



HEATHER ROUSSEAU PHOTOS, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Sima Gul looks for apple juice drink boxes in an aisle lined with beverage options at the grocery store on Jan. 18.



Sima Gul prays in her bedroom with her son Amir Mazlom Yar on March 25.

Afghan

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the Afghan military, and because of the partnership's support.

In Utah, Gul said she had a full-time job, her driving permit and child care for Amir, but she had little time to learn English and struggled to find people to teach her the new language. Blacksburg offered an opportunity to not only live among friends but to focus on learning English.

"I want to learn English so I can stand on my own two feet," Gul said, using some of the English she has been learning.

In Utah, Gul also did not have access to the dedicated volunteers she now has through Blacksburg Refugee Partnership, which teaches her English four days a week. In Blacksburg, The Secular Society provides Gul with funds that will allow her to study English at Virginia Tech's Language and Cultural Institute when she is ready for the advanced program, and to work toward her academic goals.

Edmondson explained that the amount of support offered by Blacksburg Refugee Partnership is unmatched.

"Blacksburg is a unique community in that you've got so many volunteers who dedicate so much of their time and their energy and attention to helping these people," Edmondson said. "The support that the families receive from Blacksburg Refugee Partnership is just exponentially more impactful."

The Secular Society provides BRP financial support for the Afghan women, helping them gain their independence in the United States. The Secular Society pays for all living and educational expenses for the Afghan military members as they work toward their educational goals and study English. The women, including Gul and Ahmadi, are referred to

as TSS Scholars.

Fighting for a better life

Ahmadi did not know how to speak English when she arrived in the United States with her teenage sister a little more than a year ago.

"I did not know my ABCs," she said, her English now vastly improved.

She feels a sense of responsibility to help Afghan women who continue to suffer under Taliban rule.

"I am very sad about the Afghan women, because I am here and I am safe and I have a good life right now, but I think about the women in Afghanistan who have to stay home and not go to work or school."

In Afghanistan, Ahmadi, 28, was a police officer before joining the Female Tactical Platoon. She studied science and law for four years at Kabul University and was working toward her master's degree in criminology when the Taliban took over.

She wanted to fight the Taliban because she hoped for a better life for Afghan women. The American action films that she watched while growing up influenced her.

"As a kid I always watched American movies, like Arnold [Schwarzenegger] and Rambo. I always want to be strong and fight the bad people."

Happy memories scarce

Gul and Ahmadi walked to class, their backpacks filled with English learning books, and entered a mobile home owned by Blacksburg United Methodist Church.

The English class, which focuses on communication for daily life, is taught four days a week through Literacy Volunteers of the New River Valley, in partnership with Blacksburg Refugee Partnership.

"This class is a skill-up class,"



Sima Gul shares a moment with her son, Amir Mazlom Yar in their Blacksburg apartment on Feb. 9. "Amir is the only precious thing I have from my husband," Gul said. Her husband also served in the Afghan military and died fighting the Taliban shortly after they were married.

said class instructor Anne Abbott, a board member with the refugee partnership, explaining that the students focus on English to achieve real-life goals.

The Afghan military women have a variety of English learning options, Abbott explained, including scholarships through The Secular Society to attend classes at the Language and Culture Institute at Virginia Tech, a program that is part of the university's outreach to international students. Abbott said that the English classes are rigorous and can be more challenging, because they focus on language that is beneficial for academia. It

can also be a challenge for working mothers to meet the class demands.

During Abbott's English class, four women sat around a table in a room plastered with posters of brightly colored letters and numbers, along with maps of the world and the United States.

Abbott asked the women to break into groups with individual tutors and share stories about happy memories.

Ahmadi, however, could not think of happy memories.

"I was forced to marry when I was 12," she said, recalling how she had to stay home and cook and clean for her husband. Her

family was able to help her divorce her husband, and she got a job to help financially support her family.

Ahmadi also recalled when she was 8, before the U.S. occupation, when her dad was kidnapped and tortured by the Taliban. She said her father was returned but has trouble walking because the Taliban whipped the soles of his feet, leaving permanent injuries.

Ahmadi started to cry. Soon, so did the other Afghan women in the room.

Gul talked about her son, but

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