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DONYA [pseudonym]

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is May 3, 2024. I am Azaad. Today I have the pleasure of interviewing Donya as part of the Afghanistan Oral History Project. Welcome, Donya. Happy to see you.

DONYA: Thank you so much.

Q: Before going to the main part of the interview, we would like to hear about your early life.

Early Life and Education

DONYA: Thank you, Azaad, and thank you to the organization that provided this opportunity, not only to me, but also to other Afghans to share their life experiences, especially their experiences with the evacuation process back in 2021.

I was born in Helmand Province in 1994. I grew up there in a large and educated family with my parents, grandmother, grandfather, and uncles. I was six months old when the previous Taliban regime took over Afghanistan, and we became refugees in Pakistan for almost a year. After that, we returned to Helmand Province, Afghanistan, where there were still many restrictions for Afghans, especially women. I was 5 or 6 years old when I started school in 2000 or 2001, when Hamid Karzai became the president of Afghanistan.

I remember being a small child when the Taliban were still in Afghanistan. I was four or five years old. I remember my brother, who was three years older than me, was going to school—not a state school, but a Madrassah, a religious school. I remember my mom putting a turban on him. We would go to the mosque for religious studies and to learn the Koran.

During that time, I noticed things happening in society. My mother, other relatives, and other women were not allowed to go outside. My mom and my grandmother were tortured by the Taliban once when they went shopping. The Taliban beat my grandmother with a lash on her hands and arms because of going out for grocery shopping.

Later, when the Taliban regime was over and Hamid Karzai became the president, I started school. I attended school from grade one until I graduated from high school in 2011. During high school, I remember seeing many projects implemented by UNICEF and other international organizations that provided educational opportunities, such as English language courses, especially for girls. I decided to focus on learning English too. So, I started English language studies while I was in Grade 10 and continued until I graduated from high school in 2011.

One day at my English language center, my classmates and I were studying when our English teacher informed us about an opportunity for fresh high school graduates to take the TOEFL test at the Ministry of Education in Helmand Province. After passing it, the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) was offering full scholarships for girls and boys across the country. I was surprised and thought, why not take this exam? The following week, my cousins, other classmates, and I went to the Education Ministry. There were only 10 girls and hundreds of boys taking the exam.

You may know that Helmand Province is not like other big cities, such as Kabul, Mazar Sharif, or Herat Province. The ladies there had a strict dress code. My sisters and I always wore large scarves whenever we went out. We were allowed to go out, but we still had to wear proper hijab. There were some people who discriminated against girls and women, believing they should stay at home and not be allowed to have an education. I remember a lady police officer who looked at us and asked, “Why are you girls taking this exam? You are just taking opportunities away from the boys.” We were really upset, but we ignored her and others who didn't want us to take the exam. We focused on the exam that day.

Q: So, you were thinking about pursuing a college education?

Studying and Attack at American University of Afghanistan and First Job

DONYA: Yes. I had already graduated from high school and was waiting for the results of the exam I took for admission to the American University of Afghanistan [AUAF]. It took almost 20 days, until mid-August, to receive the results. At that time, I didn't have my own cell phone, so I had provided my father's phone number on the exam application. My father received a call from AUAF, informing him that I had passed the exam and been awarded a full scholarship at AUAF in Kabul. He called me immediately and asked, “Did you take an exam somewhere?” I replied, “Yes, did you receive a call?” He said, “Yes, you passed the exam and got a full scholarship,” and congratulated me. I was very happy, but I wasn't sure about my family's decision—whether they would agree with it or not—because it would be the first time I would leave my home province and live far away from my family. I felt that my father might not agree because he was concerned about allowing his daughter to go and live alone for the first time. My father values education for his daughters and sons and encourages studying abroad, but he was worried about where I would stay, with whom, and about my safety and security, especially since we didn't know anyone in Kabul. He wondered, “What if something happened to her there?” I remember crying that night as I spoke with my parents, requesting their support

for my dreams and asking them to allow me to study. I reassured them that three other girls—two of my classmates and my cousin—had also received the same scholarship, so I wouldn't be alone in Kabul. Eventually, my father agreed, and a few weeks later, he took me to Kabul. He also met with the girls' hostel representative to discuss the living arrangements and safety. Once he was satisfied with everything, he felt more at ease. I am sure all parents in Afghanistan share similar concerns about their children.

Q: Just to clarify, it was a scholarship for a bachelor degree, four year bachelor degree?

DONYA: It was a scholarship for a bachelor's degree, supported by Laura Bush at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) in Kabul. So, we went to Kabul. I was very happy. From the hundreds of students from Helmand, only six got scholarships – me, my cousin and two other girls and two boys. I chose to study for a bachelor's in law. I was hoping one day to become a woman attorney or a judge, if not maybe an international diplomat for Afghanistan. Our professors at the university were Afghan-Americans and also Americans. The law department was supported by Stanford University. During studying at the AUAF, I was working as a paid intern inside the campus from 2014 – 2016, which was amazing and supported me to learn lots of things.

Q: I wanted to ask you about an incident. I remember there was a complex attack on the university. It was a huge incident.

DONYA: That attack happened in August 2016. Many students and my professor lost their lives. It was around 7 p.m., late evening and my class had just finished and I was waiting on the bench outside for my classmate to come join me and take our dinner from the cafeteria. We planned to go back to the hostel. Some students were in the classrooms, some of them were outside, and some of them were in the cafeteria. There was a huge number of students on the campus in the evening time.

Q: Just to clarify, it was 7 p.m., but the university had evening classes. It was full of students and professors.

DONYA: Yes, AUAF had morning and night classes. The campus was open and classes ran from 8:00 a.m until 9:00 p.m. Most of the students were coming in the evening time, because most had full time jobs, so after working hours they were coming and studying.

I was sitting on a bench outside the campus, right next to the Azizi Building. Our campus was very beautiful. At that time, everyone was busy with something—some were in class, some were walking around the campus, others were in the cafeteria, and some were in the mosque praying. Then, a very big explosion occurred. We weren't sure where it happened, but the sound was extremely loud and frightening. When the explosion happened, everything went dark as the electricity went out. I shouted, but I couldn't hear anything—I had lost my hearing temporarily.

The explosion seemed to come from Darul-Aman Road, likely from the back side of the Bayat Building. Everyone was trying to escape through the emergency gate at the very

back of the university. No one was allowed to use the regular gates. I managed to find some of my friends who were around the campus. Along with hundreds of other students, we were struggling to get out of the campus safely. Our phones lost signal, there were no lights, and we heard lots of gunfire, shouting, and crying. Naturally, everyone was terrified. I, along with other friends and students, used the emergency gate and finally got out after an hour of following a security guard. The way out was very long because we had to move quietly and carefully. Finally, I made it out safely, walking through the streets among the neighborhoods.

Q: You could leave the area?

DONYA: Yes, yes, I did leave.

Q: Because it continued, just to clarify, the attack was a complex attack and continued after the explosion.

DONYA: Yes. Almost until early morning of the next day.

Q: The armed men entered the campus and fighting continued until the next day.

DONYA: Yes.

Q: They were inside and just killing and shooting?

DONYA: Yes, I do not know how many people from the terrorists there were, but yes, they were firing and shooting at anyone inside the campus—students, professors, and any other university security personnel. We wanted to call our friends, our professors, and our relatives who were inside the university, but we were afraid to do so because we had been told that during an emergency, no one should call and everyone's phone should not ring, as it may cause danger to that person. During any emergency, the phone should be in silent mode. That night, after I got out safely, I called my uncle to come and pick me up from a safe place. My uncle came and took me to his home. I was very worried about all my friends, students, and professors at the campus, but there was nothing I could do except follow the news. In the morning, I learned that one of my friends had been shot in the leg and some lost their lives, and more bad news was that we lost our law professor, Naqil Ahmad Akhpulwak. He was one of my best professors, teaching family law and Islamic law and some other subjects. We lost him from the law department, along with many other students.

Q: Very sad incident, just to add to what you said. Unfortunately, as I remember, 13 people—students, professors and employees of the university—were killed and many were injured. That was shocking. I think the university was closed for a while after that incident.

DONYA: Yes, after the incident, the university was closed for almost a year. Some classes were offered online, but because it was the first experience for students to take

online classes, only some could take but most students could not because of the lack of internet connection in their home provinces. Those students who were planning to graduate in 2016 had to wait and graduate the next year in 2017. For a year, I went to my home province Helmand and so didn't try to take any online classes. In 2017, the university started again and on a new campus. The new campus was on the other side of the Darul-Aman Road, but near to the Darul-Aman Palace. They had built dorms for girls there inside the university with higher walls, safer, and many security gates. I had my last semester in 2017 and graduated in June 2017 with a LLB, Bachelor of Law.

Q: Did you decide to go back to Helmand Province or to stay in Kabul after graduating?

DONYA: Though it was difficult to stay in Kabul because I had no place to live, I still decided to stay and work there because I believed that if I went to Helmand, I would not be able to find a job. In Helmand, it is a bit harder for girls to find a job and work, as the society and environment are different from Kabul for women.

Q: Because we know that the south region of Afghanistan is one the most conservative, especially in Helmand and Kandahar, in particular for women.

DONYA: Yes, you are right. My parents, everyone, lived in Helmand for a long time and my parents were concerned about where I might stay in Kabul. And they found a solution for this. After graduation, I went back home to Helmand for a few months, then I decided to go back to Kabul and search for a job. In order not to be alone, my siblings also shifted to Kabul. My youngest sister in high school and brother also came to Kabul for Kankor exam preparation—the university entrance exam. It was hard to find a job, but finally after four or five months I could find a job in a private NGO, the Human Rights and Eradication of Violence Organization [HREVO] in Kabul. It was my first professional job, but since I had no official job before and was a fresh university graduate, the NGO offered me a small amount for a salary that would increase later. Though it was hard to accept, I accepted and started working. The good thing was that the NGO was focusing on human rights, women's rights, and good governance projects which perfectly matched my field. I started working as an M&E [Monitoring and Evaluation] Officer.

Q: So, that was the start of your professional experience. Before we start talking about your professional experience with the U.S. Mission in Afghanistan, we heard that there was another sad incident that affected your life. Would you like to talk about that sad incident?

DONYA: Yes. I started working with a private NGO for almost three and a half years. My siblings and I used to live in Kabul, sometimes for any special events we were going to Helmand to visit my parents and other siblings. My youngest brother who was living with me in Kabul, was preparing for university entrance. He was 19 years old, intelligent, nice looking and a very polite boy. I lost him in a terrorist attack on the first day of the Persian new year in Kabul City.

Nowrouz Attack

Q: This was in March 2018, the start of the new Afghan year.

DONYA: Yes. It was exactly the 20th or 21st of March. It was the first day of the new year—Nowrouz. My brother and his friends went out for the Nowrouz celebration. He went out in the morning, and after the ceremony ended, he and his friends were on their way home when the terrorist blast occurred among the people who had come out from the ceremony around noon. The place is called Karte-e-Sakhi, near Kabul University. The blast happened among the Hazara community, who were celebrating the ceremony, and they were targeted by ISIS (Daesh) and the Taliban. We lost hundreds of Hazaras in that incident. My little sister and I stayed at home, and we were preparing food for the Nowrouz celebration at home. I was waiting for my brother to come back home, and then we planned to go somewhere.

I was not following the news on that day. About 15 or 20 minutes before the explosion happened, I called my brother and asked where he was and when he would arrive home for lunch. He said, “The ceremony is finished, and I am on my way home.” I was preparing lunch. About 15 to 20 minutes later, I received a call from my brother's phone. When I picked up the phone, I heard the sound of crying and other noises. Someone asked me, “Who does this phone belong to?” I asked him, “Who are you?” The person said, “Who does this phone belong to?” I said it belongs to my brother. He told me that an explosion had happened there and that my brother was okay. He told me to go to Ali Abad hospital. I was shocked. I asked, “Are you kidding me? Who are you?” He said, “You have to come to the Ali Abad hospital.”

Q: Ali Abad?

DONYA: “Ali Abad hospital, yes. You have to come here,” he told me. No, you're kidding me, I thought. Maybe this person had stolen my brother's phone. Only my sister and I were at home. Our father and brothers weren't there in Kabul. I was crying and unsure of what to do. I was praying, telling myself, “He is okay, be brave and go to the hospital.” On that day in Kabul, there was terrible traffic, and I was a female who didn't know how to drive. My sister and I ran into the main street. I was shouting for a taxi to stop and take us to the hospital. Nobody was stopping, and I had no one to call. I was thinking that if I called my mother or father, they would be shocked and wouldn't have the strength to hear such news. I couldn't call them now. How could they help me? They were so far away. It was a very bad day.

We arrived near the hospital, but the road was blocked. There were many police officers and guards; they stopped everyone. I fought with those guards and the police to get inside the hospital. I really hated that hospital. We went upstairs and downstairs, looking into each room. I saw those who had been injured. Some of them had lost their legs. I was losing control and couldn't focus on where I was. Finally, the person who had called me before called me again. He asked, “Where are you?” and I said, “I'm inside the hospital.” He told me, “You have to go to this other place—the place for those who are no longer alive.” He told me to go look there. I stopped and said, “No, how can I go there? You told

me my brother was okay.” I said, “No, I can’t go there. I just can’t go.” It was very hard for me, but in the end I did go. When I went there, I saw my brother. He was not alive anymore.

Q: Just to clarify about that incident, it happened at the annual ceremony by the Shia community, the Hazara community, in Kabul, at the time they celebrate the new year. Unfortunately, on this day, a suicide attacker exploded a bomb among the crowd, which killed more than 30 to 35 civilians killed and injured more than 40 to 50 other civilians, including women and children. I remember this incident. I remember that was one of the huge, sad incidents in Kabul. Thank you, Donya. Really, that was a sad incident and we are really sorry for the losses you had in that incident.

DONYA: Yes you are right.

Working for the U.S. Embassy in Kabul

Q: Let's go to the next chapter of your life. How and when did you start working with the U.S. Embassy in Kabul?

DONYA: It was very hard for people to get an opportunity to work with the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan. In my case, I had been working from 2017 until the end of 2020 at the Human Rights and Eradication of Violence Organization (HREVO). It was a civil society organization, and the head of the organization was a civil society activist as well. I had my background and work experience in the field of law and focusing on human rights, especially on women's rights and good governance. I had been providing training for the fresh graduates from the universities who were working at HREVO. I also worked for INTERNEWS Afghanistan for several months. It was in 2019 that I got a recommendation from the Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan and the offer to participate in a religious freedom event in Washington, D.C.

Q: From the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission?

DONYA: Yes, I received an email from them saying that the Department of State in Washington, D.C. was organizing an event on international religious freedom, and they recommended that I participate in this event to represent the Shia Hazara community. I accepted the offer and began processing my first trip to the USA. I represented the Shia Hazara minority in Afghanistan, who have faced discrimination and have been targeted by ISIS (Daesh) and the Taliban, and as a person who had lost family members. I was in contact with the U.S. Embassy's Human Rights Section about this event and the processing of my U.S. visa. Before my trip to the USA, I met with the Human Rights/Rule of Law Section to discuss the event and the program in more detail.

I was very happy to be traveling for the first time outside of Afghanistan and going to the United States. It felt like a significant achievement to represent my community. My trip was confirmed, and I received a one-year visa. I traveled from Kabul to the United States and back home. My participation in the International Religious Freedom conference was

informative, and I was able to share the Hazara situation in Afghanistan, particularly the issues of security, discrimination, and targeting by ISIS (Daesh) and the Taliban. My trip to the U.S. lasted 24 days. I attended the four-day program and then stayed to explore D.C. at my own expense before returning to Afghanistan.

Q: Just to clarify, the U.S. Embassy Human Rights Section nominated you to attend this event because you were a relative of a victim who had been targeted because of his religion in Afghanistan?

DONYA: Yes. It was for the IRF [International Religious Freedom] Report. It was a very good event. I got to go to the State Department and the White House. While there I met with friends in Virginia and Washington, D.C. Some of my friends suggested that I stay in the United States and not go back to Afghanistan. They said I would have more opportunities here. I said, no, I don't want to stay here because my family needs me and my siblings need me too. So, I decided to go back to Afghanistan. And when I got back to Afghanistan, things were different. I was regularly invited to different events and programs by the U.S. Embassy. And then one day I saw a job that was announced by the U.S. Embassy Rule of Law Section. I really wanted that job and I applied.

Q: That was in late 2019?

DONYA: Yes, it was in late 2019, during the COVID time. I saw a position within the U.S. Embassy's Rule of Law Section. So, I sent an email to one of the officers within that section and asked if I could apply for the position. He replied, "Yes, you can apply, and a decision will be made later, but you are eligible." I was happy and applied for the position. After a few weeks, I was invited for an interview. I was interviewed by the Rule of Law Section and also by some of our Human Resources colleagues. They also tested me to see if I knew the Pashto language. Since I grew up in Helmand Province and studied my grade school and high school in Pashto, I was very familiar with the Pashto language. I passed the polygraph test as well. I received an offer and was really happy to get this opportunity to work at the U.S. Embassy. This was during COVID, from late 2019 and early 2020 to 2021. It took a long time to join the U.S. Embassy's Rule of Law Section, but I finally started working at the beginning of 2021.

Q: Did you have a chance to come to the Embassy inside the compound and work?

DONYA: Yes, many times.

Q: How was the environment when you started working as an employee of the U.S. Embassy?

DONYA: When I came into the Embassy, I met my colleagues and the chief of the unit was JP—James P. McCormick. I was going to the office once or twice a week. I was new, so I really wanted to go every day because I was excited. I did meet most of my colleagues, but most of our work and meetings were from home because of the COVID. My portfolio was about human rights, especially women's rights and minorities' rights. I

focused on daily news about the targeting of minorities, especially the Hindu, Sikh, and Hazara Shia communities, and also about human rights issues in Afghanistan for women and girls, children, and so on.

I also had the chance to do volunteer work with the visa section because at that time everyone was going to the United States because they had special immigrant visas [SIVs]. In 2021, the visa section needed help with the SIVs, especially with translations during the interviews and help the officers. I helped them for a month. At that time, we were hearing that the Taliban might come.

Q: At what point did you start to get worried about staying in Afghanistan or the situation going to be changed? You had just joined in early 2021.

DONYA: When I started working there, I learned that people who worked more than two years were qualified for the SIVs. We were not sure what would happen or when there might be an evacuation. I never thought that the Taliban would come to power again. Sometimes I thought it wouldn't happen. There were too many questions and rumors. We didn't know what would happen to the people who worked less than two years. Would the Embassy evacuate those employees? Also, what would happen to their families, to their parents, to their siblings, to their extended families? Of course, this was a big concern for me and everyone else, as I wasn't eligible for the SIV and didn't know if I would be included in an evacuation.

In the middle of May 2021, our desk officer asked for a list of my family members and their information, including passport and national ID details. I shared this information but was worried about the future situation in Afghanistan and for our people. I felt that something might happen that I did not know about, and no one knew for sure because everything was uncertain. During this time, we sometimes heard that the Taliban might come to power as the U.S. Army was leaving. I was following the news and saw provinces falling one by one. I was worried about everyone's safety. The evacuation process was unclear. My family was also worried about me and themselves. I didn't know whether I and my family would be evacuated together or not. Even our supervisor wasn't sure about anything, and we never discussed the evacuation process. Once, I heard from one of our colleagues that the evacuation would happen and that all the staff would be evacuated with their families. I also heard from the office that it wasn't certain when and who would be evacuated—maybe everyone with their families would go together, but if not, then only the staff would go.

At that time, I was single but had already decided to get engaged and married. As each province was collapsing one by one, I got engaged and married in July 2021. Later, I added my husband's name to the list and informed my supervisor about my situation. Though my husband had his own case because he was working for PAE [Pacific Architects and Engineers, a large defense and government services contractor], a U.S. Embassy contractor, he also submitted his form to his supervisor.

At this time, we were thinking that one day the Taliban might come and everything would be gone. What would happen to the embassy? What would happen to our colleagues? What would happen to all the women and girls and the Afghan people we worked with? What about the embassy partners, like international NGOs, and the thousands of people we worked with? Who would go where? Everyone was thinking about this. People were trying to sell their homes and their belongings and just trying to get some visa to the neighboring countries. Everything was unknown and uncertain. In June or July, heavy fighting started in the south, in Helmand and Kandahar. Every day we were hearing that another province had collapsed and that the Taliban had taken it. Every day was worse; we were hearing that in one day, three provinces had fallen.

Q: At that time, were your parents and siblings in Helmand or were they with you in Kabul?

DONYA: At first, they were in Helmand. My family was living in the city and the fighting started from the districts, from the villages. Every day I was talking with them. My mother had been a teacher. My sisters were in school and university. My older brother was in Helmand with his family. As the situation got worse, I told my family that you should move here to Kabul. I knew that it might be very difficult for them just to leave everything back in Helmand and run away. In the end, they left almost everything back in Helmand and they took just their most important stuff to Kabul. They arrived just before the fall of the city. Later, we heard that the city was gone, and my father's pharmacy collapsed during the fighting in 2021.

Q: Due to the conflict in the city?

DONYA: Yes. Everything was gone there. Talking with my father, I said it is good that you are here, you are safe, and do not think about what happened back in Helmand City. Every day we heard that other provinces had fallen to the Taliban. We were not sure if Kabul also would collapse or not.

Q: So quick, so quick, less than a month.

DONYA: Yes. We were in touch with our supervisor at the embassy. They said that this was the time to be ready for you and your family—parents and extended family—to be evacuated. I was not sure about others, but I was not ready to leave my country like that. I had concerns about everything. The security was getting worse day by day. I was thinking how the evacuation would happen; would it happen or not. Thousands of imaginations came to mind. I was thinking what if the evacuation failed and the Taliban killed and attacked everyone, what if someone was arrested by the Taliban. It was very concerning and there was a lot of fear among people. Before the 15th of August, everyone was trying to go into the bank to take out whatever they had in the bank. I had a very bad experience going to the bank—there was no money in the bank. No one could get cash. Everything stopped. I went and tried to get our money. This was August 15, 2021, the exact day that Kabul fell to the Taliban.

Fall of Kabul and Getting into the Airport

Q: Let's go on August 15 when the Taliban entered Kabul. Where were you when that happened?

DONYA: At that time, my husband and I went out to the “Shahr-e-Now”, to the Karte-e-Chahar bank, the AIB [Afghanistan International Bank]. In the morning we went to the Karte-e-Chahar, but got nothing from the bank and then went to the Shahr-e-Now, inside the bank, and there were too many people inside the bank. Everyone was only allowed to get like \$2,000, not more. I got \$2,000 and it was around like 11 a.m. or noon.

My husband and I were both in the bank when we began receiving calls, and other people were receiving calls too, that the Taliban had come, and they were in the city. Some were saying that they were in the Kote Sangi area, and some were saying that they were attacking Kabul from District 6. And some were saying that they had attacked from Dasht-e-Barchi, District 13 or 15, from the west part of Kabul. There were so many rumors. When we came out of the bank, we saw everyone closing their shops. People were running for their cars, motorcycles, bicycles, and everyone was just trying to get home. Some were trying to take taxis. Some taxi drivers weren't stopping. Other taxi drivers started charging very high fares. What normally would cost only 20 Afghani from one stop to another, was now 200 or 500 Afghanis. We were shocked that some taxi drivers were trying to benefit from this day. We couldn't find any taxi to take us home. So, we took a bus to Kart-e-Chahar and from there we walked to the Darul Aman Road, it was several kilometers. Then finally we got a taxi to arrive home.

Q: That was two to three miles.

DONYA: Yes. Everyone was running and shouting and crying. We were seeing some of the Taliban members in the street on motorcycles, like two people, three people around the city. Everyone was staying quiet. It was like a nightmare. Some of the Taliban members had their flag in the main street. Everyone was afraid and no one went out. We were afraid and were thinking maybe during the nighttime, the Taliban would come and knock on the door and say come out or maybe they would kill us directly. Everyone was thinking the same, not only me, but everyone was afraid and had a tough time. Everyone was trying to burn their stuff from the U.S. government and whatever things were in English, like English books, certificates, work phones and computers and many other things, because we believed, if the Taliban see those things, they would arrest us or they would kill us, because they are against the U.S. government and against the English language. They are against those people who studied in the English language or who worked at the U.S. embassy. They were all against all of this. Of course, they would treat negatively those people who had worked for the U.S. government.

My husband and I had cell phones from the U.S. government. My husband received a text message from his supervisor that he could break his SIM and destroy any office materials.

Every day we were talking with our colleagues and with our supervisors. On the 15th of August, I heard from my new American supervisor. He had arrived in Kabul on August 14th and then the Taliban came on August 15th, so he traveled back that night. He was in contact with us, and also our other colleagues from the embassy. We created some WhatsApp groups to discuss the evacuation and how to get into the airport and how to bring our family members.

Q: Before entering the next part of the discussion, the evacuation and airport, I want to stop this session. We will pick up the rest of the story in the next session. Thank you.

Q: It is May 6th and I am Azaad and today I'm doing the second part of the interview with Donya for our Afghanistan project. Welcome again, Donya.

We had a very wonderful first session and thanks for sharing everything with us. So I think we can continue from the evacuation process. When the evacuation process started from your office, from the embassy site for the staff members, and how exactly you could get to the airport and who was with you on that day. If you can talk about that day, that would be great.

Getting into the Kabul Airport

DONYA: Thank you, Azaad. Everyone will remember that day, all Afghans around Afghanistan and also those who were evacuated. Before evacuating Kabul, we stayed almost ten days in Kabul. Of course, it was a very difficult moment for everyone, just to stay at home, not go anywhere, and not using the work phone, but using social media, especially WhatsApp for communication. We were communicating through WhatsApp with our colleagues inside Kabul and with our focal point at the embassy. I remember there was a focal point from the administrative office and she was in contact with me. I was in contact with my supervisor who was in the U.S. through WhatsApp.

We were hearing that the airport was blocked by the Taliban and no one was allowed to get to the airport, of course for the U.S. Embassy employees and other U.S. government allies it would be so hard and risky to get into the airport, especially passing through the Taliban check points. There was lots of fear. Then we heard that the evacuation process was happening. We saw the very first plane that departed from Kabul to Qatar and then to another third country. It seemed that the airport was open for everyone. Everyone was hearing that the U.S. government was evacuating Afghans. We were watching the news that thousands of Afghans went to the airport and the airport gates were blocked. It was very difficult for all who wanted to enter the airport. For me, I was in contact with my supervisor and we were hearing from our colleagues, those who were on our team, who were trying to enter the airport gate. They were telling us the timing and how to get to the airport. Though it was very difficult for me to go there. I was trying to be very normal. My husband and I – we were only two people – tried to go to the airport at around 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon.

Q: Do you remember the date?

DONYA: It was before the explosion. I don't remember when the explosion happened. It was like on the 18th of August. We tried for the first time.

Q: Three days after the fall of Kabul.

DONYA: Yes.

Q: So, you tried by yourself, not by the office.

DONYA: Yes, by myself, not by the office. We were hearing from our supervisor that the office could not directly help the employees get into the airport, but the employees could try themselves. We also heard from our colleagues, who tried to go to the airport by themselves. The airport road was blocked by the Taliban and by the crowd. Thousands of people were there. After the Taliban took Kabul, they were everywhere, and they set up checkpoints on each main road. Also, it was during the month of Muharram, which is a holy month for Muslims, especially for Shiites.

Somehow, where we lived, it was very quiet. We decided to try to get to the airport. That was the first day that I had left home. I had my hijab, scarf, and documents. I was afraid of what would happen if the Taliban stopped us. We took the road from "Kote-Sangi" to the airport. My brother drove, and my mother and father were with us in the car. They tried to drop us near the gate to see if we could get into the airport. If we couldn't, they would take us back home. We passed through many Taliban checkpoints on the road. They would ask us where we were going. My brother made up things, like we were going home or visiting someone, just to say something so they wouldn't stop us.

It was very difficult for us to get near the airport. We stopped somewhere almost five miles away because there was bad traffic and we could hear the gunfire from the airport. We got near the regular airport gate that was closed, but people were trying the other gates. I am not very familiar with the other gates, but we tried to get to the Abbey gate. That day, I saw hundreds of people near the gate, waiting or trying to go into the airport. I was in contact with my colleagues through WhatsApp. I asked them what was happening, which gate was safer, and at which gate we could enter the airport. As we got near the airport, we heard lots of gunshots and shouting. There were large crowds of people trying to get into the airport, and we were afraid that if we got out of the car and walked, something could happen to us. There was gunfire, shouting, and reports that people had been shot by the Taliban. It seemed impossible to get to the airport.

My mother was worried about us. We saw the Taliban running after people who were walking and trying to beat them with lashes. We worried that if we left the car and walked, they might injure us. After waiting for one to two hours, we saw that it was impossible to get into the first gate. So, we tried to go to the second gate of the airport, which was in Shash-Darak. I heard from some of my colleagues that they were trying to

go that way because it might be easier, but after communicating, I received calls and text messages that the second gate was also impossible. That whole day, it was only opened once or twice. I was in contact with my colleagues, and they said, "Okay, this is not going to work to go to the airport, and none of the gates are safe for us with families." I heard from some of my colleagues who left to go back home. I also decided to go back home. Both gates seemed impossible for us. So, we went back home.

Q: What happened next?

DONYA: It was on the 20th or 21st of August that we were hearing from our colleagues. We were in contact with the embassy. Everybody, especially our U.S. colleagues, were planning for the evacuation. We all, the Embassy colleagues, were in contact with each other and in contact with our supervisors to discuss how to find a way to get out of Kabul and to keep ourselves and our family safe. Some of our colleagues had children, and it was nearly impossible for families with small children to get into the airport. We were hearing from the news that children had lost their lives during those evacuation days. It was very hard for the children. Finally, there was a plan under the coordination of the embassy that would arrange transportation for colleagues. A bus would pick up a group of colleagues from one spot and then take them to the airport. The embassy was working to arrange that transportation. I was seeing that everyone was very stressed about how to get out of Kabul and also how to make a safe place for their family.

One night, maybe on August 19th, around 1:00 a.m. in the night, there was a knock on the door of our house. My husband and I looked from the third floor of our home to see who was in the street knocking on the door. I was thinking what if the Taliban came to the house to make an arrest or do something to the family. I told my husband to talk to my brother and go see who was knocking on the door. We saw from the top window a police car, which was close to our door and taking an injured person to the hospital. The hospital was near our house. We did notice that those were Taliban, because they had a dress code and wore turbans. Between August 15 – 25, we were hearing that an unknown gunman had fired at the Taliban member in our area.

Each of those days was unforgettable to me and my husband, who worked for PAE, the U.S. Embassy contractor. We were trying to stay safe with our family and not to go out. We were hearing from our colleagues that trying during the nighttime might be good to get to the airport. For the second time, we decided to leave home and try to go to the airport. I think it was on the 21st of August around 10 p.m. in the night. This time my husband and I took just a very small backpack. We had heard from our office that we could not have large luggage. Again, my brother and my father and mother went with me and my husband to the airport.

Q: Your father and mother and brother just accompanied you to the airport or did they plan to enter the airport with you?

DONYA: We did hear from our office that employees with their extended families, siblings and parents, and of course, their immediate family, could all come together. Once

it was very difficult to enter the airport, and there were so many checkpoints by the Taliban, the office said that it might be better for employees and just their immediate family to go to the airport, not their extended family. They could not provide transportation for everyone to go. If the extended family could get to the airport by themselves, then that would be okay. The officer said we are not suggesting that they do so because it might be a risk for everyone. So, they said for now employees could come with their immediate families.

I had my brother, my brother's family with his two kids, my parents, and my two sisters. I was thinking that we might take a sister with me and maybe my brother. Still, I know that in an Afghan family it is difficult for the parents when they get older. They need someone to stay with them. If I took my brother, it might be difficult for my father to be left alone with just my mother or my sisters. So, all of them decided to stay there, but they would help us to go to the airport.

We decided to try to go to the airport during nighttime. It might be less crowded during nighttime. Again, my parents and my brother took us from our home and dropped us near the airport. But my father said, we are not going to leave the area, until you both get into the airport. Until then, I will wait outside even though it was not very safe outside. And so my husband and I again said goodbye to them and we got out of the car and we tried to go to the airport. I think to Abbey Gate. We tried that gate and we saw that there were Taliban checkpoints. The Taliban had big lashes and stones in their hands and were hitting the people around. The people were all sitting, and we could see some trying to run and skip around the checkpoint.

We did hear from our colleague that whenever you go near a checkpoint, the Taliban are asking you, Who are you? Where are you going? Do you have any documentation for them? We had received a form from our office, like an exit form. We were supposed to show the form to the Taliban at the checkpoints. And the Taliban are supposed to not stop you guys and they will let you go. I did have that paper, but I saw that there were like thousands of people that also had the same paper. I didn't know if they were U.S. government employees or they worked for the U.S. government or not. Most of the people had that same document with them. I saw the people showing that document to the Taliban at the checkpoint, and the Taliban just throwing it down and then beating or lashing them, two or three or four lashes. The Taliban were telling the people to not stand, just stay sitting there. I was able to see the U.S. army near the gate.

Q: With their Humvees and their military vehicles?

DONYA: Yes. I saw that they were firing their guns in the air to scare the people. And I got really afraid. I told my husband that it's not going to work for us to enter in this kind of situation. We saw that thousands of people were there and they had the same paper as we had. And I was thinking, what is the difference between me and these people who are around? No difference at all. I was not able to see any of my colleagues or familiar faces. I told my husband that this time, it's not going to happen, and I'm not going to come again. With the Taliban lashing people, and lots of gunfire, what if something happened

to us? I heard that some people had been shot and some people had lost their lives. We had been there only for one hour, and we had moved only about ten feet nearer that day. I felt stuck there in one place. I told my husband, it's been about an hour, we came and we just stayed in one place. I think we should go back.

Q: You didn't reach the Taliban checkpoint to show your document?

DONYA: No, I saw the people were showing the same document we have and the Taliban just threw it away and they lashed them.

Q: So you decided to go back home that night.

DONYA: Yes. After waiting for an hour and a half, I called my father and asked, "Are you still here?" He said, "Yes, I'm here." I said, "It's very difficult to go, and I cannot go there; we're coming back." So, we went home. For the second time, I was not able to make it to the airport.

I told my husband, "I'm not going again." This was not only me; many of my colleagues were saying the same thing. They had children, and some had small babies. They were pushing the office to provide a way to get to the airport. Then we heard from the office that they were arranging transportation for everyone. All of us would come to one place, and a bus would pick us up and take us to the airport.

From August 15 until I left Kabul, every day was like watching a movie. I was thinking about the things we were seeing, going to the airport, and watching the news. This was something unbelievable for me and for everyone in my family. I was thinking if I leave Kabul now, what will happen next? There was a lot of stress for everyone. I talked with my supervisor and said I wanted to bring my sister with me. My little sister had lived with me for years. While I was in Kabul, I had been financially supporting her. I knew that with the Taliban back, they would stop girls and women from going to school and work and would bring many other restrictions like in their previous regime.

Q: How old was your sister?

DONYA: She was 17 years old and studying in grade 11 in Kabul. My supervisor said it was okay for me to bring my sister. The office then put us into groups, and there was one focal point for each group. We talked with our focal point and gave the names of the family members who were going with us on the bus. On August 24th, my husband, my younger sister, and I took our small luggage and went to the meeting place. There were four or five buses, and each bus had a number. We knew what time to be there and what our bus number was.

It was very difficult to leave the house and everything behind: our home, our experiences, our family members, everything I had known and loved my entire life. I wasn't thinking about leaving Afghanistan, leaving Kabul, leaving my home, or leaving my family. I didn't know when I would get the chance to come back to Kabul. The night before we

left, I remember crying as I sat with my mother. I was thinking, now that the Taliban have come back, what will happen? What will happen to my mother, who taught in school for more than 30 years? And what will happen to my sisters, who had planned to go to university? We didn't know what would happen next. Not only me, but thousands of people were thinking the same thing.

My parents and my older brother took us to the drop-off point on August 25th. I think it was around 9:00 a.m. when we left home for the given address. At the bus, our focal point was reading out the names of the people who could enter our bus. Then, we waited for an hour for our other colleagues to come before the bus left.

Q: Your sister could get on the bus with you? You, your husband, and your sister.

DONYA: Yes, my sister, and my husband. We got on the bus and waited for an hour or so with the rest of our colleagues.

Q: Then you went to the airport.

DONYA: Yes, we went to the airport. That trip took us two, three, maybe four hours, moving from Karte Parwan road to the airport.

Q: How did you enter? Was it through the North Gate? I heard the buses came in from the backside of the airport.

DONYA: I think so, because it was my first time entering through that gate. It was around 3:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m. when my family and I arrived at the airport. On the way to the airport, we were stopped twice at checkpoints. I do not know who was at the checkpoints, the Taliban or the U.S. Army, but we waited around 20-30 minutes at each one. We were allowed to enter the airport, and the bus dropped us off inside. We saw thousands of people already inside the airport. Some people were waiting, and some were sleeping there. The airport was in chaos and such a mess. It was my first time seeing the airport in such a situation. There were thousands of people in the airport.

Q: How did you feel when you entered the airport?

DONYA: I wasn't expecting to leave Kabul like this. What will happen to all the women, girls, and people who had dreams of doing something or being someone in their lives? Afghan women had worked so hard over the past 20 years when the Taliban wasn't there. I asked myself how Kabul could collapse in just a moment. I could see our people were afraid of the Taliban and leaving the country for neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan. Everyone left everything behind—their homes, hopes, and lands. They did not know where they were going or what their future would be. Even I was not sure how I would deal with the future.

Q: How many buses were there on that day?

DONYA: There were four or five buses, and each bus carried around 30 people. They picked up employees and their immediate families.

When we came to the airport, we had to go through various stops. We first got checked by the army, and our bags were inspected. Then we went into a room for fingerprints and to show our documents. My husband and I had brought our passports, but many people came without any documents. My sister didn't have a passport but had a national ID, called a Tazkira. I was thinking, what if they don't allow her to go with me? What would happen to her? Those who had passports showed them. They looked at our passports and national IDs, and they put a wristband on our hands.

It was getting to be night. We were going from one place to another as they processed and checked our documents and bags. I had my yellow badge [the U.S. Embassy employee badge]. Our focal point said, "Wherever you go, show your yellow badge so that they know you are an embassy employee." It was around 10 p.m., and we heard there would be a flight for us. It would be my first time on a military flight. We heard that we would be leaving from Kabul to Qatar, and there were around 350-400 people on each flight.

We were just following the procedure. It took a very long time to sit and wait in each line. But we were lucky that we did not stay in the airport for nights or days, but just one day, and we left at midnight. Finally, we took the last line to the military plane at 4:00 a.m. I was surprised by the plane because there were no seats; everyone sat on the ground next to each other. It was a very difficult and hard experience for me. When we entered the plane, there were already hundreds of people sitting. There was no place for me to sit comfortably. The arrangement was a sensitive issue for an Afghan woman. Afghan women do not sit nor are allowed to sit or lay next to a man not in their close family. Our first flight from Kabul to Qatar took almost 5-6 hours. We arrived in Qatar around 11:00 a.m., almost noon.

Qatar and Germany

Q: You left at midnight on the 26th of August?

DONYA: Yes, on the 26th. We boarded the plane around 3:00 a.m., but it took us longer to leave and depart. We were sitting on the plane, waiting to take off for two or three hours. We had to wait for everyone to board and load their luggage. Since it was a military plane, it was very hard to sit comfortably. Almost 350-400 people were on the plane with no seats. I think the flight departed around 4:00 or 4:30 a.m. When we landed, we went from the plane to the base. It was summertime, and the weather in Qatar was very hot. When I entered the base, I heard rumors that all of us would stay in Qatar for three to six months and that we would move to the U.S. after all immigration procedures were completed. There were too many different rumors, and I was wondering how we could stay there for such a long time. It was a very big base with thousands of people—men, women, and children—all in one big hangar together. The weather was unexpectedly hot for me. So, all of us U.S. Embassy employees were trying to find someone to talk to and clarify the process regarding our next destination.

Q: There were other colleagues with you on the same flight?

DONYA: Yes.

Q: What about the food and the bathroom situation in Qatar?

DONYA: When I arrived in Qatar, I rested for about 20 minutes and then searched for a restroom and a place to wash my hands and face to feel refreshed. The U.S. military had set up a table with water and food for everyone. However, there weren't enough bathrooms for the large number of people present. There were only about six to eight bathrooms and a few sinks to wash our hands and faces. After washing my hands, I placed my glasses down by the sink. As I left, I had a nagging feeling that I was forgetting something. It was then that I realized I didn't have my glasses. I went back to check, but they were gone. Unfortunately, I lost my glasses on that first day.

We were all very tired, and everything was unclear. The questions of where our next destination would be and when we would go were still unanswered. There were Wi-Fi issues, making it difficult for us to communicate with our families and let them know we had arrived. After one or two hours, my two female colleagues from the U.S. Embassy and I went and asked the U.S. Army personnel about the next flight and how long people were staying at the Qatar base. We were trying to find someone there to help us with our next flight. We heard that the next flight would be to Germany and that it would leave in an hour. My colleagues and I, along with almost eight families, tried to find someone close to the U.S. Embassy. Finally, we found someone, introduced ourselves, and talked to him. We were able to join the line of people leaving from Qatar to Germany. We were in Qatar for almost four hours. It was around 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. when we boarded the plane to Germany. After an eight or nine hour flight, we arrived at a military base in Germany. Upon arrival, I heard from my colleagues that an explosion had occurred in Kabul. I think the explosion happened on August 26th.

Q: How long did you stay in Germany and when did you move to the United States?

DONYA: Yes, we stayed in Germany for eight to ten days. It was very cold there. I moved to the USA on the last day of August, August 31st, 2021, but arrived in the USA on September 1st.

Q: So, you left Germany for the United States in August or September?

DONYA: I left Germany on the last day of August and arrived at Washington Dulles airport on the 1st of September. In D.C., we were guided to the Expo Center and waited there for nine or ten hours. I was waiting for transportation to the Fort Lee camp in Virginia. I wanted to stay in Virginia and not go anywhere else. At the Center, we met our focal point from the U.S. Embassy. There was a desk set up for us. We completed our biometrics and had dinner there. We informed them that we all wanted to go to Fort Lee. Unfortunately, they told us to wait until they could confirm whether we could go there or

not, but we heard that the Fort Lee base was full and did not have enough space for additional refugees.

Q: At that time your husband and sister were with you?

DONYA: Yes.

Q: And what about your other colleagues from the U.S. embassy? Did you all come together to the United States?

DONYA: We were together on the flight from Qatar to Germany. The military base in Germany was very disorganized, with large hangars and hundreds of people living there. The food system was a mess. There were no proper and clean baths or bathrooms. Those were the worst days. I remember that I never had breakfast there. The food situation and access to other facilities were not good.

In Germany, it was very difficult for us to get a flight to the U.S. More than three times, we lined up to board a flight, only to have it canceled again. We waited for almost 8-10 days. It was also very cold. My husband and I were not living in one place. We were separated into different areas of the same camp. We were trying to find someone, a focal point from the U.S. Embassy, to help us get a flight to the U.S., our destination. One afternoon, we found out that only a few U.S. Embassy employees could take a flight from Germany to the U.S. My husband, my sister, our two female colleagues from the Embassy, and I approached an Army officer and introduced ourselves. Finally, he took us to someone from the Department of State who helped us get on a bus and then a flight to the U.S. It was late evening when we took the flight from Germany to the U.S. I am not sure who else was on the same flight, but some of our USAID colleagues were with us.

Dulles Expo Center and Fort McCoy

Q: So let's go back to the Expo Center. Where did you go?

DONYA: At the Expo Center, we heard that Fort Lee was full and there was no other room for Afghans to go there. They decided to take us to a Wisconsin military base, Fort McCoy. Fort McCoy was one of the biggest U.S. military bases, I think. There were around 13,000 to 15,000 Afghans there. From Expo Center, It took us around two hours to fly to Wisconsin, Fort McCoy military base, from Dulles airport.

Q: This was not a military airport?

DONYA: Yes. It was a place just for waiting and from there the evacuated people were moved to different bases. When we arrived in Wisconsin at the Fort McCoy base, it was around morning time, almost 8:00 a.m.

Q: How long did you stay in the D.C. area?

Not a lot, just 9-10 hours. When we arrived at the Dulles airport from Germany, it was in the afternoon. We left the Expo Center around 5:00 a.m. and arrived in Wisconsin around 8:00 a.m. In Wisconsin, the weather was mild. The military base was very large, with separate buildings for males, females, and families. So we went to our assigned buildings, though we were not comfortable staying together in large buildings with more than 20 people, but that was necessary, I think for everyone. However, we had no control over the situation.

On the second night, September 2, 2021, we met our focal point from the U.S. Embassy, Josh Bull, a Department of State employee. He brought us our Social Security numbers and work permits, so we were lucky to get our documents very quickly.

After a few days, we were quarantined for 15 days, which was very difficult. We spent each day in tents with no proper bathrooms or showers. It was a dark place among the woods, with many mosquitoes and other insects. There was no Wi-Fi or internet connection. Those were very hard days, and we were worried about our families back in Kabul, wanting to inform them about our safety and stay in contact. During this time, I was bitten by an insect on my right elbow, causing fever, rashes, and irritation. The tents we lived in were not in good condition, and we did not feel safe, especially at night. The fifteen days of quarantine felt like a year.

After that, we moved back to the military base buildings, where we had access to Wi-Fi, though the quality was poor. Still, we could contact our Embassy supervisors. All the LES [Locally Employed Staff] received an email stating that we would receive SIM cards with internet. For some, the internet worked, but for others, it did not.

Josh Bull was at the military base called Fort McCoy. He was in contact with our other Embassy colleagues and our supervisors at the Department of State. After a few weeks, he was able to provide us LES with a building that had a Wi-Fi connection, allowing us to work and check our emails. He provided us with work, specifically TDY [temporary duty], as we were still U.S. Embassy employees at that time. My Embassy colleagues and I started working with different offices at the base. I worked with HHS [Health and Human Services], helping with unaccompanied children by translating and explaining everything to Afghan children who came to the U.S. with their uncles, cousins, and other extended family members but not their parents. It was a rewarding and good experience. At the same time, we were waiting for our case interviews with resettlement agencies, to receive our medical shots and other necessary documentation.

It was very difficult because we did not have our own room or space to feel comfortable and relaxed. About thirty to forty people were living in one large building, and there were only three food cafeterias for nearly 13,000 people on the base. Each morning, noon, and evening, we had to stand in long lines for 2-3 hours to get our meals. Sometimes, we did not want to go because of the huge lines and lack of proper food.

Those two and a half months felt like years. During those tough days, my husband and I received our Employment Authorization Documents [EAD], so we decided to use this

time to search for jobs in the state we wanted to go to. We decided to go to Northern Virginia, but it was hard to find a job there. However, we found many positions with the IRC [the International Rescue Committee] in Phoenix, Arizona, so we applied. We were waiting for the IRC's response, as we had applied for several positions. Finally, we heard from the IRC and a notice for a virtual interview via Zoom. Happily, both my husband and I received positive responses. And we got offers from the IRC. After searching about Arizona, my husband found out that one of his friends also lived in Phoenix, Arizona. We tried to find his contact and communicate with him. We also informed him that we are coming to Arizona and would work with the IRC. He was surprised and said that he was also working with the IRC in Phoenix. After several days, the IRC confirmed the start date of our work at the IRC. So, finally we decided to book our own tickets and move to Arizona.

Q: You and your husband?

DONYA: Yes, the both of us, and my sister also was with me.

Q: Wonderful. In which place were you going to work for the IRC?

DONYA: In Phoenix, Arizona. We passed our interview through Zoom with the IRC, and we got hired, it was a smooth hiring process.

Move to Phoenix, Arizona and then Northern Virginia

Q: You had a great start in the U.S., very quick.

DONYA: Thank you! As my husband and I were hired by the IRC, our case was also picked up by IRC as our resettlement agency to assist us and provide case management and other necessary services. When we discussed this with the IRC, since we were hired as staff, of course we were not eligible for the IRC resettlement agency's services. My husband and I chose to work with the IRC, foregoing any assistance such as house rent, pocket money, and other services typically provided to newcomers in the United States. We trusted ourselves to manage things on our own. We fixed the date and booked our tickets from the military base to Phoenix, Arizona.

A good friend of ours and a very respectable person, Knox Thames, who was a former employee of the Department of State and a former diplomat who had always worked for religious minority freedom, was in contact with me during the evacuation. He and his family consistently inquired about our safety and settlement in the United States. I met Knox in 2019 when I came to Washington, D.C., for the International Religious Freedom conference at the Department of State. Since then, I have remained in contact with him. During the evacuation process, Knox was in regular contact with us, always asking about our safety and situation. He asked us which state we would like to go to and if anyone would be there to help us. Before packing up from the base, I informed Knox that we were moving to Arizona and had been hired by the IRC. He said, "Donya, my family and I would like to help you and your family with the resettlement process because you are

new and we want to help.” Although he was not in Arizona, he helped us through another friend named Bobby Cox, who lived in Phoenix. Through Bobby Cox, Knox assisted us in our settlement process in Phoenix, Arizona. They helped us with renting an apartment and house setup. I am very thankful to Knox and Bobby for their support during our difficult days.

Q: So you moved to Phoenix from the base.

DONYA: Yes, my husband and my sister and I moved to Phoenix. We took our flight from Wisconsin. We paid for the tickets ourselves. When we arrived in Phoenix, Arizona, the IRC picked us up from the airport and dropped us off at our first home in the United States.

Q: So, just three months after leaving your home in Kabul, you entered your new home in the United States.

DONYA: Yes, we left Kabul on the 19th of August and arrived in the United States on the 1st of September. After two and a half months of living on a military base, we settled into our first home in Phoenix, Arizona, on the 17th of November.

In Phoenix, we met Bobby Cox, the Director and Head of GoTEN. He helped us with our home setup and many other necessary things as we were new to the United States. He and his staff assisted us in getting our driver's licenses, setting up our electricity account, and enrolling my sister in school. My husband and I started our work at the IRC two to three weeks after our arrival in Phoenix, Arizona.

As caseworkers, we helped other Afghan refugees obtain resettlement services that were supposed to have been provided to us. These services included applying for medical coverage, food stamps like SNAP, TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families], case management, home visits, home setup, and other services from the IRC and the government. We were working to help others while trying to learn how things worked in the United States and understand the needs of refugees when they arrived and what they would have to do.

I worked for the IRC for a year and a half. I left the IRC and started working with the Department of State in April 2022. For a couple of months, I worked at both the IRC and the Department of State, but after my daughter was born, I left the IRC and continued working remotely for the Department of State.

Q: Were there any other U.S. embassy colleagues in Arizona with you?

DONYA: No, no one was there. I don't think most Afghans want to go there. One, because in Arizona you will have almost nine months of summer. And you will have winter, but the winter is like spring. There is no snow, only rain. And you will find Phoenix, like Kabul, has lots of mountains. I do like Phoenix, Arizona, because we got our start there. We build our careers there, we build our credit there, and we live there.

We got familiar with other Afghans there. We hosted some and also helped other refugees. All those Afghans who were pilots, almost 99 percent of them, were in Arizona. My husband and I were the caseworkers for those pilots. And we did the home visits with them.

Q: The Afghan military pilots?

DONYA: Yes.

We stayed in Phoenix, Arizona, until December 2023. When my husband started working with the IRC headquarters in New York, while I still was working with the Department of State, we moved to Virginia in December 2023. Right now, my family – my husband, our 19-month-old daughter, and I – are living in Virginia. My youngest sister, who came with us from Afghanistan, is also living with us.

Q: Thank you, that was really interesting. You quickly settled in the United States compared with many other Afghans and refugees in the United States. We heard a lot of things, a lot of tough things, about your experience in Kabul, and your personal life. Do you have some final thoughts?

Final Reflections

DONYA: Thank you so much.

Most of the time, I don't think only about myself, but about the thousands of Afghans, especially women and girls, and particularly my own family, who are currently in Afghanistan. They have lost their jobs, and their schools have been closed. My sister is no longer attending university. My mother, who was a high school teacher, is now at home. My father, who was a pharmacist in Helmand, had his pharmacy destroyed in August 2021.

We must consider their situation, filled with stress and financial challenges. They worry about how to feed themselves and find solutions to alleviate their stress and anxiety, with nowhere to turn. Every day, the Taliban imposes more restrictions on them. Yesterday, I spoke with my mother, and she told me that they went outside to have a picnic as a family, but the Taliban soldiers came and told them to leave immediately. Women are not allowed to sit outside in that place.

My family is waiting for their cases [to immigrate to the United States] to be processed.

Q: They have P1 cases as your parents and siblings.

DONYA: Yes, they have their P1 cases pending. They are in the pipeline, awaiting processing. It will take some time for these cases to be processed.

My parents and I have endured a lot. Years ago, I lost my brother, and they lost their son. As members of the Hazara minority, we have faced significant discrimination in school, the workplace, and within our community, even in our own country. Despite these challenges, we fought hard to create a peaceful life. But who knew that even worse days were coming, and all Afghans, especially women, girls, and minorities, would suffer so much more? Since the Taliban took over, each member of my family has lost their job and become unemployed. My parents and siblings were forced to leave our home in Helmand and move to Kabul. My sisters were banned from attending school and university. They have faced many challenges, living stressful and financially strained lives. But I am always thankful to God for His support and for giving me the opportunity to help my parents and siblings financially from the United States. Sometimes I think that if I had stayed in Kabul, we would all be in the same difficult situation with no one able to assist us financially. I am grateful to God. I am here and able to help my family. I hope that these tough days will pass and that they will experience better times in the future.

Q: Thank you, Donya.

End of Interview