers use an app called TalkingPoints, which translates English to languages including Swahili.

“I think they have a lot of love because they want me to understand what is going on,” Alebelebe said.

### **Learning released**

Mertha and Teelecha burst into their home and ran upstairs, where they threw their backpacks on the bed after school on April 29.

When asked how school was, Mertha said, “It’s good. I learned to eat and play outside and work.”

She opened her backpack, pulled out a book and brought it downstairs to the family room where her father, siblings and cousins, who also live there, had gathered.

Mertha knelt on the floor and spooned her body over the book, “Zombelina School Days,” by Kristyn Crow. Her younger siblings peeked over her shoulder. Mertha opened the book and slowly and cautiously pronounced the letters as she read. She made it a couple pages in, but the other children wanted to go outside.

“Let’s play tag,” Teelecha exclaimed.

Donat looked out from the backyard balcony as his four younger siblings and two cousins ran and rolled in tall green grass, plucking dandelion flowers and blowing on seeds that parachuted into the wind.

*Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2022-23 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.*

THE ROANOKE TIMES

SEPT. 4, 2022

For some new arrivals from Afghanistan,  
seeking asylum a complicated process

By Heather Rousseau

A year after fleeing Afghanistan and losing everything for the second time in his life, Mohammad Naziry sat in the safety of his Roanoke apartment and discussed what is most important to him.

Atop that short list are his family’s health and well-being.

Next is to be granted asylum, which would give him permanent residence in the United States.

“I want to be valid, so I can really work hard and try to build up a life here,” Naziry said. “Otherwise, where am I going to be headed, you know, if I don’t have my proper documentation? So that is really important.”

Since the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021, 214 Afghans have come to the Roanoke and New River valleys, according to Commonwealth Catholic Charities, the nonprofit that helps immigrants and refugees settle in Virginia.

Naziry is one of many seeking asylum, a form of protection that allows refugees to remain in the United States rather than be deported back to a country where they fear persecution of themselves or their families. Asylum seekers must apply for protection within one year of arriving in the United States. Many refugees came on Special Immigration Visas or humanitarian parole, which often allow permanent residency in the country.

Naziry, however, did not receive a Special Immigration Visa, though he said he and his family rented out living spaces to American government contractors in the U.S.-backed Afghan government era.

“Since we had our homes rented to the U.S.,” Naziry said, “now we have going through our mind that the Taliban is going to say to us, ‘You work with them. You had your homes rented to them, so we’re not going to spare you. We’re going to cut your throat.’”

Joe Mott, a retired senior executive with the Department of Justice, was a liaison in Afghanistan from 2018 to 2020 and is helping Naziry’s family apply for asylum. Mott volunteers with Episcopal Community Sponsorship, a ministry that joined Commonwealth Catholic Charities newly formed Community Sponsorship program.

Naziry, his wife, their two sons and his mother are here on humanitarian parole, which is granted to people with urgent need to enter the United States.

“They weren’t eligible for SIV because they weren’t employees of the U.S. government or a U.S. government contractor,” Mott said. “In their case, the route to seek asylum is due to the threat of harm if they return to their native country.”

### **Fleeing the Taliban**

As the Taliban gained control of Kabul in 2021, Naziry and his family of five fled their home with an uneaten hot dinner at the table, dirty dishes in the sink and the television still on, showing the news. They filled one suitcase for all of them. They had no idea where to go.

Naziry told his story in English and in Dari, with help from a Commonwealth Catholic Charities translator.

He and his family are Shia Hazara, an ethnic minority in Afghanistan that has long faced discrimination and persecution in the country.

Naziry, 36, recalled the Taliban gaining control of Afghanistan in the late 1990s, when he was a young boy. The Taliban took away and tortured his father and brother for being Hazara, he said. His father died of those injuries within days of his return. Naziry said his brother’s hands still shake from the torment.

Naziry and his family fled to Pakistan soon after. When they returned to Afghanistan in 2002 after the U.S. and its allies drove the Taliban from power, Naziry started a bridal shop business.

“I was a hard worker. I was well off, and I made good money for myself, a good living,” Naziry said. He shared his wealth with neighbors, for example providing beds for children previously sleeping on floors. “I said, ‘Where’s your pillows? Where’s your blankets?’ And they say, ‘We don’t have that.’ And that made a hole in my heart.”

### **‘The system is broken’**



Mott, the attorney helping Naziry and his family, said their asylum application is supported by the fact that they helped U.S. government contractors, but also by who they are.

“They’re Shia Muslims who are subjected to frequent attacks, especially by ISIS, even within the last couple of months,” Mott said. “Plus, they’re a member of the Hazara minority, which has historically been subjected to discrimination and oppression under the previous Taliban regime.”

The Taliban kidnapping and beating Naziry’s father is an example of what Hazara Shia face, Mott said.

Seeking permanent residency in the United States can be an uncertain path, taking years and possibly ending in rejection, according to Rachel Thompson, an immigration lawyer with Poarch Thompson Law in Salem.

“The system is broken,” Thompson said.

Once an application is submitted, it can take years until an interview with an asylum officer is scheduled with the U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Thompson said some clients who filed applications four years ago still have not had interviews.

“It kind of jeopardizes their due process, because as each day passes, evidence is getting old, it’s getting stale.”

People seeking asylum must prove that their lives are in danger — based on race, religion, nationality and membership in a particular social group or political opinion — if they return to their native lands.

“If you have one minor contradiction [in your filing], then your case could be tanked,” Thompson said. “If the application is not filled out correctly, it could get rejected or denied.”

Jennifer Smyrnos, an immigration lawyer with Grace Immigration in Roanoke, said the average wait time can be several years for an asylum interview with her firm. Because of hurdles in applying for asylum, she has advised Afghan families in Roanoke to consider applying for Temporary Protected Status, which allows displaced individuals to remain in the United States for up to 18 months, a time that can be extended.

“The TPS program provides them with the minimum of what they need to begin their lives here in the U.S., such as a work card and a Social Security number,” Smyrnos said.

Afghanistan is one of 15 countries currently designated for Temporary Protective Status by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Smyrnos understands that many families want a permanent home base, but said many of the Afghan families who came to Roanoke last fall will have difficulty meeting the criteria to get approved.

“Even with a country in turmoil such as Afghanistan, that has been subjected to Taliban terror, does not automatically mean that its civilian population will be granted green cards or approvals for asylum status,” she said. “We see this clearly in the immigration courts and the agencies.”

The backlog of immigration cases is nearly 1.5 million and growing, according to the Transactional Research Access Clearinghouse, a data research organization based at Syracuse University that tracks

immigration reports. Virginia's 69,120 pending immigration cases are the sixth-most in the United States, according to the group. That is a nearly seven-fold increase in the past decade.

TRAC Immigration data shows that as of July, more than 1,500 pending cases from the Roanoke Valley are waiting to be heard in Virginia's immigration court.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., heard multiple concerns about wait times for permanent residence status and citizenship, during a meeting in August with more than 20 local South Asian community members at Baymont Inn, in Salem.

Kaine said that the backlog of immigration cases in the courts is due to the pandemic and restrictions imposed by former President Donald Trump's administration.

"Everything on the immigration side, and a lot of other things too, kind of backed up during COVID," Kaine told reporters after meeting citizens. "And then there was a backlog. And then second, look, the Trump administration was not interested in making it easy for people. ... Even people who are in the United States who had green cards found that the process of going from green card to citizen slowed down. So I think there was an intentional slowdown effort in the previous administration on everything connected to immigration."

Smyrnos said that Temporary Protected Status, with its easier access, is a solid option to obtain legal status in the U.S., compared to the lengthy petition process for asylum.

"TPS is envisioned to be a temporary measure," she said. "But in practice, it acts like a long-term measure because Congress has repeatedly reauthorized TPS programs over the past 20 years. Until Congress gets it together and provides comprehensive immigration reform, which hasn't been addressed in over a quarter century, immigration practice today is largely a piecemeal framework of federal regulations, executive actions, agency programs and political whim."

People like Naziry can only wait as their requests work through the system.

"Right now, it's a little hard for me. I am new to this county," Naziry said. "But here is peace. I can work. I can go home. I can be happy with my family. If I can stay here for my future, it's everything for me."

*Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2021-22 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.*

THE ROANOKE TIMES

SEPT. 4, 2022

## Roanoke region reaches out to Afghan refugees

By Heather Rousseau

A month after Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021, Commonwealth Catholic Charities said it experienced one of the largest influxes of refugees arriving in the agency's 95-year history. The resettlement agency increased staff in its Richmond, Newport News and Roanoke offices since the Afghan crisis started, with additional funding from local foundations and governments.

"With so many families that came in so quickly at one time, we realized that we needed additional help to be able to support and provide our services to the families, to help them thrive and to help them integrate into our communities successfully," said Marnie Mills, a mission advancement associate for the agency.

Still, Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC) needed more people, as well as funds for the new arrivals. Several in the Roanoke Valley stepped up.

"It was weeks and weeks of non-stop phone calls, and people emailing and wanting to help," Mills said.

The agency started the Community Sponsorship program, allowing local groups to work more closely with incoming families.

"It was just a really neat way for us to engage our community, engage these groups that wanted to all work together and to come together to help support the families," Mills said.

Groups went through training and background checks and were able to choose among three different levels of support varying from a one-week to a one-year commitment.

The Becoming Beloved Community with Christ Episcopal Church was the first faith group to become a part of Commonwealth Catholic Charities Community Sponsorship program. The ministry began with the goal of creating inclusion.

After retiring from work as a chaplain for 10 years, Jan Therien felt a need to continue her ministry.

She knelt and prayed in the Christ Episcopal Church sanctuary as the Rev. Melissa Hays-Smith came to the pew beside her.

"She said to me, 'Jan, we'd like for you to coordinate the Afghan resettlement ministry,'" Therien said.

"Of course I said yes."

She reached out to Mills at CCC.

"We thought that would be beautiful, to grow the Becoming Beloved Community by bringing in a stranger and making them family," Therien said.

She and members of Christ Episcopal Church worked alongside CCC to form the Episcopal Community Sponsorship, including seven other churches — St. Elizabeth, St. James, St. John's, St. Mark's in Fincastle, Trinity Ecumenical at Smith Mountain Lake, Trinity Episcopal Church in Rocky Mount and Christ Church in Martinsville.

The Episcopal Community Sponsorship group decided on a 90-day sponsorship and was introduced to Mohammad Naziry and his family. Group members provided more than 600 hours of service to Naziry and his brother's family during the formal partnership with CCC. The formal period ended in June, but the core team continues to spend time with Naziry and his family.

Sponsorship volunteers helped the family shop for new clothes. They arranged home furnishing donations, grocery shopping and English tutoring. They provided tutorials on paying bills and applying for asylum or work visas. They drove family members to medical appointments and soccer practices.

"These are things that can be very time consuming, with so many families that came in, for our resettlement staff," Mills said.

### **New shoes and smiles**

Naziry watched in silence while children and adults paraded and jumped around his living room, his smile radiating delight as his sons, nieces, nephews, wife, brother and their mother tried on new shoes.

Red and orange lights flashed as his youngest son jumped up and landed wearing a pair of new light-up sneakers.

Eight months after arriving in Roanoke from Afghanistan, they were all getting a new pair of shoes, fitted just right for their new life. Fleet Feet, a local running apparel store, donated the shoes to the families.

Therien recalls helping Naziry take his son's shopping for school clothes.

"He found the shorts. And he said, these are what American men wear, yes?"

Naziry purchased his first pair of shorts. He wore them on a summer afternoon as Therien came by to visit. His son, Benyamin Sakhidad, 10, ran outside to greet her and the two embraced.

Therien tried to greet his wife by speaking Dari, the family's native language, laughing at her own pronunciation of "Salâm."

The Roanoke Times is identifying Naziry's wife by name, for cultural and safety reasons.

An interpreter with CCC helped translate.

"You're trying to learn Dari; I'm trying to learn English," Naziry's wife said in Dari.

"But you're doing much better with English than I am with Dari," Therien replied.

Therien reminded her of how she reacted by speaking in English the first time she saw a train pass by.

"We don't have a railroad system in Afghanistan," Naziry said in English. "We have 45 years of war."

Naziry, who said he has vacationed in such places as Fuji, China and India, said not much has surprised him about America so far, other than how kind and welcoming people in Roanoke have been.

“You can basically help others with just a smile,” he said. “If you can offer that only, your smile can help people.”

Naziry works full time at an auto body repair shop in Salem. He said he would perhaps someday like to start another business as he did in Afghanistan, but is unsure what type of business might work in Roanoke. He also said he has concerns about supporting his family of five on minimum wage.

“All the time is not sunrise, and all the time is not sunset,” Naziry said. “It is sunset, sunrise, sunset, sunrise. It is life.”

Naziry walked Therien to the door and they hugged goodbye.

### **Creating bonds**

Joan Dowdy, a retired special education teacher, runs around the apartment with Benyamin and his 13-year-old cousin Omid Naziry, sticky notes in hand. The word “stove” is written on a note, and the boys run to the kitchen but are uncertain where to place the square purple piece of paper.

“Ceiling” is written on another, and the boys laugh as they try to figure out how to place a sticky note on the ceiling.

“They’re delightful boys, and they are so gracious,” Dowdy said.

Four volunteers with Episcopal Community Sponsorship visit the boys and the rest of the Naziry family each week to help teach them English. They will continue to learn through the Roanoke County school system and Blue Ridge Literacy in Roanoke, an organization that provides language skills for adults.

Naziry’s wife brings out a large circular flat bread, bigger than a large pizza. She offers the soft and warm bread, cradled in a large blue cloth, to one of the English tutors, who tears off a piece.

A knock at the door reveals another volunteer, who has come by to take the boys to soccer. They excitedly run out the door.

One summer afternoon during a soccer scrimmage, Omid was the first player to score a goal. After the game he and Benyamin left the field, arms around each other.

Joe Mott was there at the sideline with a fellow volunteer. He held out his arm. They fist-bumped and began to walk up the grassy hill.

“I’d like to think that even when the need ceases, [the] relationship will evolve organically and we’ll be going to [their] high school graduations,” Mott said.

Theiren replied: “Good lord willing. I don’t know how to stop.”

She recalled the night Naziry and his family had members of Episcopal Community Sponsorship over for dinner. More than 20 people sat in the Naziry apartment with an elaborate display of food, and when Naziry stood to speak, Theiren said his words gave her tears of joy. “He stood up and said ‘We are family now. We will be family forever.’”

*Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2021-22 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.*

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JUNE 5, 2022

## Roanoke Valley teachers adapt, innovate to help English learners

By Heather Rousseau

Spanish language filled the Salem High School hallways as baseball players and students teamed up for a schoolwide scavenger hunt.

About 15 Salem Red Sox team members joined more than 30 English language learners in early May as they searched for sticky notes with clues that sent them to their next objective. Written in English in black marker on a yellow note were the words: “Where do you go to eat lunch?”

Two pitchers on the minor league baseball team, Miguel Suero and Reidis Sena, towered over the trio of high school students who led them around the school. They hustled to the cafeteria and found the next clue. Tossing Spanish words back and forth as if playing catch, the players moved cautiously between English and Spanish.

The scavenger hunt, developed by Salem High English learner teacher Nolan Shigley, was a way for students to practice their English while working alongside the young ballplayers, many of whom were also learning English. After taking a while to warm up, players and students were soon laughing and high-fiving each other as they searched for clues.

“They're learning the value of learning a new language and adapting to a new culture, but also embracing their own culture and that it's okay to be Latino in a new country,” Shigley said. “It's OK to speak Spanish and English, you know, learning to support each other and understanding that adults have the same experiences.”

Teachers have been at the forefront of finding innovative ways to help this growing population of English learners in the Roanoke County, Salem and Roanoke school systems.

Salem's school division since 2014 has seen a 7% growth in students eligible for English learner services. The city schools serve 142 EL students among 3,800 students enrolled.

Roanoke County Public Schools' EL population is up 25% over the past seven years, with 617 students eligible for EL services in a division with about 13,000 students.

School systems are expanding their services not only to align with state regulations, but also to implement ideas from teachers and faculty to better meet the needs of their English learners.

Commonwealth Catholic Charities, a nonprofit that helps refugees, has resettled 199 individuals so far in the Roanoke and New River valleys in its 2021-22 fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. The number of refugees has more than doubled in the past three years, climbing from 92 settlements in 2019.

Katie Hedrick, bilingual support specialist for the city of Roanoke, said there are multiple reasons for the rise in refugees coming to the region.

“We’re one of only [three] cities in Virginia with refugee resettlement organizations,” Hedrick wrote in an email. “And the number of refugees admitted has grown with both the upheaval in Afghanistan and the change in federal administration.”

When one cultural or language group settles in a specific area, she added, other family members are attracted to move near their family members, giving them familiarity and a sense of community.

In Roanoke City Public Schools, the number of EL students has grown by 50% over the past nine years, with more than 1,630 English learners comprising nearly 12% of an enrollment of approximately 14,000 students.

An alphabet soup of acronyms describes people learning English who are coming from other language backgrounds. Federal, state and local programs use either English learner (EL), English Language Learner (ELL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). Virginia localities employ EL, which is the term used predominantly in this story.

### **Homework Help Club**

Sharon Francisco saw a need and she acted on it. Years ago, she started an after-school club to help EL students in Roanoke County, where their population was climbing. Students she worked with since kindergarten see her in Mount Pleasant Elementary School hallways and say excitedly: “See you this afternoon in homework club!”

Francisco, an EL teacher in Roanoke County, said her students do not get the help they need with homework because many of their family members are non-English speakers or speak very little English.

“This was the one school where pretty much all of my parents spoke Spanish, and spoke very little English, so they were really not able to help my kids with homework,” Francisco said. “The teachers understand that. But at the same time, the kids really needed help with homework.”

She started Homework Help Club so that her English learners could keep up in school.

The kids gathered around tables in the elementary school library, to get down to business.

“Open your backpacks; let’s get busy,” Francisco said to a couple students chatting in English after a snack. The chatter grew quiet, other than the voices of students reading books or spelling vocabulary words with instructors’ help.

Francisco has worked with students at three elementary schools in the division, but saw the biggest need for additional homework help at Mount Pleasant, where she works with 14 English learner students.

“Everybody I have, except for one, was born here,” she said. “As far as I can remember, all of them came [to school] speaking English. Except for maybe one in fourth grade.”

Even children who were born in the United States need help with English-speaking skills, Francisco said.

“They're still living in two worlds, basically, because they still have that Spanish influence at home,” she said. “And then they hear only English at school. So they're still processing everything twice.”

Spanish is the most frequently spoken non-English language in Roanoke County schools, followed by high numbers of Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin speakers, according to Cammie Williams, supervisor of English Language Learner and World Language programs with Roanoke County Public Schools.

The division has 27 schools serving grades K-12, which means English learners in the district are spread out across the county, requiring EL teachers to travel from school to school. Williams explains that navigating the teacher's travel time and time with students is a challenge.

“Because our population is so spread out, not all teachers have had the experience of having an EL [student] in their class,” Williams said. “And I think that that is something that I just wish for every instructor, because you see a student through a different lens. I think some of the strategies that we use with our students ended up being good for all students, and learning about different cultures, I think, just enriches classroom experience, again, for all students.”

Four new positions have been added during her tenure, because of increased EL enrollment, new course offerings and changing state requirements for more teachers per EL student.

The county school system also added a family liaison to ease adjustments to new communities and schools, Williams said. Federal money from Title III of the Every Child Succeeds Act, which can be used to help immigrant students and non-English speakers, funded that position, she said.

### **Learning with the Sox**

Back at Salem High School, the scavenger hunt between EL students and ballplayers was working.

Eldin Arriaga, a junior, led the way as he and his scavenger hunt team read clues that took the students and Red Sox members to the high school gym.

“It's just crazy how they are trying to play baseball so they can get a better future,” he said of the players, many of whom are also learning English.

Arriaga was born in Honduras and loves to play soccer. He had fun during the scavenger hunt, learning to connect with others while speaking English. He said it helped him to be less shy.

“It's good to be able to spend time with your community,” Eldin said.

The hometown Red Sox seemed to fit right in with the EL students at Salem High School.

When Shigley, the school's EL teacher, moved to the area from Richmond last year and went to a Salem Red Sox game, he discovered how similar the ballplayers were to his students.

He noticed more than half of the Salem Red Sox team was Latino, like the majority of his English learner students at the high school. And, like his students, the team has an English tutor for many of the players who are also learning English.



“These ballplayers are on this parallel journey with our kids here,” Shigley said. “They get moved around maybe a little bit more than my kids do. But they all have this goal of adapting to a new culture and learning to speak English and surviving. They're doing it with baseball, my kids are doing [it] with education and work. It's nice to let my kids know that they're not alone, and the players know that they're not alone in this journey.”

As the number of English learners increased in the Salem school system, the need to hire more full-time teachers dedicated to educating and caring for those students became evident, according to Megan Crew, who is in her first year as the division coordinator in Salem for English Learners and Early Childhood programs.

Before 2019, Salem had one part-time tutor who worked in three of the four elementary schools, and the middle and high schools each had a tutor, or part-time EL teaching position.

This year, the school division had three full-time EL teachers. For next year, it has hired another tutor and a fourth full-time EL teacher for the division.

Shigley, who started his position this school year, is the first full-time EL teacher at Salem High School, which previously had only a part-time position.

He began the 2021-22 school year launching a program of inclusion, to encourage English learners to participate more in high school sports and activities.

A collage of photos from activities the group did together hangs in the classroom: prom, football games, meeting the Red Sox players and other experiences the students didn't have until this year.

After the baseball players left the school, Shigley reflected on the morning's excitement with seven students from Honduras, Guatemala, Dominican Republic and Venezuela. Their desks in his newcomers' class faced the front of the room in a half-circle, flags of countries from around the world hanging in the classroom behind them.

“What is one really interesting thing about a baseball player today that you learned?” Shigley asked.

“They are personable,” one student said.

“They are tall.”

“Very young.”

“EL teachers are very much also social workers and liaisons,” Crew said. “They're doing so much more than educating the students with academics, but they are the humans in their [students'] life that are trying their best to be culturally competent on their behalf, and be liaisons with classroom teachers.”

Other EL teachers in the division echo how important it is to advocate for their students in their classrooms.

The Islamic holy month of Ramadan began in April, and English learner teacher Nicole Salzbach sent an email to the general education teachers on behalf of her English learner students at Andrew Lewis Middle School.

“I sent out an email to the teachers letting them know what Ramadan is, that your kids might be hungry, they're fasting, they might be tired, they're staying up late,” Salzbach said. “And I have a lot of teachers this year and last year, email me back and say, like, ‘thank you so much. Thank you for that information.’”

### **Social and academic English**

During a recent Homework Help Club session in Roanoke County, calming instrumental music played along with scenes from ocean life on the learning board. A sea turtle swam by on the screen. Francisco and two other helpers worked with 13 English learners in the school library at Mount Pleasant Elementary School.

Francisco worked at a table of first-graders learning how to tell time on a clock.

“Done,” said Abigail, one of the students.

“Queen Abigail, you are an amazing leader,” Francisco said to the girl, who wore a pink crown.

They meet twice a week after school during the school year, starting in the fall.

“Psshewww! Pshewwwww! Pshewwwww!”

One afternoon, during homework club snack time, Francisco battled a first-grader in a light-saber duel. Andy, the little boy, received a miniature light saber from a prize box for completing his assigned reading. Francisco took a light saber of her own and the two played in an open area of the library.

School officials asked that The Roanoke Times not use the last names of these two Homework Help Club students.

“We do something silly every now and then and try to make it fun. Sometimes we're all just tired, but we all have to work, so we have to try and rev them up a bit at the same time,” Francisco said.

Francisco, who speaks Spanish, has been a teacher for 28 years, including nine years as an EL teacher, 13 as a librarian and six as an instructional assistant.

The need for EL instruction reaches beyond the elementary school level. Roanoke County offers newcomers' classes at the Burton Center for the Arts and Technology, where middle and high school students are bused from their base school and spend about two-and-a-half hours together every morning or every other morning, depending on their needs.

“The priority is for English acquisition lessons,” Williams said. “What that means is that they do learn social English, just by interacting. But the standards that we use actually focus on academic English. So, those are lessons that are designed to grow their English for language arts, science, social studies and math.”

Williams sees value and opportunity with the district's growing English learner population.

“You always want to be aware of different demographics,” she said. “Is there a certain increase in population and in a certain demographic in your district that require any different services or outreach?”

She gives an example from a few years ago, when the district changed its cafeteria menu to give students more vegetarian choices, for cultural reasons. They sent menus home to families in languages they could understand.

“Our nutrition department jumped right in and was super willing to do that. It was the result of an ELL teacher noticing, and being in touch with a family,” Williams said.

As 4 p.m. approached on a Tuesday afternoon, Francisco looked for two students she was driving home. Family members and guardians are responsible for picking up children, but often can't for a variety of reasons that include work. Francisco is happy to help out when needed. She wants to make sure her students don't miss the opportunity to join the afterschool program.

“They're just as smart as everybody else,” she said “They are hard workers.”

*Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2021-22 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.*

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JUNE 20, 2022

## Harvesting fruits of cultural diversity

By Heather Rousseau

The ambassador of the bananas came to talk with the community of oranges to see how the two fruits could peacefully coexist on the imaginary island of Fruitopia.

Sydney Werness, 17, a junior at Patrick Henry High School, was the banana ambassador who met the oranges to discuss life on their diverse yet segregated island.

The whole exercise was part of a role-playing game among members of Roanoke's expanding refugee and immigrant populations that taught methods for communicating across language and cultural barriers and forming communities, like a real-life Fruitopia.

Words of Dari, Swahili, Spanish and English weaved together as students talked and worked with art supplies and fruit to create personalities for their imaginary communities. A frowny face was made from pipe cleaners on a banana. Feathers popped out from the head of an orange with googly eyes.

More than 20 high school and college students gathered at Belmont Library on a Saturday afternoon in May to participate. Some were refugees, others grew up in Roanoke. Many had never met before.

Each fruit group faced challenges in their homeland, which led them to Fruitopia alongside other fruit groups that had persecuted them. The project mimicked the immigrants' own experiences of leaving home and seeking refuge in a new country.

The activity was organized by Hardwired Global, a nonprofit organization based in Richmond that is traveling throughout the commonwealth this year, targeting areas with high refugee populations, and using their simulation workshop to support social integration of refugees and newcomers into schools and

communities. They are partnering with resettlement organizations, including Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Roanoke which, as of May, has helped resettle 438 refugees to the Roanoke area since 2019.

Victoria Tiggas, outreach and development officer with Hardwired Global said the goal of the workshop is to promote pluralistic societies where people can go beyond simply coexisting with others who might be very different and engage with those people more fully.

“So for example, here [during the Roanoke workshop] we have Afghan refugees, we have some Hispanic refugees, and we also have Congolese refugees,” Tiggas said. “So, even between those refugee groups, they will have to engage with one another here in their community and in their schools, and we want them to feel comfortable doing that.”

Tiggas said fruit is used as an analogy to help students feel more comfortable discussing hard topics such as pluralism, acceptance and tolerance.

“Throughout the simulation, they work through fears and misconceptions that they have with one another, they break those down, and then they rebuild them into a more positive view or perception of the other fruit. Even the ones that persecuted them back in their home.”

Four hours later, a roomful of students that began mostly silent, erupted with excitement. Members from the different fruit groups put fears and prejudices aside to discuss attributes each group had that could help contribute to the community.

Werness, the banana ambassador, wanted to attend the workshop to learn more about the different cultures that she sees at school.

“I learned how different my life has been from the newcomers' life,” said Werness, who was born in Roanoke. “I've learned their stories.”

Josette Iradukunda, 24, one of the oranges, talked about her own life, moving around for 15 years as a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has been ravaged with civil war for over two decades.

“Just be you and grip opportunities,” advised Iradukunda, talking to fellow oranges Negina Rasoli, 20, and Marjan Sharifi, 22, both refugees from Afghanistan.

Iradukunda came to Roanoke in March 2021.

“I understand because, in Congo, we lost a lot of people,” said Iradukunda about the ongoing civil war in her homeland.

She lost many of her own family members. “We had to split and when we are running away everyone is running for their life,” she said. “It's so frustrating.”

“Yeah, it's frustrating,” agreed Rasoli who said she came to Roanoke in October 2019, fleeing Afghanistan just after finishing high school in an unsafe area controlled by the Taliban, and having to leave some family members behind.

“Right now it's going wonderful for me because it's almost three years I've been here,” Rasoli said. “But the first one and a half years was too hard for all my family members.”

Rasoli currently works at a textile company and will attend Virginia Western Community College in the fall. She hopes to be a surgeon someday.

Werness said she liked the simulation because it was fun and informative.

“My high school is very diverse, but so separate,” Werness said about Patrick Henry.

She said she is not uncomfortable reaching out to students who came from other countries but that she can be hesitant because she is unsure what to ask. But she said she does try.

“I think it's really important to understand and empathize with everyone,” she said, “to learn about different cultures and where they came from, and just to make everyone feel comfortable and accepted.”

The workshop ended with the citizens of Fruitopia mingling and sharing what they learned from each other.

Tina Ramirez, executive director with Hardwired Global, concludes that all fruits have seeds on the inside and that it is not ideal to simply coexist with one another. She said she hoped the simulation taught the group that through interaction, different cultures can learn from each other and people need other people to survive.

“Does this orange have to believe the same thing that the banana believes in order to get along with the banana?” Ramirez asked.

A resounding “No,” is the response from the room.

“In your schools you have people that are different from you and not just newcomers and Americans, you have people that believe and act and have lots of different ideas from you. Is it possible to live together, is it possible to get to know them?”

“Yes,” replied the group.

*Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2021-22 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.*

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JAN. 30, 2022

One dream lost, another unfolds

By Heather Rousseau

Rukhsar Habibzai's journey to Roanoke started on a bicycle in Kabul and ended in an airport terminal. Her eyes flowed with tears when she arrived at the Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport on Jan. 21, when she embraced Nicola Cranmer, a woman she had known for two years but had never met in person.

Cranmer cried, too, as she hugged the young Afghan woman who was captain of Afghanistan's first women's cycling team until the Taliban regained power in her home country.

Now, Habibzai will ride for Virginia's Blue Ridge Twenty24, a national cycling team that will be based in the Roanoke Valley for the next three years. Cranmer founded the team in 2005 and has trained young female athletes who have brought home 14 medals in the Olympics and Paralympics.

The team hopes to send cyclists to the 2024 Olympics in Paris, which inspired the "Twenty24" in the team's name.

Habibzai, 23, wants to be one of those Olympic athletes, a lifetime goal that may be within reach, although not in the way she had hoped.

She was one of the many Afghans who fled her country as Kabul fell to the Taliban in August. Habibzai had received threats to her life from the Taliban on Instagram for being a female cyclist and activist.

Habibzai did not want to leave her home. She described her experience in a series of interviews conducted over several days in person and via text messaging.

With explosions all around Kabul and the Taliban targeting women activists, she had to escape.

According to Human Rights Watch, the Taliban have increasingly restricted the rights of women and girls since the collapse of the U.S.-backed government. According to a joint study issued Jan. 18 with the Human Rights Institute at San Jose State University, the Taliban have placed limits on access to education, employment and even freedom of movement for Afghan women.

Habibzai said progress women had made in the past 20 years has been lost.

"When our government fell, on that day my heart was aching. I felt that I was in prison," Habibzai said. "Like, we work for 20 years. We develop a lot. But now we go back."

As the Taliban invaded, "as if they were cannibals," the once bustling capital emptied as people fled the streets and shops and hid in their homes.

"Me and the young generation we're all crying."

Following her departure from Afghanistan, Habibzai was undergoing standard security screening at a military base in Germany with thousands of other refugees when Cranmer offered her a place on VBR Twenty24 through a message on WhatsApp, a messaging platform.

At first, Cranmer was not sure if it was the right time to ask about joining the team.

"My train of thought in offering her that spot was, is that something I do now?" Cranmer said during a telephone interview. "It seems so frivolous compared to what she's going through, and having just fled Kabul and fearing for her life."

Habibzai felt uplifted by the offer. She had dreamed of leading the women cyclists on her cycling team in Afghanistan to the Olympics and also of being on Cranmer's team.

"She was the reason for my happiness in my worst day of my life," Habibzai said. "I saw a kind and strong woman."

Cranmer said she admires Habibzai's fearlessness to ride her bike in Afghanistan where cycling was not accepted for women, and "for being so young, she was so brave, and so strong and so determined. So that character trait goes a long way when it comes to being on a bicycle, too. And she's just so focused, she'll accomplish anything that she sets her mind to."

Cranmer connected with Habibzai in 2019 through a man living in Boise, Idaho, who was from Afghanistan. Cranmer's team had been based in Boise before relocating to Roanoke. He reached out to Cranmer and Kristin Armstrong, a former professional road bicycle racer and three-time Olympic gold medalist, asking if they could help Habibzai and her team.

"We were hoping to help the group of young female cyclists in Kabul, Afghanistan, with coaching equipment and to further their progress," Cranmer said during a Jan. 22 news conference at Hotel Roanoke when VBR Twenty24 was introduced. "The dialogue quickly moved away from the bicycle and became about survival."

Habibzai was 12 when she got her first bike, which she called "a casual bike," or a hybrid bike that is used for general-purpose riding.

She had seen men ride bikes and wanted to try herself. She hesitated at first because it was not yet accepted in her culture for women to ride bikes even in the post-2001 Afghanistan.

"I was just thinking, 'No, in Afghanistan, it's impossible to ride a bike,'" Habibzai said. "But I did it. So everything is possible if you want."

She taught herself to ride with the little knowledge she had and by watching other people.

"I just heard about the balance, you have to control your balance," she said. "But I fall a lot. I fall down again and again, like keep trying hard and never give up for that."

Learning to keep her balance was not her biggest obstacle. She feared being ridiculed and beaten.

"I remember when for the first time I rode a bicycle in the Kabul city and the cobbled roads, people throwing stones, people throwing with tomatoes on me because they said a girl is not for bikes," she said. "It's a big shame in our culture."

What kept Habibzai pedaling was her dream for equality for women and girls. She wanted to become a role model for all Afghan girls and to make females riding bikes more common in her country.

She was making progress on achieving this dream before the Taliban regained control of the country. Habibzai and her teammates were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 for fighting against female oppression and setting an example for Afghan girls with the all female bike team.

"When I ride bike, I feel so free," she said. "Like everyone has problem in their life, but when I ride a bike, I feel I'm flying in the sky. And I feel peace of mind and I feel so free. That's why I love it."

She not only taught herself to ride a bike, but also how to speak English by watching Hollywood films with subtitles. She especially liked the "Fast & Furious" action film series, about street car racing. She said she liked the cars in the film.

**Unfamiliar freedom on two wheels**

During the VBR Twenty24 cycling team announcement at Hotel Roanoke, members of Roanoke's Afghan community attended to show their support for Habibzai.

Eight Afghan women took the stage holding the Afghan flag. Afterward, they took selfies with Habibzai.

Shekiba Hassani, a refugee and new Roanoke resident from Afghanistan, praised Habibzai by speaking through translator Mohammad Samim Noorzad, program manager with Commonwealth Catholic Charities, a nonprofit that helps refugees resettle in Virginia.

"We are here to show our support for Afghanistan and our Afghan community," Hassani said. "We want to show that no matter where in the world we are, we love Afghanistan and we are here to support anything that belongs to Afghanistan."

On Monday, Habibzai returned to Fairfax County, where she works as a dental assistant.

She had gone to dental school for five years in Afghanistan and was studying for her final exam before graduating when the Taliban regained control of the country. Even if Habibzai could have safely remained in Afghanistan, under Taliban rule she would not be able to continue her education or work in her field.

Habibzai has felt an unfamiliar freedom riding her bike in her Fairfax neighborhood.

"I remember for the first time when I go outside by the bike, I feel so peace of mind," she said. "Everyone was like, respect for cyclists for sports. And no one, like, harass me. It was very good feeling for me. And I'm very happy to be here in America."

Cranmer has organized a GoFundMe page to help Habibzai start her new life in Virginia. The support will go to housing costs, food, utilities, clothing, books and tuition. Habibzai hopes to complete her dental degree, but she is uncertain how many college credits will transfer to American schools.

"Now I start my life from zero," Habibzai said, also adding that she feels "homesick."

Both her parents are currently in a military camp in Dubai, with hopes to come to Virginia.

In March, Habibzai's improvement will be aided by training with her new team in Roanoke and the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains.

She said that she and her team in Afghanistan accomplished much with very little.

"We are very strong," she said. "We, with no any equipments, with no any facilities, we ride a bike, it's not easy."

Now, while training with a top women's racing team in the U.S., Habibzai has all the support and equipment she needs.

"I'm sure one day I will win a gold medal, or one day I will be an Olympian."

*Heather Rousseau, a photojournalist for The Roanoke Times since 2015, is the 2021-22 Secular Society Fellowship recipient. Her work is focused on refugees and immigrants in the Roanoke region.*