



Three Afghan women saw their lives upended when the Taliban seized their country last year. Now, thousands of miles from home, they set out to reclaim their dreams.

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Between **Two Worlds**

On moving day, Zulaikha pauses for a moment just outside her host family's living room. The Eugene, Oregon, house where she's lived for the past month is filled with colorful reminders of its owners' foreign travel and international guests. A blue and white teapot from Ukraine sits on a shelf underneath a colorfully painted plate from the Soviet Union. Across the room, a silk embroidery from China depicting cherry blossoms hangs on the wall.

Zulaikha, who came to Eugene after fleeing the Taliban in Afghanistan, didn't bring many tangible reminders of her home country. But she and Zahra and Maryam — the two other Afghan women staying in the house — have filled it with more elusive pieces of their culture. There's been a dinner of Kabuli Pulao, conversations split between English and their native language, and their left-over habit of never wearing shoes inside.

On this January day, before the three women move into their own place, Zulaikha, dressed in dark jeans and a flannel shirt and sporting short brown hair and round glasses, sets her hand on the wall just outside of the living room. She wrinkles her face in a feigned sob. "I'm going to miss here, I don't want to leave here," she says.

Despite being sad to leave the home of Janet Anderson and Evelyn Anderton, their hosts since arriving in Eugene, Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam are excited to move into their new place. The rental is closer to the University of Oregon campus, where they are studying English on scholarship. After completing their English coursework, Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam plan to continue the educations and careers they'd started in Afghanistan, in journalism, law and medicine, respectively.

"I have plans to stay in Eugene with Zahra," Zulaikha had said a day earlier. "Because I love here. I don't want to leave Eugene."

Along with over 76,000 other Afghan refugees, Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam came to the U.S. last fall fol-



Despite not knowing each other for long, the three Afghan women bonded over their shared journey.

lowing the American withdrawal of Afghanistan and the Taliban's subsequent seizure of the country. After five months of waiting on a military base, they became three of about 33 refugees to resettle in Eugene.

While most Afghan refugees who relocated to Eugene are single men or with their families, Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam came on their own. In a new city without family or old friends, they are up against homesickness, the financial stress of going back to school, and the bureaucratic challenges of immigration. They're working hard to adjust to life in Eugene and, in many ways, start over again.

Journey to Eugene

About three hours from Green Bay, Wisconsin, Fort McCoy spans 60,000 acres. Forty acres of the U.S. military base are used for live-fire or maneuver training. Elsewhere are sprawling rows of white barracks. For about six months this fall and winter, they became temporary homes for Afghan refugees.

Fort McCoy is one of seven military bases that hosted Afghan refugees. At one point, the bases were home to 13,000 Afghan refugees as individuals and families waited for immigration paperwork, employment authorizations and health screenings to be processed. The U.S. government then coordinated with refugee resettlement agencies throughout the country to assign refugees more permanent locations to live in.

For five months, Zulaikha's daily life at Fort McCoy consisted largely of working at the base's medical center as an interpreter. She had enjoyed working as an inter-

preter for the U.S. Armed Forces in Afghanistan, but life was different on the base.

Zulaikha didn't eat or sleep much at Fort McCoy, she said. Up to 320 women stayed in barracks with about 20 in one room, coming and going at all hours of day and night.

"I hate Fort McCoy, it was so boring," she said. "Every day, the same meal, the same people, the same place."

When a friend from the base told her about a scholarship the University of Oregon's Academic English Institute was offering for refugees, she thought, "Let's try it. It would be better than doing nothing." When she was accepted and started planning her journey to Eugene, she "was so happy. I just wanted to get out of there."

While waiting for the women's arrival in Oregon, Anderson and Anderton — who had agreed to host the women — bought three friendship bracelets from a shop on the Oregon coast. Then once Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam had arrived and settled in, Anderson and Anderton took the women on walks around the neighborhood, taught them how to use the local bus system and brought them to the coast where they saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time.

Zulaikha started to love Oregon's scenery and friendly people.

"Wherever you go, people behave like you're family, and I like it," she said. "Anywhere — my teachers, the neighbors, the shopkeepers. They are so friendly."

The community activates

The teapot in Anderson and Anderton's living room is a souvenir from one of the first cultural exchanges they did in Ukraine. The program, Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament, brought U.S. residents to the Soviet Union and vice versa, with the goal of showing people's humanity in both countries.

The couple would bring back wooden toys and display them at the Lane County Fair. Anderton remembers one

fairgoer who, after learning where the toys were from, asked: "They have toys in the Soviet Union?"

"That's how inhuman we thought they were," Anderton recalled.

International exchanges — both traveling and hosting — became ways for the pair to learn from different cultures. They've traveled throughout the Middle East and Asia and hosted international UO students and travelers from an exchange program for people with disabilities.

"It's a way to break down barriers, to have Americans realize that people are people no matter where they are," Anderson said.

After COVID-19 hit, it was just the two of them in their Eugene home with three extra bedrooms. Then, last fall, they reached out to Emily Heilbrun — a facilitator for a local volunteer group that supports refugees and asylum seekers, and an old friend of Anderton's — to ask if there was anything they could do to help Afghan refugees coming to Eugene. A plan to host one refugee then grew into two, then three, Anderton said.

The Refugee Resettlement Coalition, Heilbrun's group, works closely with Catholic Community Services of Lane County, an agency that helps refugees resettle. CCS staff provide immigration legal services and support for asylum seekers. RRC trains advocates (like Anderson and Anderton) who connect with refugees and support them when they transition into their new home.

CCS committed to helping 33 Afghan refugees resettle in Eugene, a figure based partially on the \$18 million



Janet Anderson, left, and Evelyn Anderton hosted the three Afghan women when they first arrived in Eugene. Hosting international students, Anderson said, is a way "to have Americans realize that people are people no matter where they are [from]."

Editor's note: This story features three women who left Afghanistan after the Taliban's seizure. Their last names are not included to protect their safety.

the state of Oregon put aside for Afghans coming to the U.S. As the first refugee arrived in Eugene in October, community members stepped up to help, Heilbrun said.

“We definitely had more people coming and saying, ‘What can I do?’ People coming forward with some housing options and donations,” Heilbrun said. “Thankfully, we couldn’t do this without so many people being willing.”

Some volunteers help refugees find housing through host families, rental units or hotels using public assistance. Lack of housing is one of the biggest barriers for refugees coming from Afghanistan, Heilbrun said, and one of the reasons CCS has accepted mostly individuals and not families.

One volunteer, a social worker named Nancy Murakami, originally signed up to be an advocate. But as her training started, she and the CCS staff recognized that she could use her specialization in trauma and refugee mental health to bolster the behavioral health support available for refugees. She developed mental health support groups where arriving Afghans could connect with each other.

Murakami said that while many advocates aren’t trained mental health professionals, they still provide effective psychosocial support. Murakami said advocates communicate: “you matter. I’m new to you, but you matter, and you’re in my community, and I want to welcome you.”

Daily life in a different culture

On a Sunday evening in February, Zulaikha was steaming a pot full of rice and chicken on Anderson and Anderton’s electric stove. She was preparing Kabuli Pulao, an Afghan dish with rice, meat, spices and raisins — although Zulaikha was using cranberries, not commonly found in Afghanistan, as there weren’t enough raisins in the house.

The day before, Anderson and Anderton had playfully reminded Zulaikha and Zahra how they’d been promised the traditional dish.

“How about tomorrow?” Anderson asked.

“Sure, I don’t have any problem. But Zahra should help me, because I don’t know how to cook,” Zulaikha said, prompting laughter from Zahra and the couple.

“Yeah, when I was at home, I cooked Pulao,” Zahra agreed. But the night of the dinner, Maryam and Zahra were running errands while Zulaikha started dinner.

When the two others came home, Maryam, who cooked dinner every night for her family in Afghanistan, made a shocked expression and then covered her face with her hands as she laughed. She’s cooked the dish before, but Zulaikha hadn’t, “so I laugh,” she explained.

She pulled the dish from Zulaikha, examining it closely, adding spices and transferring it into a pan to put in the oven.

“It’s not delicious; this one is not Kabuli Pulao,” she said later, explaining that the traditional dish has different vegetables, more spices and lamb rather than chicken.

In a household with three Afghan women and two Americans, there had been food-related adjustments on all sides. Anderson and Anderton learned their guests didn’t eat many vegetables but loved fruits. The three Afghan women started adapting to American food which, they say, has more vegetarian options and is faster to prepare.

New foods are just one reminder that Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam aren’t in their home country. In Afghanistan, they said, people pray after eating, don’t wear shoes in the house and don’t keep dogs inside. There are also different attitudes toward women leaving the home and playing sports.

Even before the Taliban’s seizure of Afghanistan, Zulaikha and Zahra said women would be looked at critically if they had jobs outside of the home or wore pants or short dresses.

“I was okay with that. I don’t take it seriously. I just wear what I want,” Zulaikha said. “I just want myself to be happy.”

In the women’s living room, three bikes donated by a local volunteer had been leaned against the wall, although Maryam was the only one who knows how to use them. It’s not a common activity for women in Afghanistan.

“I don’t have a sister, I just have six brothers. In Afghanistan, girls don’t ride the bike and the car; she has to stay at home or go to college on the bus,” Maryam said. “My brother help me; I know everything, with men.”

Zulaikha said women in Afghanistan are expected to wear scarves while playing sports, which can be a deterrent, especially in hot weather. Swimming is also frowned on. In Eugene, the three women have visited the YMCA to work out, play basketball and go in the pool, although Zahra is the only one who can swim a bit. On their last

visit, Zulaikha mostly clung to the side of the wall, she said, or splashed Zahra and Maryam until someone told them to “stop acting like kids.”

While the women have enjoyed many parts of Eugene, navigating cultural differences can be difficult. Murakami, who leads the mental health support groups, said, “Just everything that is important about one’s culture that we live and breathe, and it guides who we are, what we think about, suddenly is not something that they can rely on.”

In a new environment, the women’s school and work schedules, while tiring, have given them a sense of normalcy. Their classes run most of the day Monday through Thursday. On Friday, Saturday and Sunday, Zahra and Maryam work eight-hour shifts at the Graduate Hotel, cleaning rooms.

In Afghanistan, their lives were similarly busy, with days that often started at 5 or 6 a.m. and were filled with work, school and helping their families around the house. Usually they didn’t end their days until late in the evening.

“Every time I’m at work and learning, it’s normal,” Maryam said. “I like work, and I like lessons. It helps me not think about bad things in my life.”

Starting over

In the field of refugee mental health in the U.S., the guiding framework is called the triple trauma paradigm, Murakami said. Clinicians often approach the challenges and traumas facing refugees as three groups: pre-flight, the journey and post-flight.

“Post-flight” refers to the obstacles in the country of resettlement, like cultural and linguistic differences, lack of resources and the inability to work in a profession someone is trained in.

“That’s not the vision that most people have of the United States,” Murakami said, “and not the hope for most people who are leaving a bad situation hoping to go to a place that’s better.”

Reaching an immigration status that ensures refugees can remain in the U.S. is also a challenge. Refugees who worked for the U.S. government or aided the U.S. Armed Forces can apply for Special Immigration Visas that provide permanent residency. Others are humanitarian parolees who entered the country without a visa and must still apply for asylum and go through the immigration process.

Murakami said a major disadvantage for parolees is they can’t petition to have family join them in the U.S. “Their family members are still there, and they don’t know when they’re going to be reunited with them, and that is just tearing people apart,” she said.

For Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam, one of the biggest obstacles is having to start over with their education and finding the money to do so.

After earning a bachelor’s degree Maryam worked as a midwife in Afghanistan, but her qualifications don’t transfer to the U.S. She’s searching for scholarships, so she can eventually study to become a nurse. Zulaikha and Zahra are in similar situations, as they aim to study journalism and law.

Murakami said many refugees also struggle to navigate parts of life that used to be effortless, such as driving or scheduling appointments, because of linguistic, cultural or systematic differences in a new country.

Some challenges are easy for Zulaikha, Zahra and Maryam to brush off — like the first time they took a Eugene bus by themselves. They accidentally went to McKenzie Bridge, an hour east of Eugene. They came home cheerfully telling Anderson and Anderton, “We saw the mountains today.” Other times the challenges have been more serious, like when Zahra ran into issues



Janet Anderson and Zahra share a moment together after the Afghan women moved into their new home.

THE JOURNEY THAT CHANGED A LIFE

written by Zulaikha

The pain of losing a house is impossible to describe. The house in Afghanistan where we used to feel the warmth of a complete family and care of friends, where we had our own jobs and lived a happy life with our loved ones.

I used to wake up seeing a bright smile on the lips of my mother and hearing the morning greetings from my father and siblings; my loved ones who were making my life full of joy and happiness.

But my happiness did not last long and I lost everything: the warmth and love of my family, my job, friends and the opportunity to continue my studies.

When I was leaving Afghanistan, I had nothing and no one by my side. I was sad and alone. I saw my country falling into the hands of wild people who had no idea how to live in a city and what is education. The people who were not accepting that men and women have equal rights in a society.

The new chapter of my life started when I arrived in the United States, my new home where I have gotten the chance to meet new and kind people. They were sharing their happiness with me in order to decrease the pain that I have in my heart.

They helped me mentally, emotionally and financially, and I am really grateful for what they did and are still doing for me. These people gave me the strength and motivated me to start life from the bottom once again and create a new identity.

I will show the world the power that girls and women hold. I will prove that we are strong enough to fight back in order to achieve what we have lost once.

with her Social Security paperwork or had to figure out how to wire money back home.

Even seemingly small tasks can be challenging in a new culture and environment. “To take that same adult who was a fully independent, functional, successful adult in their home community context, and comes to a place where they don’t even know how to get on a bus, or they don’t even know how to check out at a supermarket,” she said. “That’s just a really distressing and difficult experience for many people.”

Changing connections

On a Friday afternoon in March, Maryam, with a long, dark ponytail and rose-colored headband that matches her shirt, sits with Zulaikha and Zahra in the living room of their new home. They talk about their different family situations.

Maryam’s family, who mostly lives in California, is upset that she’s a single woman living on her own. They want her to either marry or join them.

“I say, ‘I need a tall man, a handsome man, and brown skin’ and they find me...” she trails off and makes a displeased face.

“You shouldn’t marry a guy, you should live by your own,” Zulaikha advises. “You’re independent.”

“No! That’s not good!” Maryam exclaims. “Who can help me change the furniture?” she asks, laughing.

When she visits her family in California, her parents ask her to stay with them. She can’t find scholarship opportunities in California, though, and her family members, many of whom don’t speak fluent English, haven’t been able to help.

“Every time I go, they tell me, ‘You need husband? We find it. You need money? We find it. You need clothes? We buy for you,’” she says. “I think all of life is not money. Education is important.”

Zulaikha’s family supports her living situation, but she isn’t able to see them. They’ve been hiding in their Afghanistan home as the Taliban is looking for some family members who also worked with the U.S. military. She misses them — especially her dad.

Growing up, her father encouraged her to make her own decisions.

“I’m same as my dad,” Zulaikha says. “He’s independent and he doesn’t like women to be dependent on any man. He always told me, ‘Now you’re young and you know what is good and what is bad. You have to do whatever you want. But don’t worry, whatever you do, I’m going to support you.’ And that’s why I love him so much.”



In the backyard of their new home, the three Afghan women reflect on their bond. “I just met them here,” Zulaikha said. “But here, we get very close to each other, and right now we are like sisters.”

The separation from friends and family is a significant post-flight challenge, Murakami had said. It often means starting over in a new social environment without much support.

Zulaikha says she misses “my job, my university, especially my friends.” She calls her family in Afghanistan every night and her best friend from the military, who’s now in Virginia, a few times a week.

A lack of community and the safety net it provides often stresses refugees in the U.S., Murakami said. There’s a sense of security in knowing that, when life gets difficult, your neighbors will help you out. “Not having trust in those around you, because you don’t yet have a relationship with them, I think is really scary,” she said.

She said advocates like Anderson and Anderton play a prominent role in helping new community members plant their social roots.

For Zulaikha, friends and social support have been one of the most helpful factors when resettling in Eugene — especially her host couple.

“I never want to lose them,” she says. Anderson and Anderton are one reason she plans to stay in Eugene with Zahra even after finishing her English courses at the UO. Her goals include, first, retaking a course she got a B in after arriving halfway through the term.

Then she hopes to find a scholarship or donations she can use to study journalism. “I want to be the most famous journalist in the U.S.,” she says.

On the living room couch, Maryam teases Zulaikha about how the Kabuli Pulao dinner turned out and an incident the day before when Zulaikha kissed Maryam before telling her, “You remind me of my father.”

“I usually kiss my father,” Zulaikha explains, laughing. “I miss him too much.”

A little earlier, Zulaikha had recounted how, despite missing friends and family from home, she had immediately felt welcomed by Anderson and Anderton when she arrived in Eugene, and bonded quickly with Zahra and Maryam, too.

Although she’d seen Zahra briefly at Fort McCoy, Zulaikha didn’t really know either of the women before arriving in Eugene. “I just met them here,” she says. “But here, we get very close to each other, and right now we are like sisters.” ♦



Amid the chaos of packing, Zulaikha takes a moment to play with Cricket, Anderson and Anderton’s miniature Goldendoodle.