

The Stand's Podcast: My South Side

Episode 1: "Path to Permanency" Transcript

Nat sound of the coffee shop where Saboor was interviewed, sounds of people taking and espresso machines steaming milk can be heard in the background

Saboor: "The moment I heard the words that 'We're in,' and we're in US custody. I just, I just couldn't believe it for the first few minutes. I was hearing the voice of my family members saying 'We're in, we're in.' I felt like an entire mountain weight of shoulders, you know, it kind of fell off my shoulders"

Intro music starting very low, a soft and sad instrumental music slowly gets louder

Saboor: "And it was a it was a moment of joy. But yet sadness at the same time, because my birth nation was just falling into pieces right in front of my eyes"

Host: That country was Afghanistan, and Saboor Sakhizada, who immigrated to the United States from Afghanistan 10 years ago, fought for months to evacuate his siblings in the wake of Afghanistan's fall.

Intro music increases

Sakhizada was successful in bringing his family to safety, as well as others along the way. Syracuse is now home to over 400 Afghan people, who all aided the U.S. military during its 20-year occupation of Afghanistan. After leaving imminent danger, they face new battles here in the United States.

I'm Abby Fritz of The Stand's podcast "My South Side", in this first episode we will speak with Syracuse's Afghan humanitarian parolees and the people supporting their path to permanent residency.

Intro music fades out into the sounds of a coffee shop

Zac: "You know, the easy battle was getting them out. Now, you know, what we need to focus on now is the long term"

Host: Zac Lois served in the military for 12 years and now teaches middle school history in Syracuse. During his deployment in Afghanistan from 2012 to 2013, Lois worked alongside a variety of Afghan Special Operations and interpreters who, in the wake of the fall, feared retaliation from the Taliban.

Zac: “So the first thing that a lot, um, any veterans or anyone who worked with the US government did was burn their paperwork. Because, ya know, they're going door to door, they're looking for anyone with an affiliation to the US government, or the US military or the former Afghan government. They're going through their phones, anything. So they basically have to get rid of any, anything identifying them.”

Host: Sakizada's family felt this urgency to leave Afghanistan without detection because of their ties to the U.S. military.

Saboor: “A lot of these families come in with a lot of those traumas and stresses. And in that mix is my own brother, is my own family member that I desperately worked day and night to get them out of Afghanistan. Because of my reputation and my family's reputation with the United States military and Afghanistan. My family, traditionally, all of the brothers — we're four brothers — all of us served the United States military committed to that mission. So given that history of who we were, who we are as a family and the values that we hold very dearly to ourselves, easily made us a target to the Taliban. And so and for that reason, I made it my mission to bring my loved ones, my brothers from from harm's way.

Host: But now that Sakhizada's family is here as humanitarian parolees, their emergency entrance only allows for a limited stay of two years.

Saboor: “The alternative if they are not granted permanent residency or permanent status here in America is to send them back. And where else to send them back? Send them back to hell in Afghanistan, who, there are people waiting for them? And so essentially, you're giving them a passport to hell, a passport to a Death Note, to go, because someone who's waiting out there for you, monsters.

Low instrumental music begins, a slow build up of tension building music can be heard under Sultani's quote

Arsalan: “I think it was the 15th, I guess, of 2021. That the Taliban came to Kabul. Everywhere that sound comes from there, comes from Saudi comes from north. It was another shooting, all the day another shooting. *music stops* In Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan is Kabul, I work in a military all of the people was so worried about that the Taliban was coming.

Host: Arsalan Sultani, who is 25 years old, arrived from Afghanistan with his wife in September of last year. He was a member of the Afghanistan Nation Military and fled

the country during its fall. In recounting the hours leading up to his decision to leave, he says he left his family, friends, and only place he's ever called home to ensure safety from the Taliban. They left in the night on what Sultani believes is a U.S. cargo plane.

Arsalan: "When we come, we came from Afghanistan my wife was pregnant she was in a so bad situation and inside of the airplane. *contemplative pause* I passed so bad days, I never forgot that. I started to make a life, a better life for me for my family. I want to do everything for them."

Arsalan: "Never I forgot that day. It was a darkness day for me. Because I left my family, my parents, my brother, all of my relatives, my friends there. It's so..." *Pained pause accompanied by low breathing*

Music of a coffee shop with a song from the 50's playing loudly

Sharifeh: "We are from same country. We feel same pain. They left their country. Some people when I talk to them, they saying we had life over there. We had like, a good life in there in Afghanistan. They just left during a night. We don't know. They are actually still in shock. 'What happened? Why we are here?' Yep. I just want to to be a hand."

Host: Sharifeh Mohammadi works as a caseworker at Interfaith Works. She is originally from Afghanistan herself and felt called to help Syracuse's newest arrivals. She moved to Syracuse seven years ago with her siblings, after her parents were killed in Afghanistan. She remains in contact with family still in the country.

Sharifeh: "And you always see they're crying, you always — and you cannot do anything for them. The most important part is — make us feel sad and make us feel unused that you cannot do anything for them. Your hand is not open, and you're just there to just to listen to them. I'm just a listener, just listen to them to what they're saying. Just to their story, just to their feeling."

Host: She listens in live time over the phone as her family tells of the changes that came with the Taliban's rise, including her young female relatives being denied access to an education. She says they were turned away at the school house doors.

Sharifeh: "This is what I can say that they have every, uh, every country is just watching the Afghan girl's tears."

Pause

Zac: “I still have five friends that are still there. And they were the ones that, you know, I've been working with since July, before the fall.”

Host: Lois, who we heard from earlier, has been an active member in veteran organizations like Task Force Pineapple and Honor the Promise since Afghanistan's fall. He's worked to help evacuate U.S. citizens and Afghans who supported the U.S. military, including several friends he made during his deployment.

Zac: “You know, we were successful, moderately successful. But I, it's feels, still feels very bittersweet. Because the whole reason I got involved in this was to get out my friends, and they still haven't gone out. So as much success as we have, it feels very hollow because my guys are still over there and it really looks like they aren't getting out.”

Host: Many have been touched by the fall of Afghanistan. Humanitarian parolees and those who have supported them are left with the lingering effects of losing family and friends, leaving home, and finding stability in a new life.

Arsalan: “I live with my family all 25 years. All of my life was with my family, my parents my brother, we are joined together. But then in those six months you separate, they are left in Afghanistan and we came here....we don't have any happiness, you know. It's annoying me all the time. Like my family, 1000 million families that they are in a bad situation in Afghanistan. Right now I'm sad, I got depression here because my family is there in the reverse situation, it was a very bad day in all of my life.”

Coffee shop sounds

Zac: “You know, Syracuse alone, I think, is a shining example of what what refugees will do. I teach in the Syracuse City School District, refugees and immigrants are a large percentage. You know, and they often succeed at significantly higher levels than, you know, people who have been born here. So I think they I think they come here with an understanding a bigger, bigger worldview, and, you know, a lot of motivation.”

Host: While these humanitarian parolees make a life in Syracuse and work through the emotional turmoil of leaving their home and loved ones, there are still more challenges to be faced. A complicated, long and in some cases retraumatizing battle against the U.S. immigration process.

upbeat, curious music comes in, starting slowly then getting louder

Because Afghanistan fell so quickly, the U.S. government granted an emergency, but temporary, lawful presence as humanitarian parolees. The circumstances of fall made it difficult for many humanitarian parolees to produce documents. So essentially, by doing everything in their power to leave Afghanistan safely, they now are having trouble staying here. But the U.S. is drafting the Afgan Adjustment Act, which could help these humanitarian parolees on their path to permanent residency.

Zac: “I don’t think they will be able to do without the act. And I don’t know that the all the details of the act, but I know that it would be, you know, significantly beneficial for our population.”

Host: Next week, we’ll dive into the legal side of this issue, examining what options these new arrivals have. We’ll talk with lawyers, like Lindsey Gysling, and other professionals on the next legal steps. As well as how humanitarian parole has been utilized in the past during other crises.

Lindsey: “I think the biggest thing, right is that it means that people who were brought here on the promise that they would be safe, because we withdrew after two decades of being in Afghanistan, will either be left with, you know, no path forward, or they’ll be forced to go through really difficult processes like asylum or searching for some other form of relief. And what that ultimately means is that our communities are going to be, you know, left destabilized,

Host: My name is Abby Fritz, thank you for listening to “My South Side.” Tune in on Spotify and The Stand’s website for upcoming episodes. A special thanks to Jeff Kramer whose story for The Stand titled “Humanitarian Parole” inspired this series and for assisting with sourcing on this project. This has been a collaborative production with WAER. A thanks also goes to Chris Bolt and Ashley Kang for assisting with scripting and editing.

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