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Afghan veteran works to build a pathway to citizenship for fellow vets

By Heather Rousseau

Azizgul Ahmadi developed a taste for turkey subs while working at a Blacksburg sandwich shop. She layered tomatoes, lettuce and cheese on a sub roll. They have so many breads in America, she would tell friends. Rye bread, wheat bread, hot dog buns. In Afghanistan, she only ate traditional Afghan flatbread.

“Anything else?” She asked a customer on the other side of the counter, a young woman who took her order and made way for the next person waiting in line at Sub Station II, where Ahmadi has worked since mid-2022, six months after she fled the fall of Afghanistan.

Ahmadi started out washing dishes and filling vinegar and mayonnaise bottles in the back, advancing quickly to making sandwiches at the front counter after she learned enough English to talk with hungry customers.

During a break from sub making, Ahmadi sat down to enjoy a meal of her own. A pile of jalapenos sitting next to her turkey sub.

“I like spicy,” she said.

In Afghanistan she preferred chicken kabob.

Much has changed in two years. Instead of slicing bread and making sub sandwiches for Virginia Tech students, back then Ahmadi was fighting the Taliban. She was a member of the elite Female Tactical Platoon, or FTP, working shoulder to shoulder with the U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan.

Ahmadi and her younger sister fled Afghanistan in August 2021, when the capital of Kabul was overrun by the Taliban following the chaotic withdrawal of United States military forces. She and other FTP women came to the United States, where they have lived in a state of limbo ever since.

Ahmadi and fellow FTP veterans are making Blacksburg their home, but the majority of the women who served in the platoon have yet to have their asylum applications approved by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, and they worry that they will be deported back to a county where they would most likely be killed or tortured by the Taliban, which rules Afghanistan.

After the U.S. military evacuated from Afghanistan, the Department of Homeland Security granted Temporary Protective Status (TPS) for two years to vulnerable Afghans and allies who worked alongside the U.S. in Afghanistan. The designation has been extended to May 2025. To remain in the U.S. after TPS expires, Afghan evacuees would need their asylum applications approved, but the U.S. government has an unprecedented backlog of applications.

A glimmer of hope is for Congress to pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, a bipartisan bill that would provide a clear path to citizenship and expand eligibility for Special Immigration Visas for thoroughly

vetted Afghan military veterans and those who served with the United States military. The bill, however, has been stuck in House and Senate committees for over a year.

“We have a problem with asylum,” Ahmadi said. “We do not understand if we are staying here, or we are going to back in Afghanistan. It is too dangerous.”

Ahmadi, 29, and her teenage sister were granted asylum, but are disheartened to know that less than half of the former FTP members now residing in the U.S. have been approved.

Ahmadi is among 75 former members of the FTP, 45 of whom found their way to the United States. The remaining women are hiding in various countries overseas.

Expect delays

Resettlement agencies reported that the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program, initiated by the Biden administration to handle the influx of refugees, involved some of the most significant challenges those agencies have ever faced, according to a review by the State Department's Office of Inspector General released in March. Those challenges include the large numbers of Afghan arrivals, delays in processing applications due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the decrease in refugee admissions under the Trump administration, which caused the agencies to lose resources.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) website posted an alert informing candidates for asylum to expect delays due to an extraordinary number of applications for Afghan asylum seekers since the fall of Kabul.

“It will take time for us to work through the unprecedented number of parole requests we have received since Fall 2021,” the alert reads.

When the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan after its 20-year war that followed the 9/11 attacks, Ahmadi and her sister fled their country along with approximately 80,000 other Afghan allies to the U.S. An estimated 76,500 Afghan evacuees were welcomed to the U.S. through Operation Allies Welcome, a Biden directive that instructed the Department of Homeland Security to coordinate federal efforts to help vulnerable Afghan evacuees.

Virginia has the second largest population of Afghan refugees in the country, at just over 18,000, behind California's Afghan population of 51,606, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said the new arrivals of Afghan allies deserve a path to citizenship.

“Virginia is home to one of the largest Afghan diaspora populations in the United States, and I'm proud of many Virginians' work to help resettle Afghan allies following the U.S. withdrawal,” Kaine said in an emailed statement to The Roanoke Times. “I strongly support the Afghan Adjustment Act, which would provide a path to permanent status for many Afghan evacuees.”

The bill has not been voted on and it is unclear that it would have enough votes to overcome any possible filibuster in the Senate.

“Frankly, the challenge has been to find at least 10 Republican senators who will help Democrats overcome a Senate filibuster to pass this bill,” Kaine said.

“In the meantime, I’m thankful that these Afghan evacuees will be able to remain in the U.S. legally, and that those who were paroled into the U.S. as part of Operation Allies Welcome can request re-parole without any filing fees or apply for Temporary Protected Status.”

Meanwhile, Ahmadi worries about her fellow veterans and two brothers who, like her, served in the war against the Taliban with the U.S. military and who are hiding overseas as they wait for their asylum applications to be approved in the United States.

“Afghanistan is very dangerous,” Ahmadi said. “Everybody maybe has worked with American people. For 20 years we all fought the Taliban and we work with American people.”

New goals in Blacksburg

In Afghanistan, Ahmadi hoped to become a judge. She was a police officer before joining the Female Tactical Platoon. Women in Afghanistan had many more opportunities before the Taliban returned to power.

“I thought I be big woman in Afghanistan,” Ahmadi said.

When Ahmadi arrived in Blacksburg two years ago, she could not speak English. Now, her English skills have vastly improved, she got her driver's license and purchased a white 2018 Mitsubishi Outlander. She and her fellow members of the FTP living in Blacksburg have participated in community events that include Blacksburg Welcoming Week and the annual downtown Christmas parade. In September, Ahmadi and fellow FTP members spoke to a room of over 80 people at Virginia Tech’s Torgersen Hall to share their stories as part of a series sponsored by the university’s Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies.

Before being granted asylum, Ahmadi was scared that the hard work she was doing to gain traction in a new country would be worthless if she was sent back to Afghanistan. She worries for her fellow Afghan veterans who, like her, came to the U.S. under TPS and are waiting to hear back about their asylum applications.

Now that Ahmadi has been granted asylum, she would like to go to college for nursing and join the U.S. military someday. She said starting over from nothing has been challenging.

“I did not know my ABCs,” she told The Roanoke Times in April.

Since then, Ahmadi has advanced to classes at the Language and Culture Institute (LCI) at Virginia Tech, a program that is part of the university’s outreach to international students. To do well in a nursing program in college, she needs to better understand the English language. She took English lessons from volunteer tutors with Blacksburg Refugee Partnership (BRP), which along with The Secular Society provides support for seven Afghan military women and their families who relocated to Blacksburg. Another BRP partner, Literacy NRV, a nonprofit that serves the New River Valley, also helps with English learning. (The Secular Society is a Blacksburg-based nonprofit that has assisted other refugees and has funded a fellowship that has supported this reporting.)

Between work and taking classes, Ahmadi also takes care of her younger sister, Shah Pari Ahmadi, a 17-year-old 11th-grader at Blacksburg High School. The teenager, who is known as Angel by classmates, also has a full schedule. Pari means Angel in Dari, which she prefers to go by in school because teachers and classmates were calling her Shah, which means royalty.

On evenings and weekends, Ahmadi drives her sister to soccer practice and games, boxing class and to her job in the clothing department at Walmart in Christiansburg.

“Right now I have a lot of problems,” Ahmadi said. “Suddenly, everything is done with my country, and we come here. I couldn't believe this for my life. I am hard working and I have a lot of goals for the future, but right now I am not thinking about my future, I am thinking about my sister. She is young. Everything is not good, but I be strong and I help her. I help my family.”

Classic rock blared on the radio at Blacksburg Boxing and Fitness, where Ahmadi watched from beside a set of punching bags outside the sparring area. Shah Pari swayed and danced to the beat. Then it was her turn to spar. The boxers practiced blocking techniques and aimed toward the face. Shah Pari squared a firm stare on her opponent, peeked from behind her pink boxing gloves, and struck. The opponent answered with a blow back to Shah Pari, whose fierce demeanor dissipated into a full faced smile and uncontained giggling, a response she often had during her practice. Sweating, with mascara smeared below her eyes, she ran over to Ahmadi.

“Is my makeup running?” Shah Pari asked her big sister, in English. Ahmadi laughed and wiped the mascara away and Shah Pari ran back to sparring.

Shah Pari has admired her sister and has wanted to follow in her footsteps since they lived in Afghanistan. She said Ahmadi is more like a mother than a sister.

Shah Pari wanted to go to a boxing club since seeing the sport on television when she was in Afghanistan. The country made progress for women's rights during 20 years of U.S. occupation, including in sports and the armed forces. Her older sister pushed gender boundaries by carrying a gun and working closely with the U.S. military. Still, Ahmadi was protective of her younger sister. She deterred her from practicing boxing in Afghanistan.

“You cannot go to boxing club because here is dangerous,” Ahmadi told her sister when they lived in Afghanistan. “Maybe you find some problem with somebody.”

In the United States, Ahmadi wants to support her younger sister's interests.

Shah Pari said she likes boxing because it makes her feel strong.

Advocating in D.C.

In October, Ahmadi took a break from slinging subs and carting her younger sister around Blacksburg for a trip to Washington, D.C., to advocate for the Afghan Adjustment Act. The team of former FTP comrades and U.S. military members walked through the long hallways furnished with American and state flags outside the doors of congressional offices in the Longworth House Office Building, one of a handful of office buildings in the Capitol used by representatives.

Wearing hot pink dress pants and bright red lipstick, Ahmadi held a blue squishy stress ball, normally passed around in her English class, which signified someone's turn to talk. She stood before congressional aides squeezing the small blue ball, which emboldened her as she addressed her concerns.

“I am one of the FTP members,” she told a Senate aide while standing outside a senator's office. “Right now, I am here but we have a lot of problems, like asylum and green card. We have family in Afghanistan. It is not safe.”

The endeavor was arranged by members of With Honor Action, a D.C.-based nonprofit that promotes bipartisan leadership from military veterans. Also among the group that went to Capitol Hill were members of the Cultural Support Team (CST), a unit of U.S. military women who trained Afghan women to serve in the FTP. The veterans met with roughly a dozen congressional aides.

Tom Seaman, a Marine Corps veteran and legislative director of With Honor Action, helped arrange the visit. Seaman wanted legislators to hear directly from Afghan veterans in order to build more support for the Afghan Adjustment Act.

He said there are national security implications if the bill is not passed.

“What makes the United States so strong, it's not just our military, it's our system of alliances around the world,” Seaman said. “Those alliances are only as good as our credibility and the trust that we have. Not taking care of our allies, especially ones that stayed beside us for 20 years, in our nation's longest war, is really detrimental to that.”

Seaman said a big reason why the bill has not passed is not because of lack of support, but because of the dysfunction of Congress.

“Legislation in any Congress, but especially this Congress, is especially challenging,” Seaman said. “There's a lot of competing priorities. So this is really a case of the continued dysfunction of the United States Congress really hampering this legislation and other pieces of legislation as well.”

U.S. Army veteran Rebekah Edmondson was a CST member and she worked with Ahmadi in Kabul, and made it her mission to help members of the FTP be able to integrate into the U.S. and receive government benefits.

“They are deserving of the same support that I get,” Edmondson said.

She said supporting the Afghan Adjustment Act is the duty of veterans like her, so that their mission in Afghanistan was not in vain.

“It's also important, as a measure of honoring those that risked their lives and those who lost their lives at war in Afghanistan,” Edmondson said.

Members of the delegation were honored guests during a Veterans of Foreign Wars conference in Washington, D.C., which was in partnership with the American Legion, where veterans showed support for the women military fighters. Edmondson and Seaman both spoke at the conference, along with main speaker Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn.

Klobuchar introduced the bipartisan Afghan Adjustment Act with Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

She noted that the bill helps make a path to permanent residency for the Afghan people who worked with the U.S. military, and that many Afghan allies who evacuated are still overseas waiting to hear their fates.

“Nearly 80,000 Afghans who sought refuge in our country are currently in limbo,” Klobuchar said during the conference. “Like the [FTP members] here today, who risked their lives, and their families' safety to protect our service members.”

Klobuchar compared the Afghan Adjustment Act to the Indochina Refugee Program initiated by the Ford administration at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, when more than 140,000 refugees were processed after the collapse of the South Vietnam and Cambodia governments.

“My state actually has the second biggest population [of Southeast Asia refugees] next to California, among refugees,” Klobuchar said, “and they are now and many generations later, are serving as police officers, they are in the state legislature, they are doctors. I mean, it's been an incredible, incredible journey that they have been on in our state.”

More still waiting

An estimated 840,000 Afghans who helped with the U.S. war effort have applied for Special Immigration Visas and remain in Afghanistan, according to an August 2023 report by the State Department's inspector general. SIVs grant permanent residence for people who aided the U.S. government.

A major problem for the women fighters is that, back in Afghanistan, anyone who wanted to join the FTP was required to have a document filled out by the oldest male member of the family to approve their service. An unfortunate consequence of that rule is that now family members of the FTP can easily be tracked by the Taliban.

Edmondson is concerned that data systems and paper trails identifying partners of the U.S. were compromised and left behind, leaving a roster of individual U.S. ally names for the Taliban to find.

Ahmadi is also concerned for her family and fellow Afghans who helped the U.S. and are still in Afghanistan.

“I live here but all my body, my life, my heart is all thinking about my family and my other country,” Ahmadi said. “I always cry with myself, but it doesn't help my family.”

One evening in November after a full day of work for Ahmadi and school for Shah Pari, Ahmadi looked over Shah Pari's target practice papers from an after-school shooting class with the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), which Shah Pari hopes to join next year.

Light from a lamp in their dimly lit apartment shined through bullseyes with tiny holes Shah Pari made by shooting a 10-millimeter air rifle.

Ahmadi said her little sister, who never fired a gun in Afghanistan, was making better progress than she had while in the Afghan military.

“I'm proud of her,” Ahmadi said. “I studied with three, four years in the shooting, and she started one month two months, and I told her, OK, you can keep [the target practice papers] because this is very important and you are good for shooting.”

Ahmadi said she misses the advice and support she received from her family in Afghanistan and she sometimes feels alone, but then she reminds herself she still has her sister.

“Sometimes life is very hard and sometimes life is easy,” Ahmadi said.

Ahmadi hopes with her asylum granted she can join the U.S. military and work with the U.S. once again, perhaps as a nurse. More than anything, she hopes she and her sister can be reunited with the rest of their family and her fellow veterans can be granted the same asylum protections her and her sister now have.

“Sometimes I'm very sad to see the other people,” Ahmadi said. “Everybody's happy. They are living with family. Why is my family not here? My heart is not calm.”

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Russian asylum seekers find their way to Roanoke

By Heather Rousseau

The young couple from Roanoke stood outside the courthouse on a warm September morning, waiting nervously for their immigration case to be heard inside.

Damir Kantimerov, dressed in a dark blue suit and with a red tie, took the hand of his wife, Irina, as the pair entered the three-story, brick building plopped down in a Northern Virginia suburb. Irina's hair was partially tied back with blue and yellow ribbons, the now-familiar colors of the Ukrainian flag. Her dark blue blazer matched her husband's suit. Damir's younger brother, Daian, also seeking asylum, was with them, dressed in business attire.

Just before they entered, a man approached. “Are you lawyers?” he asked, speaking with a Hispanic accent that they couldn't understand.

“Are you lawyers?” the man repeated.

The trio shook their heads, and the man walked away. They did not tell him so, but they are doctors.

They are also asylum seekers.

One year ago, Damir and Irina boarded an airplane in Moscow bound for the western coast of Turkey with their young son, Daniial, and Damir's brother. They bought round-trip tickets for a beach vacation that they had no plans to take. The vacation ruse covered up the fact that they were escaping Russia, fleeing their country that had launched a war in neighboring Ukraine, the country of Irina's birth, a war they did not support. They left behind friends and colleagues who supported both the war and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

They believed their lives were at risk, especially because they were in the medical field, and could soon expect to be sent to the battlefield to treat wounded Russian soldiers. They feared for their lives for other reasons as well. Irina, especially, feared living in a country that seemed to despise Ukrainians like her. Damir is Tatar, an ethnic minority with Turkish roots, whose young men were among the first Russian citizens to be conscripted into the military to be used as cannon fodder on the front line.

Their odyssey to the United States took them to the southern border with Mexico, where they first sought asylum. Eventually, they made it to Virginia and later Roanoke, where they settled earlier this year.

Now, they sat inside a silent immigration courtroom in Sterling. The three stood as the judge entered the room.

Would Damir and Irina be allowed to continue the lives they began to rebuild in Roanoke, or would they and their son and Damir's brother be sent back to a country where they faced the likelihood of persecution and possible death?

Surge of Russians

Damir, Irina and their family are part of more than 58,000 Russians who have filed new cases in U.S. immigration courts since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a data research center at Syracuse University.

The increase is substantial when compared to the number of asylum-seekers over the past 20 years, which ranged from a low of 630 to just over 2,000. Russia's military draft and crackdown on opponents of the invasion account for the spike in Russians seeking asylum during the past year and a half.

"It's a huge increase since the beginning of the Russian invasion," said Jason West, an immigration lawyer with Just Law International in Northern Virginia, who worked on the Kantimerov family's case. "It's astronomical."

West explains that the numbers don't mean all cases are for asylum seekers, but he suspects the vast majority are asylum cases.

In fiscal year 2023, 280 new Russian immigration court cases were filed in Virginia, with 24 cases being granted and 15 cases denied.

Damir and Irina filed their petition in Virginia soon after arriving.

When Putin instituted a military draft on September 21, 2022, Damir knew his family needed to act fast to get out of the country, because people in the medical field are required to serve in time of war in Russia to treat the injured.

Tatars like Damir, who grew up in a small village before moving to Moscow, would be among the first to be sent to the front lines of war with minimal training. Tatars face intense discrimination, he said.

"Being Tatar, do you understand in what position we are in Russia?" Damir said during a recent interview in Roanoke. "You need to think of racial discrimination in this country in '60s"

Because Russia toughened anti-free speech laws following the invasion, it's illegal to speak out against the war. Damir and Irina feared that neighbors would call the police if they overheard the couple's conversations about their opposition to the war.

Damir said one neighbor was arrested shortly after speaking on his porch about his opposition to the war. The threat of jail and torture makes many Russians fear the repercussions of speaking about opposition to the invasion.

"It is a spiral of silence," Damir said.

Instead of talking about their escape plan while in their apartment, Damir and Irina sent messages to each other's phones across their kitchen table using Signal, an encrypted messaging service. Sometimes they spoke in low whispers to ensure nobody in the apartment complex would hear.

One day, after Russian military officers in charge of the draft knocked on their door, the family hid inside their apartment, afraid to answer the door or venture outside for hours after the officers were gone.

During his asylum hearing in Northern Virginia last month, Damir laid out his worries.

"Considering my political views and ethnicity, I would be assaulted, tortured, raped and maybe killed," Damir told Immigration Judge John Gillies, with the help of a Russian translator. Damir speaks English well but opted to speak in his native Russian during the hearing in order to say precisely what he meant.

Damir and Irina built a life for themselves in Russia, but never felt Russian. Damir's ethnic group had been persecuted for hundreds of years, their culture squashed by Russian forces, who wanted to assimilate the Tatar culture, enforcing Russian culture, language and beliefs.

"I say Tatar by birth, Russian by force," Damir said during an interview in Roanoke.

Irina could say the same. Russia's aggression brought her from Ukraine to Moscow in 2016, two years after armed Russian-backed separatists attacked the Ukrainian government in the Donbas region, including her hometown of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine.

"For me, the war started in 2014," Irina said.

Irina said the invasion started when she was in her fifth year of medical school at Donetsk National Medical University. She fled to Kharkiv, Ukraine, about a five hour drive away, to escape the fighting and complete her medical degree at Kharkiv Medical University. But Irina ran out of money and returned to Donetsk to find that her city had been seized by Russian forces. She said Russian secret police spied on the citizens and she was surrounded by bombing and missile attacks. In 2016 Irina decided to go to her family who had been taking refuge in the Russian capital, where her brother had been living before the war broke out. In Moscow she completed her residency program.

"I was devastated," she said of the move. "I didn't understand how I can live here" in Russia.

Damir and Irina met a few years later while working at Moscow Clinical City Hospital 52, where Damir, now 36, worked as a urologist, and Irina, now 31, was an anesthesiologist.

They were living just outside of Moscow and their son, Daniial had just been born when Putin ordered the invasion in 2022.

Damir and Irina felt alone in their opposition to Putin's invasion.

After a work meeting one morning while Damir was drinking coffee with fellow doctors, the topic of the war came up. "They said, 'Let those Ukrainians be killed,'" Damir said.

"I said, 'Guys, you have children, so you don't even mind that there will be children killed or women killed? Just imagine that you are with your family in a bomb shelter that there is missiles going there. You are doctors. Shame on you.'"

A colleague called him a traitor.

Damir cried during his testimony when he recalled that the co-worker threatened Irina and his son. Damir, who was recovering from shoulder surgery at the time, said he could not defend himself.

“He used bombastic threatening language, he said he would rip my shoulder off and go after my wife and child,” Damir testified.

The co-worker hit Damir in his left knee with a large ceramic statue of an owl. His knee was lacerated and swollen and he was out of work for three days because he could not walk well from the injury. When he returned, he said that the co-worker who injured him had been promoted.

Damir thinks Russians support the invasion of Ukraine because they are reliant on their government for their basic needs and believe what the government tells them.

“It's their oppression, it's the obsession,” Damir said. “They want Russia to conquer all our world. Like in Nazi Germany, it's still the same.”

He added: “It's a different mindset. Here in this country [in the United States], you are responsible for your own life. You don't need to wait until government give you something or you don't need to wait until somebody will give you money.”

Russians, on the other hand, “don't do anything by themselves,” he said. “That is why they believe the government. They're like children in the body of an elder.”

Irina had trouble at work as well. She was on maternity leave with Daniial when the war broke out. When she returned to work at the hospital as an anesthesiologist, she was shocked to hear colleagues openly saying that all Ukrainians must die.

“Before my maternity, I had a lot of friends at my job,” Irina said. “When I returned to my job in August 2022 I could hear, ‘Oh, we want all people from Ukraine to be killed.’”

The couple had been wanting to move before the invasion, but now for their safety they had to act fast.

On September 27, 2022, Damir, Irina, their son and Damir's brother took a flight to Turkey.

Finding another way in

When they arrived in Turkey in late September 2022, Damir, Irina, their son and Damir's brother Daian checked into their vacation hotel and began searching for a place to settle.

They had 90 days before their visa expired. Damir and Irina shared details of the quest to seek asylum. “Every next step was like, will it work or no? Our future was unpredictable,” Damir said.

Finding work in Turkey proved difficult, partly because the couple did not speak Turkish, and also because they did not feel welcome in Turkey, which had seen an influx in Russian arrivals since the outbreak of war.

The group set their eyes on the United States, where Damir had connections with American hospitals and universities. The urology department at the Wake Forest Baptist Hospital Network in Winston-Salem partnered with the hospital Damir and Irina worked at in Moscow. It also helped that Damir and Irina spoke English and Damir's cousin lived in Northern Virginia.

They applied for a student visa, but were rejected after being interviewed by the U.S. State Department.

Ann Buwalda, founder of Just Law International and the initial attorney to work with the Kantimerovs at the law firm, said first trying to apply for a visa was the right way to go about coming to the United States.

"The Kantimerovs tried to do things the right way, by getting visas," Buwalda said. "It's unfortunate they were denied. I'm certain that it is because the State Department assumed they were going to apply for asylum."

Ultimately, they concluded their best option would be to request asylum at the U.S. southern border in Mexico.

"It was a rather hard and difficult decision," Damir said. "You are with a baby, you have no home, and you are in an alien country."

On Nov. 8, 2022, they began a series of flights that would last two days and take them through five countries — from South Africa to Qatar to Brazil, Columbia, and Mexico, where they would request asylum at the U.S. border.

They were afraid in Mexico, of gang violence and for the safety of their son.

Each step of the way required strategic thinking and improvising. In Mexico, they made connections to legally purchase a 2001 Chrysler Town and Country minivan, with an American license plate, which allowed them to avoid being stopped by Mexican border agents, whom they feared would arrest them.

Driving from Tijuana, Damir hid on the floor while his brother drove the minivan until they were certain they had made it to the U.S. border. They were concerned about drawing attention to themselves, thinking an additional man in the car might look suspicious.

When they arrived at the border, Damir sat up to see what was going on as they idled in line, this alerted U.S. officials to his presence in the vehicle.

"They beat the mirrors [with flashlights] and said, 'Who are you, what do you want?'" Damir recalled.

Damir gave the response he had practiced numerous times.

"I need political asylum," he said.

Damir and Daian were handcuffed and the four, including Irina and Daniial were taken into U.S. custody. Damir, relieved that they had reached their destination, began to cry.

"They cuffed us and I was crying," he said. "One of the officers asked, 'Why are you crying?'" Damir explained to the border control officer that the travelers had been through a lot.

"Don't worry," the border agent said. "You are safe."

But their journey was not over. Damir, Irina and Damir's younger brother, Daian were searched and taken to a detention center in California.

Because they were in custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents, the asylum seekers from Russia were placed in the court system.

Their immigration lawyer, Jason West, explained there are multiple ways to request asylum.

“In this case, CBP, who they encountered at the border, put them into removal proceedings, into the immigration court,” West said. “So they weren't able to go directly to United States Citizenship and Immigration Services and apply for asylum. They had to go to the immigration court, which is under the Department of Justice.”

Damir, Irina and Daian were separated and questioned while detained, but they were provided with basic necessities. Irina was able to stay with Daniial, her and Damir's son.

“They were double checking if we were spies, but it is OK, we were fine with it because safety of this county is their business,” Damir said.

Two days later, the family was placed in removal proceedings, a parole-like period which could have resulted in their deportation. Daian was held by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which investigated his claims more thoroughly. West explained that it is common for a single male to be scrutinized more by border agents.

Alex Filatov, Damir's cousin in Northern Virginia, and his friend, Frank Heston, drove across the country to pick Damir, Irina, and Daniial from California and take them to Virginia. As the group drove east across the U.S., Irina took pictures at every state border sign. One of her selfies showed the group standing along an interstate in front of a large green sign fixed to an overpass. The sign, which was emblazoned with the state flag's lone star, read, “Welcome to Texas, DRIVE FRIENDLY- THE TEXAS WAY.”

After arriving in Virginia, Damir, Irina and Daniial stayed in Manassas, for the next six months.

Daian was released from ICE agents on Dec. 25.

“On Christmas, like a present, he was home,” Damir said of his brother.

Starting over in Roanoke

With the threat of deportation looming over their heads, Damir and Irina tried their best at making a life for themselves in Roanoke after they arrived last spring.

In Manassas the family stayed with Damir's cousin who came to the U.S. almost 30 years ago as a foreign exchange student and then got married and became a U.S. citizen. For six months, Damir and his family checked in with ICE, initially once a week and eventually less frequently, using an app through ICE on their phone. They were required to stay in Virginia until they were released of their supervision, in June.

The couple and Damir's brother looked for a permanent place to settle and get jobs. Their scouting mission brought them from Northern Virginia to Roanoke.

Watching the sun come up over the mountains from a Hotel Roanoke window in April persuaded Irina. “We said, ‘Oh, we like this city, we try to stay here,’” Irina said.

Damir said the Blue Ridge Mountains remind him of his hometown in the Ural Mountains in Bashkiria region of southeastern Russia. “There are old mountains, same as the Appalachian,” Damir said.

They said they are thankful for the kindness from people in the Roanoke Valley, including the landlord who rented them an apartment without a credit history or a job and the barber who gave them free haircuts and a gym that made Damir feel at home. It was not long before they made friends and became active in Roanoke's small but vibrant Ukrainian community.

Under the arch of a rainbow and weight of humidity after a late-August thunderstorm. Damir and Irina attended an event celebrating 32 years of Ukrainian independence from the former Soviet Union.

They gathered among a group of more than 30 people holding American and Ukrainian flags in Freedom Plaza in downtown Roanoke. Irina spoke during the event, standing between two displays depicting portraits of Roanokers with the text, "THANK YOU" at each picture. Ukrainians of the Roanoke Valley wanted to thank Roanokers for their support of the Ukrainian community since Russia invaded Ukraine, and said showing support from the U.S. helps the spirits of those fighting the war overseas.

Irina took her son's hand, a Mickey Mouse baseball cap, with two mouse-like ears sticking up atop his head, and she introduced a literary piece she compiled from various Ukrainian poets.

"This poem is about the catastrophe of the human soul," Irina said. "The great people of the great Ukrainian, about strong and independent people, about the hope for the peace and the hope for the healing of the soul."

She began to read in Ukrainian.

According to the Virginia Department of Social Services, since Russia's invasion in 2022, about 50 people have come to the Roanoke and New River valleys under the Biden administration's Uniting for Ukraine program. There have been about 4,900 people statewide who came through the program, which is a pathway for Ukrainians fleeing the war to come to the United States.

Though Irina and Damir were forced to come a different way, by seeking asylum at the U.S. southern border with Mexico, their family quickly made friends and felt welcomed.

Roanoke became a place they could call home.

"We love Roanoke so much and now it's our home" Irina said, "Because so kind people ... and there's a very good atmosphere," Irina said.

Reagan and Ed Valeyev are some of those friends they made. Reagan is American and Ed is a Russian-born U.S. citizen, who, like Damir, is the ethnic minority of Tatar. They both have family in Russia who they do not know when they can see again, because of the war and their stance on the war.

Reagan and Ed were glad to meet another Russian in Roanoke. They are not aware of any other Russian citizens who have recently come to the valley.

"It's been nice to add people who are from Russia to our small group," Reagan said about the Ukrainian, Russian and American companions. It was nice to see that there are other like minded people from Russia, who oppose the war."

Ed points out that just because you come from Russia it does not mean you are a bad person.

“No matter where people are from they can be bad or they can be good. I think we see the world in similar ways,” Ed said about him and Damir both being Tatar.

One summer afternoon Damir and Irina picked Daniial up from child care at Jewish Community Preschool in Roanoke and took him to the nearby Fishburn Park. Damir and Irina spoke about their job search.

Damir said he sent his resume to multiple contacts with Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC but had yet to hear a response.

To do their medical practices in the U.S., Damir and Irina would basically have to start over. They would have to pass the United States Medical Licensing Examination and do their residency programs over again, the entire process can take five to seven years to complete, almost as long as it took them to complete their medical degrees and do their residency programs in Russia

Their savings from selling their apartment in Russia was allowing them to hold out on getting an entry level job which would not use their medical skill sets.

“Nowadays, we can go to work [at] Walmart, McDonald's,” Damir said. “Like things that you need to do if you're running out of money.”

A judge rules

On that September day in a Northern Virginia courtroom, Damir, Irina and Daian stood to hear their fate.

“I find the testimony of Damir Kantimerov to be credible,” Judge John Gillies said.

“I will grant their asylum.”

West said he submitted close to 800 pages of evidence on the behalf of Damir and his family, proving if they went back to Russia they would be in danger of persecution and because they opposed Russia’s war on Ukraine they would be sent to jail and, or tortured.

“Draft evasion by itself is not grounds for asylum,” West said. “That's the whole idea of prosecution versus persecution. If they're (the Russian government) prosecuting you for violating a law, that doesn't mean that you're going to get asylum. It’s the underlying aspect here, the reason they were opposing the military draft ... and what would occur to them if they went back, that makes a difference.”

The trio’s eyes filled with tears, and they all took turns hugging, including their immigration lawyer, Jason West.

Damir asked permission to address the judge.

“I would like to say we are so grateful for the people of the United States,” he said. “We’ve met so many incredible people ... thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” the judge replied.

“Today shows how institutions can function properly.”

Outside the courthouse, the trio sat around a table with West to discuss the case.

“Things went very smoothly,” West said.

Exactly one year had gone by since they fled Russia. The situation was daunting and exciting.

West said that the family is no longer asylum seekers. Now, with asylum granted, they can move forward to seek more permanent residence in the U.S.

West also said that it is rare that an immigration proceeding gets a verdict as quickly as this one did. It helped that the Department of Homeland Security attorney did not oppose granting asylum.

The first people Irina shared the good news with were friends they made in Roanoke, including Reagan and Ed Valeyev.

EPILOGUE:

Less than two weeks after being granted asylum, Damir received a job offer as a research fellow with Wake Forest Institute for Regenerative Medicine, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He had no luck finding medical related jobs in Roanoke, so he sought work elsewhere.

Damir is thankful for an opportunity to start fresh and for all the friends he and his family has made in Roanoke.

“My second life started in the USA,” Damir said. I call the city of Roanoke my second birthplace. It took a huge room in my heart.”

Daniial ran around the south Roanoke home of Reagan and Ed with other kids. Reagan and Ed Valeyev hosted a combination going away gathering and asylum celebration for Damir, Irina, Daniial and Daian.

Damir brought a traditional Tatar dish he prepared called chebureki, fried dough stuffed with meat and onions.

Damir and Irina are anxious about starting over with their careers and lives, but they acknowledge they feel hopeful and empowered thanks to friends they made in Roanoke, immigration lawyers such as Jason West and their family who helped them along the way.

“All people have got a right for liberty, and for pursuit of happiness,” Damir said, quoting from the Declaration of Independence. “So for me, it is the most inspirational words. So like, nobody will kill you or suppress you. ... Now we are in a pursuit of happiness.”

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Young African immigrant's dreams getting back on track in Roanoke

By Heather Rousseau

Janvier Fataki kicked the soccer ball, his breath a misty cloud as he yelled at his players on the brisk January evening. "You're walking," he shouted, running across the soccer field and wearing a pink scrimmage jersey. "That's not defense!"

Fataki, 22, an assistant soccer coach at William Fleming High School, scrimmages with the players he coaches so they see that he knows how to play the game. Plus, it forms relationships.

"The players enjoy playing with you and having fun with you," he said. "You need to be friends with players for them to respect you and love you."

Fataki learned to play soccer barefoot, kicking and chasing a ball made of plastic bags rolled and tied tightly together. Players raced to make a goal between two garbage cans, a cloud of dust hovering around them in a playing field mixed with dirt and patches of grass. That's how kids learn to play soccer in a refugee camp in Burundi, where Fataki spent the first 17 years of his life.

Ten years of kicking and chasing the ball went by before Fataki felt soccer cleats hug his feet when he was 17 and living in Roanoke.

"I was so excited, my uncle bought me blue cleats," he said. "I felt like a big player wearing that. You cannot imagine."

Fataki got the teal blue cleats in the winter of 2018 after arriving in Roanoke from the refugee camp in central Africa. His mother fled the Democratic Republic of Congo the day he was born, taking his older brother, as well, in the midst of the civil war that was raging. Growing up in a refugee camp meant that Fataki had little to do but play soccer and dream about getting out.

"In Africa we don't have jobs so the only way kids can focus is by playing soccer," Fataki said.

In camp he dreamed of being a professional soccer player and having a career in technology.

"The only place to watch TV was at the hospital, so I would go and sit there and act like I was sick so I could watch TV," Fataki said. "I was watching Elon Musk, and I was like, I want to be a good engineer."

Fataki graduated from Patrick Henry High School in 2021 and was awarded a modest scholarship at Tusculum University in Tennessee. There he played soccer on the university team and thought about majoring in mechanical engineering.

"It was a dream come true to be the first person in my family to go to college," Fataki said. "I was proud of myself."

For the first time his dreams felt attainable, but they soon were derailed.

Just 3% of the world's refugees are enrolled in higher education, compared to 37% of non-refugees globally, according to a 2019 report from the United Nations Refugee Agency. Language, costs and lack of proper educational documentation are among the barriers that keep refugees from attending college, according to the report.

Navigating the future after high school can be a challenge for many students, but for a first-generation immigrant or refugee just learning English and a new culture, life can present many more challenges. Strong support systems are often necessary for first-generation American students like Fataki, who relied on soccer, his family, coaches, teachers and refugee outreach programs to help him along his path.

The Commonwealth Institute of Fiscal Analysis, a Richmond-based nonprofit that advocates for public policies that improve welfare of minorities, immigrants and other disadvantaged communities, reports that the English learner population in Virginia is less likely to enroll in higher education courses compared to their non-EL peers and that high school graduation rates in Virginia are sixth- worst in the country.

Fataki completed high school in a Burundi refugee camp just before he and five siblings came to the United States with their mom. He spoke six languages, but not English.

More than 70 languages are spoken by Roanoke City Public Schools' nearly 14,000 students. Spanish is the most-spoken language of English learners, accounting for nearly 70% of all EL students. Swahili, the language of students who are primarily from Africa, including the Democratic Republic of Congo where Fataki was born, is spoken by 3% of English learners.

The DRC has been at war or facing armed insurgencies since 1998. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, more than 500,000 refugees and asylum-seekers have left the country due to violence, and that number is growing with a resurgence of violence this year.

It takes a village, and soccer

Fataki spent most of his early life trying to survive, but in the United States he was determined to thrive. Soccer and being a part of a team, gaining support from community organizations and mentors helped him along his journey in the United States.

Fataki entered as a freshman at William Fleming High School, even though he was 17. He was a few years older than most of his peers and had already finished high school in the refugee camp.

“I had to learn English from A to Z, it was really hard,” Fataki said. “But I was really happy to get the opportunity of doing high school [in Roanoke]. Because not a lot of kids who come here get the opportunity of going to school, they just want to go and do jobs.”

In 2018 four in five refugees were displaced for extended periods of time, like Fataki, living in refugee camps through an entire school cycle from ages 5 through 18, according to the UN report, “Refugee Education in Crisis.”

The report suggests that refugee school enrollment can be improved by partnerships between governments, businesses, schools and universities, charities, and members of the public.

After arriving in Roanoke as a teenager, Fataki charged quickly toward his goals, playing on his high school's varsity soccer team and learning English. The next year his family moved to the Patrick Henry school zone, where he continued to play soccer.

Despite his determination, he still faced hurdles to learn a new culture and new language.

“I remember the first day of school I was really confused,” Fataki said. “Everything is different for us so you have to learn from the beginning, you feel like you are a newborn.”

Tim Cintron, an English learner teacher at Patrick Henry High School, recalled working with Fataki when he first arrived at William Fleming and how driven the student was to learn. Cintron was teaching at Fleming at the time. “He always wants to find out the answer to something,” Cintron said. “He was never content not knowing. He wanted to know exactly what was happening, and how to do something and how to get that answer or how to solve a problem.”

Fataki said he was shocked to see students being disrespectful to teachers and their parents.

In his family’s culture, “when you grow up you have to respect your elders,” he said. “If you don’t, you get slapped.

“My father told me to respect my mom, respect everyone. Never put yourself that you know everything.”

Watching some students not try to learn frustrated him, especially because they were, as he put it, “born in America.”

“But you are failing your writing or reading test in school. That’s impossible for me to imagine. I tell myself, let me be born in America and see if I can speak. I will never fail.”

For a moment he considered stopping going to school after he said a few students said racist things to him.

“I was really hurt and crying and disappointed,” Fataki said.

He told Cintron about his feelings, and the teacher told him, “they are not taking anything from you, you are still Janvier,” Fataki remembered Cintron saying. “Focus on you, don’t focus on them.”

The advice helped.

“I always respect him for that advice and he’s one of my favorite teachers of all time,” Fataki said.

Cintron, who is also the head coach for the Patrick Henry girls JV soccer team and an assistant coach for the girls varsity team, said that sports and mentorship from community members can help English-learning students like Fataki, who might need a boost to achieve goals.

“I think it’s vital that these kids come and they have a support system that they feel comfortable with, and that they know people are backing them,” Cintron said.

Fataki made good friends on his soccer team at Patrick Henry, and formed close relationships with his teammates and head coach Chris Dowdy.

“We’re very diverse ... with players coming from all over the place,” Dowdy said of the Patriots’ soccer program. He said that four different languages are spoken by players on the team. The situation was similar when Fataki played.

“Soccer helps you focus on school and do better in school,” Fataki said.

Dowdy agreed that soccer can bring together people from different backgrounds and cultures, who might not speak the same language. “There’s a lot of acclimating that they do in the language and immersing, but the game is like the undercurrent,” Dowdy said. “The game is the ultimate translator.”

Fataki also received support from Sue Nussbaum, whom he met through Mentoring Youth in Virginia (MyVA), a Virginia Department of Social Services program for refugee youths. Nussbaum, whom he affectionately calls “Mama Sue,” worked with Fataki to enroll in college, and the two have stayed in touch.

Commonwealth Catholic Charities (CCC), one of Virginia’s main resettlement agencies, has received funding for the MyVA program through the Office of New Americans since the grant was introduced in 2019. Marnie Mills, a mission advancement associate for the nonprofit, says mentors through the MyVA program help adolescents they serve achieve their academic goals. “Mentors help strengthen self-esteem, interpersonal and leadership skills, explore career and educational goals, and navigate other resources available.”

The MyVA program helps students with college applications, and explore educational or vocational opportunities. CCC has a 100% high school graduation rate, with 12 students currently participating, since the program started four years ago.

As Fataki worked with Nussbaum to make decisions about his future, Tusculum University’s soccer coach contacted him and encouraged him to apply to attend the university and play on the team.

“He got accepted based on his [academic] performance in high school, and then his soccer ability,” Nussbaum said.

Weinstein helped Fataki apply for student aid and said he received a small scholarship from Tusculum. Fataki also received funding to help with tuition through the Star City Soccer Foundation, a nonprofit that provides educational support for refugees and immigrants who live in Roanoke. Landon Moore, a longtime soccer coach and owner of Soccer Shots Southwest Virginia, started the foundation after working with refugees and immigrants through soccer and recognizing a need for extra resources to support them.

Playing soccer is not required to receive foundation funds, but for many, like Fataki, the game was already a part of his life. Moore, a former English teacher who coached soccer at William Fleming for eight years, saw firsthand how soccer brought disparate cultures together.

“This speaks to soccer as the global game and soccer as a kind of barrier breaker and soccer as a language that people around the world can share,” Moore said. “So, a lot of it is identity and hopefully a sense of community that comes with being a part of a team or something that is familiar.”

Moore said that sports can inspire students to do better academically if they want to remain eligible to be a member of a team.

“If soccer weren’t connected to the academic piece of it, then there might not be that same motivation,” he said.

Dowdy coached Fataki for three years at Patrick Henry and described him as resilient, a common character trait seen in players from different cultures because of difficulties they have endured, he said.

Fataki, who played defense, fits the description well.

“You can tell there’s something different about him in the way that he spoke to his teammates and the way he was so fired up,” Dowdy said, “And he was very, very passionate about what he did. I always

called him a foxhole kid, because if I ever had to be in a foxhole in a battle, I'd take Janvier, first choice. Absolutely. He's not scared of anything.

Surviving in a refugee camp

Life in a refugee camp gave him the resolve to overcome challenges he faced in the United States.

“To survive in camp, there are a lot of tough situations,” Fataki said. “It was really hard with my mom only and six kids. My mom, she's my hero to me.”

The second oldest of his siblings, Fataki wanted to help his mom. There were no jobs in the refugee camp, but he gathered water. Fataki said he walked an hour every morning down the mountain to the river where he'd fill a box with as much water as he could carry. Then he hiked back up the mountain, balancing the weight of the water on his head, careful not to spill a drop, but trying not to be late for a 7:30 a.m. school start. He frequently went to class hungry. His family received one box of food to last them one month. “We only ate three or four days a week,” he said.

The journey for water took Fataki outside the camp where native-born Burundis and police officers were hostile toward Congolese refugees, he said, who were sometimes beaten, raped or killed. Fataki recalled an incident when he and a friend were harassed and ran back up the mountain, losing all the water they had gathered. Fataki, otherwise avoided harm.

“Some people don't know how hard it is to live in a camp, or to live in a different county,” Fataki said.

He was grateful to come to the United States but said it has been hard to witness the extravagance.

“It's hard to see how people are wasting stuff like water and you know that there are people who suffer to get that stuff. You feel like you want to cry, but you can't cry. There's nothing you can do.”

Despite the war in the DRC, Fataki's father did not want to leave the Congo, and he was sent to another country. He was worried about racism in the United States. Fataki had a close relationship with his father even though he visited the refugee camp less than once a year.

“He was my best friend, anything I struggled with my dad was there for me.”

The last time he saw his dad was at what was then called Bujumbura International Airport in Burundi, when Fataki came to the United States. Fataki recalled the day while showing, on his phone, one of the only pictures he has from Africa.

“I was so sad to leave him,” he said. In the photo, his dad's arm is around him, they both have a buzzed haircut and wore red shoes and red T-shirts.

Dreams derailed

Fataki's first year at Tusculum University did not go as planned.

The pressures of higher education while still learning English, paired with pressures of collegiate soccer and missing his family in Roanoke weighed on him. He worried about his family.

“I’m the one who keeps taking care of my sisters, making sure they do everything right at school,” he said. “They not getting into any activities, drugs, gangs or stuff, keep them away from the street. I always give them good advice from when we grow up and advice from our father.”

Then his father got a cancer diagnosis.

It all was too much. Fataki completed the school year at Tusculum, but his heart and mind were with his family in Roanoke and with his father in Africa. He sent the money that was refunded to him from his financial aid after his tuition and fees were paid to help pay for his dad to have chemotherapy.

“Mama Sue” helped to find a medical care facility in Kenya and gave money toward his father’s treatment. He felt as if his life was standing still as he tried to help his father from afar and his grades floundered.

Fataki decided to move back to Roanoke. He enrolled at Virginia Western Community College where school expenses were lower, which helped him save money to support his father’s cancer treatments.

Fataki kept his passion for soccer, even though he was no longer playing in college. He was hired to work as an assistant coach with the William Fleming boys soccer team, and Moore, who runs training facilities for young soccer players across the Roanoke Valley, hired him to coach players with his Star City Soccer Academy.

Fataki was settling back into a groove, when his father died in early December at age 40, right as final exams were nearing at Virginia Western.

Grief-stricken, Fataki did not show up for the exams.

“I love my dad so much,” Fataki said. “When he died, I did three weeks without going to school, without playing soccer, doing the things that I love the most. I was really giving up on my future.”

Fataki’s support network did not give up on him. His school counselor called and asked why he had not showed up for his tests. He confided in friends and mentors including “Mama Sue,” and eventually decided to return to his studies at the community college, this time with a lighter workload.

“I couldn’t stop there by giving up on the good people who helped me mentally and physically,” Fataki said.

Still, he grieves the death of his father.

“Since I lost my dad, I am struggling with something in my heart,” he said.

His main focus now is to save enough money to visit his dad’s grave in Kenya.

“I need to go there and see him. Talk to him. For him to open my doors.”

Trying to thrive

Fataki is enjoying college at Virginia Western and coaching and playing soccer. He plays with the Roanoke Latino Union Soccer League and considers pursuing a coaching career.

After a morning of studying for class at Virginia Western, Fataki walked through campus texting his players at William Fleming to make sure they were in school.

Zach Quest, William Fleming's head coach, remembered Fataki when he played his freshman year at the high school. Quest, a math teacher, was the girls soccer coach at the time.

"I didn't know him then but he impressed me in the way he played on the field and how he carried himself," Quest said.

Now, Quest and Fataki work closely together coaching the boys varsity team at William Fleming.

"We just kind of bounce off of each other in a typical practice," Quest said. "He's been fantastic for the kids, who all look up to him because he went here and he played at PH and he was a very successful player and he has a huge drive to succeed and soccer has been his avenue for that."

He said Fataki relates well to the William Fleming players.

Fataki is learning to speak Spanish so he can communicate better with many of the players who are still learning English.

Quest said that Fataki often yells simple Spanish words from the sidelines during games. Because of his multilingual skills, Fataki communicates with one player who speaks only French.

"This helps make them feel more comfortable," Fataki said.

During a match in April, Mama Sue sat in the bleachers looking over William Fleming's soccer field, not to see the game, but to watch Fataki coach. At halftime, she waited outside the locker room. Fataki walked next to a player, having a lively talk. He saw Mama Sue, and he gave her a hug, a smile spreading across his face. "Thanks for coming," he said, before running off to help coach his team for the second half.

"Maybe coaching can become my career. I don't know, everything changes in life."

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.

Corrections: Published correction ran on May 23 - Correction - A photo caption published May 21 misidentified Sue Nussbaum, who met and helped African immigrant Janvier Fataki through the Mentoring Youth in Virginia program for refugee youths. A separate caption incorrectly stated Fataki's age as 24. He is 22.