

## **May 5, 2024 (A Sanctuary Heart) Reflections on Housing a Refugee Family at UUCP Michele Ochsner**

In 2023, 114 million people in the world were forcibly displaced from their homes because of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the invasion of Ukraine and violence and conflict in Latin America, Cuba and Haiti, the Biden administration created new avenues for asylum and temporary residency. Since 2021, the usual trickle of refugees arriving in the U.S. has become a steady stream.

While the capacity of refugee resettlement agencies has expanded to support new arrivals, their growing caseloads are challenging. The most critical need in central NJ and in many areas across the country is affordable housing.

In 2022 UUCP's Sanctuary Task Force began to consider temporarily housing an individual or small family at UUCP. This planning process included the board and Rev. Bill and those who attended congregational meetings to discuss the proposal. By early 2023 we had a plan in place. With guidance from Bill Gillum, David Kyle and Jorge Salas and a slew of UUCP volunteers, Eileen Bird organized a workgroup that cleaned, painted, and collected furniture to transform two cinder block classrooms into a livable and inviting space. The congregation generously contributed linens and household items.

In March 2023 we entered into partnership with an authorized resettlement agency, Interfaith RISE. The agency would be the liaison to government programs and asylum while UUCP volunteers offered hands-on support with daily life.

A little more than a year later we can pause to reflect on the experience. I'd like to share a bit about what this has been like for me and the other volunteers who have worked closely with our sanctuary family.

**Meeting.** Standing with Reverend Bill here in Channing on a dark afternoon in early April with a young couple and carefully swaddled infant. They had arrived with their cousin to see our sanctuary apartment. Polite and serious, the couple said little. Often we don't know that a specific moment represents a crossroads – yet it was clear that their decision would be consequential for all of us. I wasn't sure I could tolerate the suspense. A few hours later their cousin called to tell us that yes, they would accept our invitation.

**Arrival.** The family moved into UUCP a few days later. On our side there was optimism and anxiety. Our Sanctuary team and hands on volunteers had developed plans to cover many contingencies. I had worked with two other Afghan families in recent years as a resettlement volunteer, but it was hard to feel confident. Could they be comfortable with us? Could we provide the support they would need?

**Visiting.** I would often find the family sitting with on the grassy hillside near the Memorial Garden. With a few words and gestures, they welcomed me and expressed pleasure with the flowering trees and the lush grass. With the help of their phone translation app. we began to get acquainted. Did I have a husband? Children? How many brothers and sisters did they have? Spring weather in NJ reminded them of their home in Kabul. Do Americans like to sit on the ground? – Afghans like to feel the earth. I learned that the young father is playful, curious and loves to tease. And that the mom is poised and serious, but her face lights up when she laughs. Shared laughter and curiosity carried us over a threshold - visits became something to look forward to.

**Responsibility.** The family is in daily conversation with parents, siblings, brothers and cousins in Afghanistan and in the US. Refugees' lives unfold in two worlds – one physical and one virtual – with responsibilities in both. For much of the population, conditions in Afghanistan are dire. One afternoon

trying to understand the dad's distress, I learned that his widowed mother and sisters were hungry. He wasn't earning enough yet to provide much help. A few weeks later, our community raised roughly \$2000 through the plate collection and a brunch featuring Afghan dishes. Although the dad initially refused help, we let him know that caring for him meant caring about his family. The generosity of this congregation reached around the world.

**Strength.** We soon learned that the parents' days and nights revolved around their child's complex needs. Born four months premature, their baby required regular feedings around the clock, twice daily breathing treatments, and frequent medical care. We've witnessed the mom's intelligence, confidence and curiosity in her interactions with doctors and her steady focus on ensuring that her daughter feels safe among the staring, poking strangers—she is soothing or playful as needed. The mom would like to pursue nursing, and we agree with the family's primary provider, a nurse practitioner, that she would be a spectacular nurse.

**Joy.** Despite frequent visits to medical settings, the dynamic center of her parents' unstinting affection was not a sickly child. Lively and curious like her parents, she laughs as easily as she cries in protest when sleepy or in discomfort. She says Papa and Mama when she is unhappy and confidentially whispers "baby shark" – referring to her favorite song and cartoon character. She sits up, crawls, takes her first steps and claps at her own accomplishments. Since Ann, Frances, Eileen, Clara and I have no grandchildren of our own – we take special delight in our time with her, finding her the most enchanting and charming of babies. Along with her parents she allows us into her world.

**Cultural exchange.** Over the last year, we've had the pleasure of getting to know their cousins who live nearby and also to meet family members in Afghanistan on WhatsApp. Familiarity with Afghan music has been yet another gain. When we offer the dad rides, we've become accustomed to Afghan music played at a stirring volume which is often followed by a question – *when are we going to have a party and dance?!*

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During their months living at UUCP, the family received much needed medical and dental care. We also helped with shopping, transportation, securing other local and governmental services, with additional volunteers helping when they could. Ann Russell took on the key role of family medical coordinator, Frances Prestianni, the complex challenge of meeting the mom's dental needs, Eileen organized the dad's appointments, and Clara led animated ESL classes. By September the family had saved enough money to buy a car which allowed the dad to start a job in Hamilton. After months waiting for an apartment to become available near the dad's job, the family moved out of UUCP on January 4<sup>th</sup>.

We're pleased to report that we spend more time these days on the complex and absolutely critical task of helping the family learn English than on medical and dental care.

In sharing these thoughts and memories, I hope to convey that refugee resettlement is a relational process. For the volunteers and the family there was confusion and frustration and also discovery, satisfaction and a great deal of laughter. There is vulnerability and growth on both sides. In this dance "other" meets "other" until the differences become incidental to our connection. *None of this was easy for them or for us, but it was and is a joy and privilege to be part of this family's life and to work together to support them and one another.*

**And here's one more memory – a recent one:** Ten days ago we celebrated the mom's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Mother and daughter were ravishing in party clothes although the baby hovered between tears and smiles—the pain of yet another new tooth. We celebrated over birthday cake and innumerable sweets.

I have learned that even if you say you are bringing food, Afghan women will prepare a feast. We ate and sang Happy Birthday a little out of tune and the mom blew out all the candles. The dad turned up the music's volume– and we danced...