

# Rochester helps refugees end extreme hardships

By **VELVET SPICER**

Obaida Omar has seen things. Horrific things that most of us have only read about or watched on TV.

She has seen family members stolen from their homes. She has seen hunger and fear, bigotry, hatred and death. And she has seen hope and kindness in the faces of strangers.

Omar is a refugee.

"I was born in Afghanistan and during Soviet invasions we left Afghanistan because of the war," Omar recalled. "So we flee from Afghanistan to a neighboring country because that was the only choice we had. The neighboring country was Pakistan."

At the age of six, Omar trudged, tired and hungry, through the war-torn country with just her mother and sister. Her father had previously died.

"My younger brother was taken by force by the army, so we didn't know where he was," she said. "We lost contact with my older sister, who was married. We didn't know where she was."

The three females walked during evening hours through villages and mountains, careful to take shelter from prying eyes and energy-sapping heat during the day.

"We didn't even know if we were going to make it alive," she said.

The journey took about three weeks.

"As a child it was really, really scary for me. A 6-year-old, I didn't even understand so I would walk over dead bodies," Omar acknowledged through tears.

Collecting herself, Omar recalled finally arriving in Pakistan, where there was no government assistance, just substandard living conditions.

"You live in a camp, basically, very limited. You don't have clean water. You don't have education. You basically don't have life," she said. "You have existence."

Omar did make some young friends that she played with, but on a daily basis she saw child after child die from the unbearable heat.

"You don't have a fan. You don't even have anything," she recalled. "So that was really tragic living there for a few years."

In 1985, when Omar was about 12 or 13, help came in the form of a sponsorship from her older brother and his American wife, who had escaped to the U.S. during the Soviet invasion. After spending six years in a camp, Omar, her sister and mother would be allowed to come to the U.S. as refugees. She was greeted in the U.S. by the warm, friendly faces of people who would help her and her family to overcome all they had been through in their native country.

## Culture shock

"That was when I realized I could go to school. I had life again, as a human being," Omar said. "But I didn't speak a word of English, obviously, and went to high school and slept through my classes the first year because I had no clue what the teacher was saying."

Omar had lost six years of education



**Obaida Omar**

while in the Pakistani refugee camp.

"I don't know how I did it. By God's mercy," she said in perfect English. "But I would watch cartoons. Tutors and summer school. I worked so hard; I was not playing around."

Indeed, she had worked hard enough to allow her to graduate high school in three years, rather than four.

But the language barrier wasn't her only challenge; Omar said she was shocked by American culture.

"As a teenager, the way we grew up we didn't have boyfriends and girlfriends, so coming here, when I went to high school I would see people kissing in the hallway and I would go, 'Oh my god,'" Omar said with embarrassment. "And the dress, people could wear short sleeves and shorts. Those things were very shocking."

Omar arrived in Rochester by way of Boston—where her brother and sister-in-law had lived—and Ithaca, Tompkins County, where she had settled for some time with her husband and three children.

While her husband was serving in the U.S. Army overseas, Omar was raising their kids and working as an interpreter at three agencies. She also went back to school and earned a college degree so that she could work with refugees like herself.

"I did my internship with Catholic Family Center. I saw firsthand what happened as a refugee, so this was my first choice when they asked me at the college," she recalled excitedly. "And then after the internship a position opened in case management. So I started working and it's been five years now."

Omar's story is one of many in the Rochester area. Catholic Family Center, or CFC, has countless examples of refugees who have escaped war-torn countries for a new life in America, a life for which they worked hard, found jobs, educated themselves and became contributors to Rochester's economy.

Tens of thousands of refugees have come to call Rochester home through the years, CFC CEO Marlene Bessette said. The organization began its refugee resettlement program about 35 years ago and works with 700 to 750 refugees a year. It is the region's only refugee resettlement program.

But in the wake of the Trump administration's attempt through numerous executive orders to scale back refugee help in the U.S., many Americans have begun to distrust refugees and immigrants.

"It's dramatically reduced our ability to continue to provide this service because we are really at the mercy of what the federal government decides to do," Bessette said. "We cannot operate autonomously in this area."

As a result, CFC launched "See Their Stories," a campaign to bring clarity surrounding the uncertainty and misunderstanding of the refugee resettlement process in the U.S.

"We and our staff were really discouraged by the sentiment that arose after the executive order," Bessette said. "The sentiment was really one of fear. And the discussions we were having were 'what can we do?' Because we know that there's nothing to fear and that we really want to make sure that there's a human face on the political issue."

In a series of short videos, Rochester-area refugees tell their stories of how they came to be in the U.S. and what organizations like CFC did to help make the transition easier for them. Each of the individuals interviewed for the videos expressed gratitude for the agencies' help and said they were blessed to have been given the chance to have a new life here.

## An arduous process

CFC works with volunteer agencies such as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which in turn work with the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, which performs security screenings and clearances in the refugee camps overseas.

The UNHCR estimates that there are 22.5 million refugees worldwide, more than half of whom are under 18. Some 28,300 people a day are forced to flee their homes because of conflict and persecution, and 16 percent of the world's displaced people are hosted in the Americas.

CFC's role is to ensure Rochester has the capacity for incoming refugees, said Lisa Hoyt, the organization's director of refugee and immigration services. CFC equips newly arrived refugees with services, resources, training and other support that allow them to rebuild hopeful lives and pursue enriching opportunities in their adopted homeland.

"We do this after careful consideration of: Can we sustain that ethnic group? Do we have language capacity? Can our partners fulfill their partnership with us as far as providing furniture? Does the school system have enough places for them?" Hoyt explained.

This process could happen up to a year before an individual or family arrives in the U.S. In most cases, CFC is not notified until a week or two before refugees arrive that they will be here.

"They get in very late. They're exhausted; they've been traveling at least 24 to 36 hours. We have them go to bed and we go back the next day for what we call a 24-hour home visit," Hoyt explained. "Then we give them a calendar and start

providing all the services."

Those services include a health department visit where they are screened for diseases and brought up-to-date on immunizations.

"If you are an agency that resettles clients you have core services that you must provide, so those include the medical health exam, applying for public assistance. They need to get their Social Security card. We register the children in school," Hoyt said.

In order to prevent refugees from becoming victims of poverty, Saint's Place provides clothing and toiletries upon arrival in Rochester. Saint's Place is a nonprofit organization that assists newly arrived legal refugees in the Rochester area. The agency helps more than 1,250 refugees annually.

"People ask all the time, are our clients on public assistance? Yes, for a brief amount of time, always less than a year," Hoyt said. "And that's because they need to get a leg up."

The county is reimbursed by the federal government for any public assistance refugees receive, Bessette noted. CFC also has an employment service, and most refugees are able to find a job in a short period of time.

"Our team has placed thousands of refugees in employment in the Rochester community, and we have numerous employment partners that specifically seek out the refugee population," Hoyt said. CFC has partnerships with some 75 employers in the region.

A 2017 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found that immigrants influence the rate of innovation in the economy, which potentially affects long-run economic growth. Immigrants appear to innovate more than natives not because of greater inherent ability but due to their concentration in science and engineering fields.

In fact, a recent study by WalletHub found that New York State ranked first for its percentage of foreign-born science, technology, engineering and math workers out of total STEM workers, and the state ranked seventh nationwide for the percentage of jobs generated by immigrant-owned businesses.

Bessette said the biggest challenge in working in the refugee arena is public perception.

"I think this is a wonderful service. I think that we as a community and we as a nation should be doing much, much more of it," Bessette said. "I think if people would take the time to look at the actual factors and facts, it is economically viable for our community to do this over the long term, and that we're adding cultural diversity and so much more."

But, she added, she has found that Rochester really stands out.

"I think in all of our experience, especially in the last year where there's been so much discussion about the risks of refugees, we do find that the Rochester community is an incredibly welcoming community and we're grateful," Bessette said.

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