

WTB Program Meeting Minutes – Panel “Afghan Voices in Syracuse”

Sunday, October 17th 3-5 pm at Jowonio School and via Zoom

President Barb Bova began the meeting at 3:05 pm -- welcoming everyone to WTB's first indoor, in-person meeting since March 2019 and our first ever hybrid zoom meeting! About 25 women, masked and socially distanced, sat in chairs before the panel table. Another 20 ladies joined via Zoom. Zoom participants were projected on a screen behind the panel; they could ask questions in real time or using the chat function. Wrapped snacks, bottled water, and hot tea were available to sample during the meeting.

After the WTB Mission Statement and Safe Place Declaration were read, Danya Wellmon introduced the program. She began by thanking Melek and Kadiz Yavuz for setting up the technology; without their efforts this meeting would not be taking place. Daryl welcomed and thanked the panel members -- Maliha Alikhel and her daughter Nazo; Karen Alimi; Daryl Files of IFW. She explained that each panelist would share her story and then answer a couple questions--one from the room and one from zoom--with time for a longer question and answer period later in the meeting.

Lorraine Markley introduced Maliha Alikhel and her daughter Nazo. Lorraine is a member of the Holy Cross Refugee Assistance Committee which has helped the Alikhel family since they relocated in Syracuse 5 years ago. Translating for her mother, Nazo related their experiences in escaping. She was 12 when her father, serving in the Afghan army, was killed by the Taliban. Maliha and her nine children were also in grave danger of being killed; the Afghan army helped them flee to Pakistan in the middle of the night. After waiting two years to receive refugee status, they came to the US when the children were 2-16 years of age. Life in Afghanistan under the Taliban was very hard: women could be killed for not wearing a face covering. Maliha became emotional describing what has happened since Taliban came to power again in August. They have not been able to contact Nazo's grandma, uncles and aunts still in Afghanistan as the Taliban has "cut off" the internet. There is no way to send money; they don't know how to help their relatives, one of whom has been kidnapped by the Taliban. Maliha brought a photo album of her family's time in America. There were several questions from members and many interesting comments from Nazo as she described her experiences in high school and helping girls translate. Maliha and Nazo explained that they help more recently arrived Afghan families (and some boys came here without families) by bringing them food and taking them shopping. When asked "What was the most difficult thing to adjust to in this country?" Maliha responded that it is quiet here, no fighting; she feels safe. What does she hope for? To give a better life to her children so they can have a good job and fine house. How can we be most helpful to Afghans arriving in our community? Her simple response: "Go talk with them."

Rosalie Young then introduced her friend Karen Alimi who shared her unique story. In the 1970s, Karen fell in love with her husband when they met as students in New York City. Though she was Jewish and he Muslim, she traveled to Afghanistan, married him in a Muslim ceremony and lived in an apartment near his family for two years. She described what it was like to travel there in the days when there was one airplane in the Kabul airport and the differences she found living in Afghan culture and in a time of Russian influence. When Karen became pregnant, she and her husband returned to the US without Afghan government approval (kind of an escape story!). They raised their family—2 boys and one girl—

in Syracuse. After Russia invaded Afghanistan, they brought many members of her husband's family to live in America. Karen brought some exhibits to share with us: her Afghan wedding license; her wedding picture; small Afghan and American flags; Afghan dolls (showing the style of dress and full body covering required of women under the Taliban). Several women asked Karen about the details of her time in Afghanistan and some cultural differences her husband found living in America. When asked how she and her husband blended Jewish and Muslim traditions, she said that in many ways the traditions were separate but parallel. Her son was raised Jewish; she did not accompany her husband to the mosque. Her husband fasted during Ramadan but she did not. One thing that blended them together – food from both traditions shared and enjoyed by all.

Panelist Daryl Files of InterFaith Works first highlighted the involvement of many in the room in helping Afghans in Syracuse or raising funds to help those relocating here. Daryl summarized the refugee situation over the last five years. After drastic reductions during Trump's presidency, the number of refugees coming to the US has risen under President Biden to 125,000 for fiscal year 2022. Seven hundred refugees from The Congo, Syria, Ukraine, etc. will be coming to Syracuse. Then came the US withdrawal from Afghanistan – 53,000 people who escaped from the country (many on Special Immigration Visas having worked with the US military) are now being housed on 9 military bases. They are in the process of being vetted, screened, or given medical evaluations. Agencies in Syracuse including Catholic Charities, the CYO, and IFW have agreed to accept over 150 Afghans. These agencies are receiving few specifics and as little as 24-48 hours' notice as Afghans arrive from military bases. While our government has made some funds available, full funding for these Afghans is not in place yet and papers for jobs is slow in processing. Great news they are all safe.

How can we help? IFW estimates \$290,000 will be needed for food, housing and expenses --\$6000 per person per calendar year. The IFW website has a link for monetary donations; the Joan Rothenberg Family Foundation is matching up to \$25,000 through December 31st. Also needed are things like \$25 TOPS gift cards. As apartments are furnished, there may be opportunities to donate furniture, TVs, and household items. The only clothing currently accepted: Winter coats and kids' clothes up to size 5 in pristine condition.

IWF is especially looking for Ambassadorships...groups of 5-10 people who will make a 6-month commitment to build relationships with an arriving family and help them settle in and feel comfortable.

The meeting concluded with an open question and answer period. Maliha had had to leave earlier, but Nazo, Karen, and Daryl answered questions from ladies in the room and on Zoom. Danya ended the meeting at 5 pm, warmly thanking our panelists and all who attended.

After the "leave meeting" buttons had been pushed, many in the room stayed on to continue the conversations and finish the snacks. Barb presented a small gift bag to each panelist along with WTB's sincere appreciation.

Respectfully submitted,

Barb Bova,

Substitute Sunday Secretary