

WESTCHESTER
JEWISH 
COALITION FOR
IMMIGRATION

REFUGEE SHABBAT,
A PROJECT OF HIAS
February 3-4, 2023 and Beyond

SPEAKER'S CORNER

Each one of our new neighbors has a compelling story. Therefore, an honorarium is desired for each person (except for those listed below as volunteers or others).

FROM CENTRAL AMERICA:

Brad D Fernando, Del Cid Ramirez, a 22 year old young man from Guatemala. He arrived in the United States on September 7, 2015 at the age of 15 by himself. He was raised by a single mom named Rosy. She worked with a family in France as a nanny and they both lived with the family. She then became a victim of Human trafficking once the family decided to move to the United States. They treated Rosy horrible and made her work all day without any breaks. Brad would see all the bad treatment she received. Rosy was not able to register him in school because the family prohibited her from using their address to register him in school. He was not able to attend school for about two months. Soon after Rosy contacted the Community Resource Center to seek help and she was assisted by our Worker Center to help her contact the Department of Labor for her human trafficking case. Our Community Justice Program also helped them by assisting Brad apply for Immigration relief status known as SIJ and also helped Rosy as well.

FROM AFGHANISTAN:

Daryosh Ahmadi was evacuated from Afghanistan on October 25, 2021. First he and his family were housed in a refugee camp in Abu Dhabi for almost 10 months. Then they came to the United States on August 9, 2022.

Frohar Ahmadi received her bachelor's degree from one of the highest ranked universities in Afghanistan. Her evacuation journey began in August of 2021. By way of a camp in Abu Dhabi, then Washington DC, she and her family finally settled in West Harrison. She is currently working in the Admissions Office of White Plains Hospital and is so grateful to all the people who helped give her and her family a new home where they feel safe and welcome.

Trained as a civil engineer, **Reshad Ahmadi** was determined to assist in his country's reconstruction. He graduated from Kabul Polytechnic in 2010, and by 2011 Reshad was working for U.S. projects in Afghanistan in quality control assurance. He traveled the country, spending half of his day speaking Persian with project staff and half in English, relaying his findings to American project supervisors. In 2016, he started to receive phone calls threatening his life if he continued to work with the U.S. One day, he was driving home when an SUV stopped me. Masked men with guns got out of the car. Reshad was brutally attacked, but his life was spared. He applied for the Special Immigration Visa, a U.S. government program that grants immigration visas to Afghans who have worked for at least two years for the U.S. government and whose lives are at risk. He was lucky — in 18 months, he was granted a visa. He, his wife Zulfar, and their two children soon found their way to New York and live in White Plains. JCC Harrison Synagogue resettled his family. Zulfar works, too, and she is quite hilarious and entertaining - they both are. They have bought a house and are a true example of a couple who came to America to make the most of life.

“I am **Shoaib Ahmadi**, an Afghan immigrant and I came to New York on August 29 along with my parents and two siblings. In late August 2021, after the fall of the legitimate government of Afghanistan, thousands of Afghans rushed to the airport to seek help from US troops and get to military planes and save their lives. Although we tried a couple of times, unfortunately, we could not make it as all the routes to the airport were blocked by Taliban insurgents. After living two months in fear and dread of the Taliban, we were able to get a chartered flight to Abu Dhabi in a Humanitarian Camp that was called EHC. Life in the EHC was good at first, but gradually the level of tension and frustrations soared. People had many difficulties in communication and mutual understanding. Finally, after waiting for nearly one year in complete uncertainty and with an ambiguous future, my family and I completed the requirements to resettle in the US. Starting a new chapter in NY is really exciting and likewise challenging, but I have strong ambition and vision to turn a new page in my life, start to build my career, work hard, pursue my education and keep myself motivated till I chase my goals to success. “

Sofia Bator is a co-founder of Open Arms for Refugees. She was a refugee since the Taliban took over northern Afghanistan Mazar-i- Sharif in August 1998. Her family was prosecuted by the Taliban because of their ethnicity and religious beliefs. Sofia and her family stayed more than five years in a refugee camp between the Afghanistan and Iran border. From a refugee camp, she won a national writing award for which she was recognized by Hamid Karzai. Later in her return to a refugee camp her family was deported back to Afghanistan and she started working as a speech writer and graphic designer for Hamid Karzai. She came to America to go to school and pursue her dream. She graduated from the University of Tennessee and worked as a women's advocate and case manager for a resettlement agency in Knoxville and Mayville area. She moved to NY and worked as a teacher in an international boarding school where she met and married the love of her life, Christian, an Ecuadorian American man. They live in Carmel with their daughter Eileen Emilia and have twins on the way. Sofia published her first children's book in 2010 and is currently looking for a connection and assistance to publish her second book which is her autobiography and her journey to America.

Farhad Ghafoori was born in Herat, Afghanistan, and grew up in Kabul as one of eight children. He got his Bachelor's Degree in the English language from Kabul University and earned a Master's degree from Kardan University. He served for the American Army in Logistics from 2015 until the Taliban took over in August 2021, after which time his family went into hiding. Then, finally, he was able to come to America on a Special Immigrant Visa. He and his wife and two young children live in White Plains near his two brothers.

Haroon Ghafoori was born in Herat, Afghanistan, and grew up in Kabul as one of 8 children. He graduated from high school and served for the American Army as a Logistics officer from 2012 until 2014. Along with his wife and four children, he came to America in February 2020 on a Special Immigrant Visa. Now he and his family live in White Plains, New York.

Fardin Ghafoor was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and grew up in Kabul as one of 8 children. He completed two years of college at the American University of Afghanistan. He served for the American Army as Operations Manager from 2006 till 2015. Along with his wife and three children, he came to America in late 2017. on a Special Immigrant Visa. Now he and his family live in White Plains near his two brothers.

In her own words from **Mina Hayati**: “I came to the USA through a Special Immigrant Visa for Afghans. I evacuated from Kabul to Doha military camp after I passed the interview and got my visa. I arrived here on September 7, 2022.”

Farhad (Anwarulhaq) Khurami fled Afghanistan in August 2021 as a newlywed with his young wife, an SIV (she worked for USAID). They had a long journey from Afghanistan to Qatar and then to the United States; they got separated, not knowing where the other was, and finally were reunited in a U.S. airbase in Qatar. They spent four months at Fort McCoy before arriving in Rochester, NY, to start their life again. Farhad had been working at NGOs, including Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders, and recently with the Democratic Government of Afghanistan until it fell. The couple has a harrowing story of leaving their home and their life and fleeing the country barely only with the clothes on their back. He also has a photo with the last Jew living in Afghanistan! They were friends.

Farzana Jamalzada fled Afghanistan in August 2021 as a newlywed with her husband. They had a long journey from Afghanistan to Qatar and then to the United States. They separated, not knowing where the other was, and finally were reunited in a U.S. airbase in Qatar. They spent four months at Fort McCoy before arriving in Rochester, NY, to start their life again. She had been working for the USAID-WIE (women in economy) project and recently with the Democratic Government of Afghanistan until the day it fell. They have a harrowing story of leaving their home and life and fleeing the country.

The couple compares their life to this poem:

“O, fly and never tire,
Fly and never tire,
Fly and never tire,
There’s a great camp meeting in the Promised Land.”

Muhammad Idris Rasuli graduated from the International Relations faculty from Tajik National University in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. From 2014 to August 15, 2021, he worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in higher positions. After the Taliban took Kabul, he and his family evacuated with help from the U.S. government to the United States. Now he is living in New Rochelle NY and works as a Court Analyst at the Bronx Supreme Court. His wife’s name is Manizha and will speak alongside him.

From **Nelofar Sorosh**: “I am the first Afghan girl who ran a 250 KM ultra marathon race. Also a medical doctor UNESCO task force member.” Nelofar Sorosh, 26, a medical doctor and the first ever Afghan

woman to run a 250-kilometer ultra-marathon, fled Afghanistan with her family last October. After more than seven months in Mexico, they crossed the border to the United States as humanitarian parolees. Sorosh then had a year to apply for asylum before her humanitarian parole status expired, all while also having to look for jobs, learn English and get her driver's license.

FROM UKRAINE

In her own words from **Krystyna Biziaieva**, "It's hard to accept but I am a refugee from Ukraine. We have 3 small boys and fled from the war in Ukraine. We lived in Kharkiv, the city which is right on the border with Russia. I will never forget and forgive that morning on February 24th at 6 am when I woke up hearing a bombing. We stayed in our basement for 3 days and then tried to escape but Russian tanks had arrived in our city. My husband drove as fast as he could to reach a safe place. We spent 3 nights in the car to get to the border with Moldova. We still felt in danger even in Moldova as it is so close to the Ukrainian border. Our smallest boy was 11 months old and his first birthday was spent in a German refugee camp. After 2 months in Europe and settling all our relatives in Germany we decided to come to the USA. We live with Jewish American family."

Iryna Lahuta, in her own words: "My name is Iryna Lahuta. My two daughters and I moved to America after the war started in Ukraine. I have a 3 year-old girl and was pregnant when Russia started the invasion of Ukraine. We lived in Kharkiv, the closest city to Russia. My husband was worried about me and our two children. He took us to the opposite side of Ukraine to cross the border with Poland. There I gave birth to my second child. And there I met my angel who helped me to move to America. This woman came to Poland to help a Ukrainian woman with a child. I just believed her. I trusted her from the first meeting. And she did amazing things for me and my daughters. She got together more amazing people to help us. She created a welcome circle and got great support on every stage. With such a great team I can go through any troubles and I'm sure there are many more people here to help and give a hand when you need."

On February 23, **Svitlana Kolobova** was a student, wife, and mother, living in Sumy, a city of some 250,000 in eastern Ukraine, just 30 miles from the Russian border. On February 24, the life she knew was shattered, as Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of her country. She spent days hiding in her basement for cover, until fear for her life and her son's future compelled her to take him and flee in March. Svitlana said that most of her relatives are still in Ukraine, and that she has minimal personal international connections. Determined to get her son as far away from the war as possible, she went first to Germany, and then farther west to Spain. But limited work and educational opportunities, coupled with fear that Vladimir Putin would not stop at Ukraine, pushed her onward. After two weeks in Europe, Irena secured a temporary work visa from Mexico, more than 5,000 miles from her home. Shortly after arriving there, she connected with an American church group that eventually helped her and her son cross the U.S.-Mexican border into California. After just one week on the west coast, she and her son then traveled nearly 3,000 miles to New York City, where, in another bit of good fortune, she connected with Holly Rosen Fink, President and co-founder of the Westchester Jewish Coalition for Immigration (WJCI).

Tetiana Kotelnikova was born and raised in Horlivka in Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine. In 2014, she left her hometown, which was occupied by Russian forces during the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. She fled Ukraine after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Her family is in the occupied territory of Ukraine. Tanya studied law at the Taras Shevchenko national university of Kyiv. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, she received a Scholarship for Displaced Students at Columbia University. Tanya focuses on the

obligation of the occupying power to ensure the right to water in the occupied territory, and Russian education policies in the occupied territories of Ukraine. In September, she launched [the mentorship program for Ukrainian youth](#). MentorUkraine supports Ukrainian youth and assists young Ukrainians in applying to universities in the USA, inviting them to network events and share professional information related to education, internships, and employment opportunities. Tanya says: “I designed this program to support my peers from Ukraine as, in addition to the trauma in their personal lives, they have to continue studying.”

Larisa Marmaris, in her own words: “ I am a Waldorf teacher. The 23rd of February was an ordinary day. My children were preparing a play for fathers.. On Thursday, February 24, we planned to show our play to other classes. The children tried very hard, it was supposed to be an unusual play. The parents of the class helped us a lot with costumes. No one has come to school anymore. My husband went to work, my children and I stayed at home. The explosions continued...I didn't know what to do. First we decided to go to a village near Kiev. But the situation was getting worse and we decided to go to Western Ukraine. Our friends from the US called us every day and asked us to come to them. And I made up my mind. It was a difficult decision since my eldest son, husband, and parents stayed in Kiev. After several days we crossed the border to Poland. In Poland, volunteers helped us while we were waiting for the plane to the US. Now my two children and I have found ourselves in NY.

Teo Senchenko (in his own words) I come from Ukraine. I came with my parents because of the war. We arrived in America and I was introduced to Holly and her organization, Westchester Jewish Coalition for Immigration. Because of community sponsorship, we have a safe home and help with so many things. We have met very special people who are supporting us with pro Bono legal services, medical care, and finding a place for us to live. We are very grateful for community sponsorship and to all the great people we have met.

Maryna Sypko, in her own words:“Everything started suddenly - the aerial alarm sounded from the television. No one in the city of Rivne was prepared. Having no basements, people were running for shelter to save the children from the rocket attack. We stayed in the bomb shelter at my dad's place of work and hoped that everything would end soon, but it didn't. We were extremely tortured by missile launches and alarms. Finally, my dad quit his job and took us to safety in Poland. There we were in a foreign country without the slightest idea or idea where to go next, but were glad to be safe. Looking for a place to stay we found that only Europe and America understood how to support us - Ukraine and its people.”

Oleksandr Zabialo born April 16, 1970, lived in Kharkiv, Ukraine prior to the war. He graduated from Kharkov University majoring in physics. In Ukraine he ran his own business. He and his wife Marina have four daughters, Valentyna, Anastasiia, Viktoriia, and a newborn Veronika. In February 2022, they escaped from Kharkiv in their car to Poland. His sister sponsored us to come to America through the Uniting for Ukraine program.