

INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM

Prince William Today

www.insidenova.com

Vol. 11 | Num. 17

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MEMBER:



Here's to immigrant mothers everywhere

As an immigrant mom, I know firsthand the challenges of raising American kids.

Yes, you have to navigate cultural differences – food and clothing preferences and language. But especially when you come here in search of safety and security, as I did nearly four decades ago, you might have an entirely different emotional mindset than your kids do.

Like many refugees and asylum-seekers, I came here in survival mode and spent my formative years trying to find a foothold. Now, in my early 50s, I've done that and more; I've attained the American dream.

That means my children have grown up safe and content, unable to fully appreciate my sacrifices. For instance, as an Afghan woman, I had to fight for my education. Now my children have access to some of the best schools in Virginia, and I sometimes beg them to study. I wish they could feel – as I do – how special these simple realities of their lives truly are.

I was recently talking with my friend, Mojgan Haghshenas, about these same paradoxes. She, too, constantly grapples with the relationship between her identities as an Iranian asylee and the mom of American kids. Her childhood was defined by her family's pursuit of safety and freedom. Meanwhile, her American-born son and daughter have been blessedly swaddled in suburban safety since the day they were born.

"They are amazed when I tell them about my life in Iran," Mojgan confessed to me. "I'm like, 'Dude, you have it so easy, take advantage.'"

Mojgan was 7 when the Iranian Revolution started in 1978. After Islamic revolutionaries murdered her grandfather, who was a high-ranking general, and her uncle, a sheriff, the family fled their home in Tabriz to Tehran.

Three years later, the Iran-Iraq War broke out. Mojgan, her parents, and her younger brother spent their nights huddling in their basement as bombs rained down. Then their neighbor's home was hit.

"We were petrified," Mojgan told me. "The next day we left everything: my dad's job, our house, most of our belongings."

The family spent three months in Turkey, then made their way to Germany, where they applied for political asylum. Two years later, they relocated to Centreville.

Mojgan enrolled in high school and got a part-time job at McDonald's to help her family. One Saturday night, a group of kids from school pulled into the drive-thru. Mojgan was struck by how carefree they seemed: rattling off a long list of burgers and fries, laughing and joking as music thumped from the car. After everything she had been through – "living so close to death for so long" – Mojgan could barely process this scene.

"It was amazing and shocking to see my classmates take their freedoms for granted," she said. "Because that's how lucky they were, that all they had to worry about was having fun."

In that moment, Mojgan realized something. "I didn't just want to survive," she said. "I wanted to become somebody. It gave me ambition and vision for my future."

Mojgan excelled in college, followed by another four years in optometry school, became an optometrist with her own practice in Sterling, and bought a home with her husband. She now has two children, 18 and 13, and she never misses an opportunity to remind them how lucky they are.

"If you have a dream and set your mind to it, you can achieve it here," she tells them.

Like most American kids, though, Mojgan's teenagers take their advantages for granted. Her son knows how unsafe her early life was, but he still jokingly refers to her as his "overprotective Persian mother."

When he was younger, she wouldn't let him attend sleepovers, which caused more than a little tension. "Sleepovers weren't a thing in Iran," she says. Beyond



SOPHIA SEXTON



Mojgan Haghshenas and her family fled Iran in the early 1980s. Today she is an optometrist in Sterling.

that, she worried that others simply couldn't look out for him as she could.

Still, she knows they have a perspective that many other American kids may not. She has worked hard to teach them lessons from her culture, such as respect for adults and the importance of being on time.

Whenever Mojgan feels frustrated, she reminds herself that the kids do take many of her lessons to heart; tales of her early life in Iran inspired her son to take an interest in international politics. He's also now a business major at James Madison University. And her daughter recently started volunteering with a group that collects food for a community pantry.

"I'm proud of who they are becoming," Mojgan said.

To me, Mojgan's experience is a beautiful example of how immigrants are shaping America's future – through the stories we tell our children. It's not always easy, but we're doing our best to reconcile our own, often fraught, upbringings with the innocence and safety we're able to give our children. We are writing new chapters for our own families and for our nation.

This Mother's Day, I encourage all moms – no matter where you were born – to celebrate their parenting wins and the hard-won lessons we're passing on.

Sophia Aimen Sexton is a professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College's Annandale campus and co-founder of the nonprofit Female Refugee Education Empowerment.

READERS REACT

WHEELER SHOULD HOLD TOWN HALL ON DEVLIN TECH PARK

We, the residents of Bristow and surrounding communities, are writing this letter due to the lack of response from Board of County Supervisors Chair Ann Wheeler to our numerous requests for a town hall meeting with her and Supervisor Jerome Lawson to hear our concerns about the proposed Devlin Technology Park.

We first invited Chair Wheeler to a town hall held by Supervisor Lawson in January. Chair Wheeler declined, citing a scheduling conflict. Since that time, Devlin was deferred indefinitely, and we again invited her and Lawson to hold a joint town hall.

Lawson quickly replied to our initial request and offered to work around Wheeler's schedule. Our final invite even suggested holding a town hall alone (without Lawson); however, all three of our requests were ignored by Wheeler and her staff.

During the Board of Supervisors meeting on April 20, Wheeler

stated to Lawson, "I don't intend to have a joint town hall with you, ever."

Additionally, she made a comment to Lawson, during a Board of Supervisors meeting on May 10, 2022, that she knows what a lot of people show up to her town halls.

It has become evident to us that while Wheeler is supposed to represent everyone in the county, she has no intention of ever holding a town hall with the residents of Brentsville or Lawson, especially when it comes to the Devlin Technology Park. Her inactions have been noticed by the community, and Wheeler will see our response in the June primaries.

– *Bethany Kelley, Bristow*

Editor's note: This letter was signed by 110 Bristow-area residents. The full list of signatories will be published with the letter on InsideNoVa.com.

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Vol. 11 | Num. 23

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MEMBER:



When America saves your life but stalls your career

America is considered the land of opportunities. If you can dream it, you can achieve it, or so goes the legend of the “American Dream.”

But many talented and accomplished immigrants face significant obstacles continuing their careers in the United States. This limits not only their upward mobility but also the growth of their new communities.

My friend Angela Rovegno is one of 2 million immigrants and refugees in America who are unemployed or underemployed. In her native Peru, she earned a master’s in criminology and a law degree and spent four years working as a prosecutor while volunteering at juvenile detention centers, helping young people rehabilitate their lives and reintegrate into society.

“The best time to help someone is when they are young,” she said. “Without proper support, they don’t have the skills to move forward on a positive path.”

Angela was successful, financially well off and happy. Then, at age 26, everything changed. Her family owns a famous Italian bakery in Lima, and their last name is well known, which made Angela and her siblings the target of extortion attempts. Angela reached a breaking point after police alerted her to a botched kidnapping and extortion attempt aimed at her daughter, Gabriella, then almost 1 year old.

“Before I became a mom, I had no fear,” Angela told me. “But from that point forward, I knew I had to do whatever was required to protect her.” In 2006, she left everything she knew to start over with Gabriella in the United States.

Angela and Gabriella spent those first years living in New Jersey. Her family was safe, and she married an American man she met through a cousin. Even so, she remembers that period as the hardest time of her life.

“I wasn’t coming to the U.S. for opportunities,” she said, but rather “running from danger.” But her Peruvian law degree didn’t allow her to practice in America, and repeating law school with a young child to provide for simply wasn’t possible. She had no choice but “to give everything up.”

Like Angela, nearly 50% of recently arrived young immigrants have a college education, according to a report by the nonprofit Upwardly Global. And yet 71% of those polled – people who worked in healthcare, law, STEM and other fields experiencing worker shortages here – faced barriers getting the education and certifications required to be hired in their profession. Sixty percent said they believe their skills are undervalued here.

So many new immigrants have to start over in America. Angela found a job in a hospital kitchen, moved into waitressing and eventually became the manager of a local Italian restaurant.

In 2011, after her second daughter was born, she and her husband divorced, and Angela and her daughters moved to Fairfax County to be closer to friends. While her children now had “access to some of the best education in the country,” she still struggled to find a career path that used her ample skills and education.

A friend suggested she get her teaching certificate, since she had loved working with children as a lawyer. In 2013 Angela began working as a Montessori preschool teacher. She still misses her legal work but loves making an impact.

“I hope if I can plant a little seed of love in their hearts, they



Angela Rovegno moved to the United States from Peru in 2006. PROVIDED

will grow up knowing there is good in this life, even when they experience difficult times,” she said. Angela also completed a two-year psychology course to aid her education work. “I like to always be filling my mind.”

She knows her new career is important, especially because the early education industry is grappling with a critical worker shortage. Still, she makes far less money as a teacher than as an attorney, and her own upward mobility stalled as she moved from job to job along the way. She does remote legal consulting back in Peru, but it’s not the same as being able to build a law career in the country she calls home.

And yet, keeping her family safe was worth the personal cost. “I did the right thing coming here,” Angela said.

But why should she have to choose between safety and a career? If immigrant professionals had more pathways into their fields of expertise, America would benefit tremendously: from their knowledge, contributions and higher disposable income. Virginia’s immigrant population holds immense talent and knowledge, so much of it untapped.

Angela is proud of the example she’s set for her daughters. By starting over and building a career as a teacher, “I’m showing them, when you get knocked down, you have to stand back up,” she said. “I’m teaching them to push themselves to do more than they think is possible.”

Sophia Aimen Sexton is a professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College’s Annandale campus and co-founder of the nonprofit Female Refugee Education Empowerment.



SOPHIA SEXTON

READERS REACT

WHEELER DESERVES ANOTHER TERM

This letter is written to support the reelection of Prince William County Board of County Supervisors Chairwoman Wheeler, beginning with the June primary. During her current term in office, Wheeler has had a positive impact on our community, and her continued leadership is vital for our county’s growth and education system and the creation of new

job opportunities.

Under Wheeler’s direction, Prince William has maintained its AAA rating from all the rating agencies. Of the nation’s more than 3,100 counties, Prince William is one of only 49 carrying this distinction. This is a testament to fiscal responsibility and the success of local development initiatives.

Wheeler and the current Board of Supervisors have demonstrated a commitment to education that is commendable and should

continue. They recognize that the key to a thriving economy lies in equipping our residents with the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the evolving job market. The current budget, crafted by Wheeler and the board, focuses on quality education by funding increased teacher salaries and reductions in class sizes.

Wheeler’s continuing efforts to secure

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MEMBER:



Give thanks, but remember the less fortunate

This weekend's Thanksgiving holiday is a time to pause, to enjoy the company of friends and family, and to give thanks for all the blessings of life.

Here in Prince William County we have lots to be thankful for. While we may complain about traffic, grumble about taxes or debate about data centers, the fact is that we live in one of the wealthiest communities in America, if not the world. We have a variety of housing options, good job opportunities and a growing economy.

But even in this wealthy community, some neighbors are struggling to get by. Whether due to family crisis, medical emergency or some other circumstance, they may not have enough money to keep their lights on, put food on the table or afford their rent.

That's where the Prince William Corps of the Salvation Army steps in to support anyone and everyone who needs

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help. Thousands of our neighbors seek the Salvation Army's help every year. Even more turn to the organization to help provide gifts for their children during the holidays.

For that reason, InsideNoVa is delighted to again present the Christmas Basket campaign this holiday season to benefit the Prince William Corps of the Salvation Army. This is the 51st year of the effort, which has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars that stay right here in our community.

We would not exist without our readers, subscribers and advertisers. We thank you – and during this holiday season we hope you will join us in extending that support to the Salvation Army's Christmas Basket campaign.

JOURNEYS TO NOVA | SOPHIA SEXTON

From speaking no English to fluency

Samar Eltalib Bashir remembers one of her first bus rides in the United States. She had recently arrived in Northern Virginia from her native Sudan and needed to go from her apartment to the grocery store.

But the 18-year-old spoke no English.

When she climbed onto the bus, she tried to ask the driver if she was on the correct route. But Samar froze, struggling to recall the words she had practiced the night before. When she noticed two passengers mocking her inability to communicate, she quickly took a seat. It was the wrong route, and she got lost.

This was not the American arrival that Samar anticipated. At 17, she was submitted by a relative for the Green Card Lottery. Formally known as the Diversity Immigrant Visa, the program was established to encourage immigration from underrepresented countries. Sudanese citizens have few pathways to immigrate to America. So, when Samar was selected, her father encouraged her.

"He believed I could do big things," Samar recently told me.

The bus experience was equally painful and motivating. Samar's father had given her an Arabic-English dictionary. Each morning, before she went to the grocery store or doctor's office, she brainstormed questions and phrases she might need, recording them in a notebook.

In the evenings, she continued to study by Googling song lyrics by her favorite artist, Michael Jackson, and watching English-language movies and sitcoms. She turned on closed-captioning and jotted down words to look up later. If certain words appeared over and over, that told her they were important. She practiced pronouncing them.

"I started to really love learning English," Samar said. "I also knew learning it would mean I could communicate, not just in America, but anywhere in the world."

Eventually, she enrolled in ESL classes at Northern Virginia Community College and began to learn English language fundamentals.

"Being around people going through the same experience as you, you

realize you are not the only one struggling," Samar said. "You don't feel as intimidated because you are all on the same level and know no one will make fun of you."

But it was the job she landed at Sally Beauty Supply where her language education really took off. Many of Samar's colleagues also spoke English as a second language. The manager encouraged them to practice with customers.

Samar was stumped one day when a customer asked her for a "rain check." Other times, people laughed when her accent made "pink" sound like "bink." These interactions were frustrating, but her manager kept encouraging her.

"She promised to help me learn," Samar recalled. "She told me, 'If anyone makes fun of you, don't take it.'"

Within a year, Samar was promoted to assistant manager. Later, she got a job at Macy's. "By then my English had really improved, and I knew working at a busier store would only make me a better, faster speaker," she said.

Samar had her sights set on college. In 2004, she passed NVCC's English fluency test. Her family – and especially her father – was thrilled for her to begin her educational journey.

After earning her associate's degree in biology at NVCC, Samar transferred to George Mason University. She graduated in 2009 with a bachelor's degree with honors in biology, planning to attend medical school. But a few months after her graduation, Samar's father passed away from a heart attack.

Needing to support her family, which included her mother, two sisters and a brother, who had joined Samar in Virginia



SOPHIA SEXTON



Samar Eltalib Bashir didn't know any English when she arrived in the United States at age 18. PROVIDED

in 2008, she had to enter the workforce. She earned her master's degree in global public health and became an academic adviser at the Saudi Embassy, advising international students applying to medical school.

"Sometimes life pushes you in a different direction, and I realized I could still make a difference," she said.

But Samar never forgot about her dream of working in medicine. And after she lost a younger brother and sister to heart disease in the years after their father's death, she decided it was time to do something about it. She was recently accepted to the Diagnostic Medical Sonography Program at NVCC's Springfield campus and hopes to pursue a career in cardiology.

"I hope people learn from my story that even if you come to the U.S. and don't speak the language, you can still build a good life here," Samar said.

In a way, her story has come full circle. Her two children are fluent English speakers, just like their mother. Samar is trying to open new doors for them – and give them the skills to communicate with people across the globe. In that spirit, she is teaching them her native Arabic.

Sophia Aimen Sexton is a professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College's Annandale campus and co-founder of the nonprofit Female Refugee Education Empowerment.