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YVONNE THAYER

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INTERVIEW

Q: It is May 9, 2024. I'm Robin Matthewman. Today I'm interviewing Yvonne Thayer for our Afghanistan Project. Yvonne, welcome. I know you recorded your full oral history a few years ago and that following that you worked on contract and in other capacities with both the State Department's Population Refugee and Migration Bureau [PRM], and some other resettlement agencies related to refugees. Could you give us a summary of what you've been doing?

THAYER: A week after I retired from the Foreign Service in late 2000, I took a trip around the world. I spent six months exploring places I'd never known—Greece, Turkey, India, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Viet Nam, Bali. I thought I should face that travel itch head on. I returned home to work on a training project for FSI, then joined PRM as a WAE [designation for a part time retiree position]. Besides working on Bureau projects, I went three times to Cuba to run the refugee program, twice to Baghdad to set up the refugee program for SIV [special immigrant visas] relatives, twice to Jordan as humanitarian liaison to the U.S. military monitoring Syria, and twice to Lebanon to restart the refugee resettlement program.

A good part of my work with PRM was monitoring refugee arrivals in the United States, first as a WAE. Later, PRM set up a contract monitor team, which I joined. We were six or so people, including two who had retired from the DHS [Department of Homeland Security] immigration office and others who had worked at refugee resettlement agencies.

Q: Can you give me an idea of what that means, to monitor refugee arrivals?

THAYER: PRM has contracts, called cooperative agreements, with some nine major social services agencies. Most are faith-based like Catholic Charities, the Hebrew Immigration Services Agency or HIAS, Lutheran Immigration Refugee Services, Episcopalian Migration Ministries, World Relief, the International Rescue Committee, and a few others. Among them they have, or had, more than 300 affiliates around the U.S.

The system assigns refugees—by refugees I mean persons processed by the State Department abroad to enter the U.S. legally as refugees—to different cities under formulas developed by PRM with the agencies, affiliates, and receiving communities. The cooperative agreement lists specific benefits and services the affiliates are to provide refugee arrivals during their first 30-90 days in the U.S. Among them are picking up refugees at the airport; providing furnished housing, food, and supplies; arranging for medical exams and vaccinations; registering kids for school; signing families up for food stamps, Medicaid, and applicable benefits; getting adults into English language classes, job placement, and training programs; and providing cultural orientation. A long list.

Our job was to visit the affiliates, interview refugee families and affiliate staff, review budgets and documentation, and rate the affiliates' compliance. I did this in many dozens of U.S. cities, big and small, for nearly 20 years.

Q: In general, during your time, were these contracts for refugee resettlement of specific nationalities or was it more general?

THAYER: The annual Presidential Determination sets the total number of persons, broken down by region, who can be processed to enter as refugees. All have to fit the U.S. definition of a refugee; most are recommended by the UN refugee office UNHCR. Many come as part of a group of persecuted people, like the Hmong, Bhutanese, Congolese, Ethiopians, Venezuelans, Balkans, Cubans. Others come as persecuted and particularly vulnerable individuals. These days, Ukrainians and Afghans come. The Iraqi refugee program I set up was for relatives of Iraqi SIVs, who were in danger due to their association with the U.S military or government. This required special legislation to permit Iraqi refugee cases to be processed inside Iraq, similar to the legislation for processing Soviet Jews and Cubans inside their country of origin.

Where refugees are assigned to resettle depends on many factors, including whether they have family or other ties in the U.S. PRM and the resettlement agencies consult with local authorities, the school system, public health system, housing officials to make sure the communities have the capacity to resettle refugees and in what numbers.

PRM manages a complex bidding system where the resettlement agencies "bid" on numbers they feel equipped to serve in particular locations. Some affiliates specialize in cases with minors or persons with disabilities where communities have appropriate resources to help them.

Q: We'll be coming back to this. Where were you in August of 2021? What were you doing when Kabul fell and it appeared that 125,000 Afghans were leaving Afghanistan?

THAYER: I was monitoring until March of 2020 when Covid stopped everything in its tracks. I was working in Minnesota when the program shut down. Many months later, PRM set up a system for remote monitoring. In my case, with no monitoring jobs, I volunteered to go to El Paso in June and July of 2021. I worked at the non-profit Annunciation House to assist asylum seekers released by Border Patrol to await their

hearings. We worked in a huge, abandoned warehouse on the edge of El Paso repurposed into massive dormitories, dining halls, and offices. We slept on cots upstairs. Individuals and families were processed and brought to us by the Border Patrol. We provided temporary housing, food, some minimal medical attention, clothing, and backpacks or kits of travel necessities. We helped the migrants contact family members or sponsors in the U.S. that they had told the BP they would be staying with for their asylum hearing and helped them arrange transport to those locations. Everything was done following Covid procedures.

Afghan Resettlement at Fort Dix

Immediately after I got home from El Paso, the Afghan evacuation exploded in August 2021. I felt the same way that I did about El Paso, another crisis where I had some skills and thought I could be helpful.

I asked a senior PRM friend if there was any way I could help out, on a voluntary basis. I quickly learned you can't do that for the U.S. government. She put me in touch with the International Rescue Committee [IRC], which had the contract to manage Afghan assistance and processing at Fort Dix in New Jersey. I had been to Fort Dix as an FSO [Foreign Service Officer] when the Kosovar Albanians were airlifted there on an emergency basis after the NATO bombing in 1999. It's now called Joint Base McGuire, Dix and Lakehurst.

The evacuation happened so quickly and was so unexpected that arrangements were being made on the fly. Some 76,000 Afghans were flown out of the country in a matter of a few weeks, some directly to military bases in the U.S., eventually nine I think, including Fort McCoy in Wisconsin, Fort Bliss in El Paso, Fort Dix in New Jersey, a few in Virginia. Others went initially to what were called “lily pads,” eight locations, mostly U.S. military bases, in the UAE, Qatar, Spain, Italy, and elsewhere, to get as many people out as quickly as possible.

I wasn’t allowed to volunteer so I completed lots of IRC forms and training, background checks, sexual harassment training, security training, all sorts of stuff. I was paid $17 an hour and billeted in a hotel on the base. I joined wonderful, mostly younger people: IRC staff, interpreters, new temp hires like myself. Eventually they figured out I had actually worked on refugees and refugee resettlement. Some told me, "You shouldn't be doing this data entry job." But I wanted to work directly with Afghans. So that's what I did. About three weeks later, I got a raise, to $24 an hour.

Q: In addition to your actual data entry work, I would like it if you could tell us as much as you can about what the Afghans' experience was in Fort Dix. How long were you there?

THAYER: I was there for about a month, the end of September into October. Things were happening very fast. Afghans were arriving constantly, from the lily pads, through Dulles and Philadelphia airports and reception facilities, and from other locations as operations

were consolidated. We got them settled and processed them immediately, seeking to move them on to agencies for resettlement as quickly as possible. The U.S. military didn't want to become long-term staging places. They wanted the Afghans processed and moved quickly into resettlement channels.

Q: First of all, what was the physical set up? Where were they sleeping, eating, and living?

THAYER: Fort Dix was fantastic. It's a large joint base, so several different services live and work there. Everyone was generous and supportive. The fort is vast, with rows of neat red brick buildings and barracks, large green lawns, and a big PX. I think many single service people moved out of their housing, dormitory housing, to accommodate Afghans. But that wasn't nearly enough. Huge tents were set up in football field-size spaces.

The system they worked out in a matter of weeks was efficient and well-organized: where families would go, singles, persons with special needs, pregnant women, mostly in huge tents, with cloth dividers. Dining halls, medical facilities, and prayer rooms were set up. They didn't set up schools, but provided books, toys, internet, perhaps some clothes. Every family got a cell phone upon entry to the U.S. and families spent hours glued to their phones, seeking relatives, news, former American supervisors. The fall weather was mercifully temperate, and despite the overwhelming trauma, the atmosphere was calm, friendly. Military folks played soccer and catch ball with the kids, who clambered for attention. Relationships were respectful and welcoming.

At times I had night duty. That meant working in the reception area when newly arrived Afghan parolees were bussed in from Dulles or Philadelphia Airport reception centers. They arrived exhausted, traumatized, many had no idea where they were. We recorded some basic information and assigned them to housing, got them food, water, baby supplies. They weren't in any condition to be asked a lot of questions. Everybody was Covid tested upon entry and we followed those protocols. Then they got appointments to see us for resettlement processing.

We worked generally from eight or nine in the morning until five or six in the afternoon. Sometimes large families took longer to process, sometimes Afghans came with personal concerns, so we stayed as long as necessary to help them.

Q: What kind of information were you obtaining in the processing and what was that information to be used for?

THAYER: PRM had been doing resettlement and placement of refugees for years, the program I'd worked on. A data information and tracking system called Hummingbird was set up for the Afghan program, new and buggy, as I recall. It was constantly being upgraded and modified. Frequently we got new instructions on how to handle and input information.

Basically we started with names, family composition, birth dates, nationality, and place of birth. Families came in groups, sometimes 12 or more, including parents, brothers, sisters, spouses, kids, cousins. Our system requires a head of household, one per family, so we had to sort them out, providing each family a tracking number. If they came in groups, we'd pull more chairs together. We provided treats and coloring books to keep the kids busy.

Q: Were you asking them, at that point, where they want to go?

THAYER: Yes. The problem was most wanted to go to only a handful of places, where other Afghans were already established or where their U.S. military friends were. That often meant Northern Virginia or Texas or California, sometimes specifically Fremont, Sacramento, Manassas, Dallas. After a while, we were told that there was no more capacity to resettle people in those places, so they were not allowed to choose those specific cities. That caused a lot of consternation, so we would try to come up with something else, maybe a town not too far away.

It was not our job to counsel on destinations, but the Afghans were facing hard decisions. We had a big map of the United States on the wall. Sometimes people would come in after they had gotten a resettlement assignment and say, "Guess what, I'm going to Arizona." Or wherever. I'm from Minnesota so if someone was assigned to Minnesota I would rhapsodize about the life and people there. I would commend anywhere in the Midwest.

Many, though, had no idea. During our interviews, they were often on their phones, frantically calling friends for advice. After rapid anguished conversations in Dari or some other language, they would name a city or state that some friend told them was a good place or where he was going. It was an emotional time. Throughout, they were cooperative and grateful.

It was interesting that we had everything from government ministers, very senior government and military officials, heads of hospitals to raw recruits. Some managed to get their families out. Some of the women were educated and professional. But many, both men and women, were literally peasants from the highlands, remote mountainous areas, who didn't speak Pashtun, Dari or Farsi. We had interpreters but some Afghans spoke languages or dialects that only family members could interpret. Many arrived not knowing how to use a cell phone.

Many of them came—it all happened so quickly—with huge misconceptions: that the U.S. was Shangri-La, that everyone has a house and a car, a computer, and a big screen TV. They thought because they had worked for the Americans they would be provided with everything. But that's not the way the U.S. refugee program works. The resettlement program is lean, roughly a thousand dollars per person. The emphasis is on getting situated, getting a job, and becoming self-sufficient as quickly as possible.

I think many Afghans were disappointed that they were not getting a house, a car, a year's salary, and other benefits. Normally, refugees get several days of cultural orientation before they come to the U.S. as well as information from refugees who arrived previously, so they have a better idea of what resettlement is like.

I don't think, for the most part, the Afghans who were airlifted out had any idea of what was going to happen to them. There was a lot of misinformation, rumors. And suddenly they were in Fort Dix.

Q: Were there big groups that had gone through Doha and had gone from Doha to Germany and then come into the States?

THAYER: I don't know exactly where they came from. Most came in from the lily pads abroad, to reception centers at Dulles and Philadelphia, then by bus to Fort Dix.

Q: Did you get to hear lots of stories of what it was like to get into the airport, the trauma involved in being one of those people that was able to leave?

THAYER: Actually, we were counseled not to bring up those kinds of things. We were interested, of course, to know more about them, but were told to focus on our task. Sometimes, if they wanted to talk, we would listen and console, but we did not prompt or pursue conversations about their departures. The goal was to move them on from the trauma. I believe mental health counselors were available.

I remember that many arrived as single men, very young, maybe late teens or early 20s. My sense was many had been fairly recently recruited into the Afghan military, that they had been airlifted out in groups, and did not necessarily have to fight their way through the Kabul airport. The U.S. was leaving so quickly. Perhaps our officials determined that anyone actively working for the Afghan military associated with the U.S. military would be in danger and they shipped them directly out.

Most had families who were left behind. Afghans tend to marry early. They were frantic about their families.

Q: I can imagine. Did you have any cases where a child had gotten separated somehow and got sent to Texas instead of to New Jersey? Did you have any cases where you had to get people together from different places?

THAYER: Some resettlement agencies have staff specialized in minors and unaccompanied minor issues. The Afghans we saw had initially been processed at the lily pads and reception centers, so we didn't see many children who had been separated from their parents. Although many Afghans had extended family members and neighbors or friends who made it out and ended up in different bases and resettlement locations. IRC helped locate family members through the larger databases, as did the Red Cross.

We had a number of cases where it wasn't entirely clear if a child was actually born to an accompanying adult, or if they had some other relationship. Records of birth dates and place of birth were often not available so we had to rely on what the family said. We sought to avoid re-traumatizing people to the extent possible, to be understanding and non-judgmental. We had several ways of reporting identities and relationships.

Q: And you were working with people as they arrived?

THAYER: Yes. Sometimes I worked at the initial reception, where arrivals were quickly assigned numbers and housing, in order to rest. After a day or so they would come in for the full processing. It went quickly, as the goal was to guide families promptly for resettlement.

I read recently that out of the roughly 76,000 parolees who were processed through the bases, some 12,000 did not wait to be assigned to a resettlement agency. They left on their own recognizance. They could do that if they had their own resources, or a relative or friend who could take them in. Afghans were counseled that by leaving on their own they may delay or even lose getting benefits. They would have to find and apply for services on their own.

The State Department launched the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program [APA] in September 2021, and later the Virtual Afghan Placement Assistance Program [VAPA]. This permitted Afghans who had gone somewhere on their own and were eligible for benefits to apply for them, within a certain timeframe. Benefits were available from the date of arrival or processing, as I recall, at first within eight months, which was later extended to 12 months. If they waited too long, they couldn't just come back years later and ask for resettlement benefits.

Some Afghans left more quickly because they were willing to go to a place that had more capacity or a U.S. service person or sponsor willing to support them. Placements were posted on a board and it was always exciting when families would see where they were assigned. Once assigned, they would leave promptly, unless some medical or other issue caused a delay.

Some took longer if there were documentation issues or a family member hadn't arrived, or if they were trying to go to a place with a backlog. Some stayed for weeks.
Some Afghans would come to the office every day, asking to see one of us. They wanted to talk, see how things were going. They would ask whether they should pick a different destination. They would report they heard a relative got out of Afghanistan and was somewhere, in Texas, in Fort McCoy. Everyone was trying to find someone. An important part of our job was to help connect them with contacts in the U.S.

Q: Once they were processed, then the resettlement agencies would go and talk to them about things and sometimes they would start looking for jobs?

THAYER: Once they were assigned a resettlement agency and location, they would go to that place and receive the required services provided to refugees. They would be picked up by a case manager and an interpreter, brought to where they were going to stay.

Back in the day when the refugee program was working at full speed, the various agencies and affiliates had different ways of doing things. Depending on the office, and the community, some had arrangements with landlords and could provide suitable housing quickly. The refugee program was well known, landlords knew refugees had housing support and other benefits and would be assisted to start work quickly. Refugees were known as reliable and responsible.

In 2016, some 85,000 refugees were resettled in the U.S. Starting the next year, the refugee resettlement program was decimated over the next four years. By 2019, twenty thousand and in 2020, eleven thousand refugees came into the country. The nine resettlement agencies, and their 300-plus affiliates, were sharply cut back; staff were let go or reassigned, offices closed. A lot of people lost their jobs.

Carefully-cultivated relationships with landlords, with public schools, health and benefits offices, and, importantly, employers were cut back or ended. Relationships that had flourished for years, with voluntary groups, student groups, religious communities, internships, rotary clubs, schools, and others dwindled as the number of refugees coming in went down by 80, 90 percent.

Q: And the money that the agencies were getting to help process them was going down.

THAYER: Exactly. Agencies were paid on a per capita basis, per refugee resettled. When the arrivals dropped sharply, the money did too. Many agencies lost staff permanently.

Q: I remember, in September 2021, I was on a webinar for interested volunteers. I think Lutheran Social Services was one of the entities on the call. And they said, in August we had the same number of people come in one month as we had all last year. We are just rebuilding. We have to rebuild our website. We have to rebuild this. We have to rebuild that. They were asking for various different sets of volunteers at that point to try to help.

THAYER: Yes. And that's with the volunteers. Think about the paid staff. All of a sudden, resettlement numbers went from 11,000 in all of 2020 to some 76,000 Afghan arrivals in a matter of weeks. You mentioned earlier that some Afghans didn't feel their case managers were giving them much time and attention. The number of clients per case manager must have gone through the roof. Staff hiring sky-rocketed but the staff were new, inexperienced, overwhelmed.

I saw some of these case managers and their bosses, heads of affiliates; they were saints in my book. They were devastated by the crush of cases, demands. On top of Covid. On top of an economic crisis, inflation, a housing crisis. Many burned out. Staff turnover was high. Most were doing their best.

An important factor is that Afghans weren't coming in on the normal refugee program, which has a set budget and a set number of refugees each year, laid out in the annual Presidential Determination. All of a sudden, tens of thousands of parolees came gushing in. Most of the funding for the Afghan program was done through special appropriations, which were very generous. There was actually more money per capita to resettle Afghans than for regular refugees. New programs were created—some exclusively for Afghans—which at times caused resentment among other refugees.

Two huge issues were Covid and housing. Covid now seems far away but it was overwhelming, complicated, politically charged at the time: shots, masks, distancing, isolation, schools, travel and jobs shut down, hospitalizations, deaths.

Housing was very tight. Partly due to Covid since people were not moving, and the economic downturn. But also because decades of refugee housing relationships ended during the previous Administration.

So, although funds designated for Afghans were somewhat more per capita, housing costs were prohibitive. U.S. officials came up with a separate supplemental or funding for housing, including I think credits or vouchers for Airbnb, DHS funding for hotels, and some other things. Temporary housing, though, is not a good option. Jobs, schools, classes, stability are hard to arrange from temporary housing. It was chaotic and difficult in so many ways.

A high point was, and I'm sure you noticed this when you were volunteering, Americans were donating and volunteering in unprecedented numbers. People donated furniture, clothing, computers, appliances, school supplies, TVs, bicycles, even cars, sometimes places to live. People donated time to set up housing, buy food and supplies, teach English, drive Afghans to appointments, orient them to public transportation and shopping, sort donations. Importantly, some helped Afghans find jobs.

I remember affiliates fretting how they had to resettle more people in a month than they had the whole previous year. They told us that where they once had a room for donations they were now contracting for one or more warehouses to store all the donations they were receiving.

Q: It looked like it worked out okay in Northern Virginia. There was a volunteer group called NOVA RAFT. They would get volunteers together, and they would go in for a day and they would fix up the apartment and meet the Afghan family. Then I used to see on Facebook that people would donate things and sometimes they would put them into a storefront or warehouse where the Afghan families could "go shopping" and say, there's children's clothes that we need, or a TV or there's this or that.

THAYER: The agencies and the affiliates were for a time flush with volunteers, and donations. With the arrivals so numerous, however, the government had to develop other ways of doing resettlement.

One innovation was Welcome Corps, where a sponsor, maybe a church group, would commit to providing the services the affiliates were contracted to do. It was more like the Canadian resettlement program, where sponsors handle resettlement.

Q: Let's go back, as I cut you off a bit. You were saying the military had a lot of reasons to not want people to stay there very long. I know they closed down these sites by December of that year.

THAYER: Right. When I was there in October, there was great urgency to keep the pipeline moving. The U.S. needed to clear the lily pads abroad and move Afghans from temporary housing on U.S. bases to resettlement.

Q: Do you remember how many per day of arrivals that you saw during the month, or some kind of order of magnitude?

THAYER: Numbers varied a lot, depending on whether I was seeing families, which could number ten or more and take a long time, or singles. Some Afghans answered tersely and were done in an hour. Others seemed to need to talk, to explain what they needed, their concern for family members left behind. I probably saw between 25 and 40 people a day.

Q: Okay. That gives us a good idea.

THAYER: I think Fort Dix took the most cases, eventually operations were consolidated there. It was large, conveniently located. The weather was good. Fort Bliss was probably hot, and Fort McCoy probably cold.

Monitoring

Q: Sounds like it. You finished after a month. And then, when did you start working as a monitor?

THAYER: I started monitoring for PRM again in December, remotely. In those last weeks at Fort Dix, arrivals were decreasing and staff were being let go or reassigned. Some Afghans from other bases were consolidated at Fort Dix; eventually it shut down.

By December PRM asked us to come back and help monitor the APA program. Not the regular refugee program, which had continued but in small numbers, but APA specifically. Many millions, if not hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on APA. Issues and complaints arose over time. Congress, and PRM, wanted oversight.

We still couldn't monitor in person because of Covid. We knew the requirements for the regular refugee resettlement program, but had to learn differing requirements and timelines for APA. It was all done online, including interviewing Afghan families and affiliate caseworkers and managers. We monitors interviewed in pairs, with interpreters

linked in for the family interviews; it was complicated and time-consuming. All the documentation was scanned or transmitted in zip files and reviewed online.

Q: Let me ask for just a little bit of an explanation of that. You were interviewing particular Afghan refugees or parolees and asking them about their experience and what the agencies were doing for them?

THAYER: Right. I was monitoring specific affiliates, like Catholic Charities in Phoenix, others in Texas. We interviewed four families per affiliate. We would select a variety of cases–a single person, large families, a couple, a single mom with kids—to get an idea how different family units with different needs and budgets were managing. We would ask specific questions about the kind and timing of assistance they had gotten and if it was appropriate and fulfilled their needs.

Q: You said you made trips, but then once you got there you could actually meet with people in person?

THAYER: My APA monitoring was all remote. Perhaps PRM staff did some in-person monitoring but Covid restricted contact work. It was too bad, because my favorite part of the job was to visit a town and actually talk to people, get a feel for the office, the staff, the community, the volunteers; not to mention the family: its members, housing, cleanliness, attitudes, school-age kids, problems. Being there, you sense the relationships among affiliate staff, meet job developers, observe cultural orientation, see donations, community outreach. Staff and families always seemed pleased to have our time and attention.

Often we monitors would try to go to a refugee restaurant if there was one. We might stop by a little corner garden where refugees would plant food or observe a women's group discussion. Sometimes we had a chance to meet with law enforcement or other service providers, to get a sense of how refugees were settling in. That can't happen if you work remotely.

Some program requirements, mainly timelines, were different for APA. Social security and work permit applications were usually done for the Afghan parolees as a group upon arrival. Unfortunately too often those initial applications were incorrect or lost and had to be redone, which was time-consuming and delayed other services. More money was involved so bookkeeping took more time and effort.

Q: How long did you work as a monitor for the Afghan program?

THAYER: The APA monitoring we did was a one-off because it was for a group that came in one big rush. PRM resettlement covers the first 30-90 days. Then refugees (or eligible parolees in the special case of Afghans) pass to programs with ORR or other agencies where they get additional benefits, job placement and training, extended case management services, etc.

Q: What is the ORR?

THAYER: The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is part of the Department of Health and Human Services. For the Afghan program, President Biden named DHS as the lead agency to run Operation Allies Welcome, later renamed Operation Enduring Welcome.

Q: You were monitoring affiliates all over the country?

THAYER: Once the APA monitoring report was released and went to Congress, my role in that ended. We did, however, resume remote monitoring of the regular refugee resettlement program. In late 2022 we began in-person monitoring again. I went to North Carolina in December 2022 and again in January 2023. That April I turned 75 and retired.

Q: Congratulations again. Broadly speaking, what kinds of patterns or what kinds of performance or differential performance did you see? What was your opinion of how the agencies and the affiliates were handling their responsibilities?

THAYER: Performance was impacted by more than the mass Afghan evacuation. Many resettlement offices had downsized or closed by 2021.

The thing I noticed was the huge struggle to rebuild staff, and lost relationships. This meant relationships with landlords, benefits offices, schools, clinics, employers, volunteers. I have great admiration for affiliate supervisors and caseworkers; they work for relatively little pay in a tough field, now increasingly buffeted by political pressures. Different agencies and affiliates have different approaches. Some tend to hire former refugees. These may start as interpreters or support staff and work their way up to case management or supervisory jobs. Some hire credentialed social workers or persons with advanced degrees.

It is heartwarming to hear former refugees talk about how grateful they are for the reception and help and encouragement they got from the agency that resettled them and the community, how they want to give back.

Yesterday, I had coffee with a friend I monitored with. We left at about the same time, in early 2023. Five of us monitors still get together a few times a year. We love recalling our monitoring days. And how much we love retirement.

Dealing with refugees is hard. They suffer unbelievable trauma and dislocation. Some are troubled and resentful. But the majority are grateful. You can almost tell after a while, which ones are going to flourish, and which will struggle to make a new life. It's not always the younger ones who are the most optimistic. I met astonishing older people, who grabbed on to new opportunities and shone.

PRM makes a big effort, which was incorporated into the Afghan program requirements, to promote gender equality. There are cultural differences that we strived to understand

and accommodate. But we made a point to ensure interpretation for the spouse, the wife, let's say, if the head of household was a man and spoke English or languages she didn't understand. We would sometimes direct questions to the wife, for example, in a culturally sensitive way, because some of the husbands didn't seem to think their wives should have any input at all. It was an example of cultural orientation to ask the wife's opinion, recognize her role.

Q: You mentioned at the beginning everybody wanted to go to the same three places, but they got full and the Afghans had to go to new places. Are there any new cities, towns or farming areas that all of a sudden now have a thriving Afghan community that stand out for you?

THAYER: I wish I knew more about that. I know, for example, places like Erie, Pennsylvania and locations in upstate New York credit refugees for reviving their communities, rust belt towns that lost jobs and population over the years. Housing deteriorated, along with schools, community life. Refugees came in and rebuilt, established businesses, raised families. These are great stories. The American dream.

I expect Afghans, like other refugees, are hardworking and versatile. Some Afghans have opened restaurants around here, the greater Washington DC area. With Afghanistan still troubled, many recognize they will not go back, soon or ever. Even though many still have relatives in Afghanistan, possibly in hiding, maybe in Pakistan, Iran, or someplace. I believe more than a million Afghans are in Pakistan. There is still the nightmare of family members in camps or hiding.

Q: I know of one former Afghan employee of USAID who worked as an administrative assistant at an NGO for about six months. She got a better paying job with one of the AID contractors and sadly moved on even though she loved working with the NGO. She said, "I'm sorry. I wouldn't do this if I didn't have to, but I have to support my family back in Afghanistan."

THAYER: That's the other thing.

Q: I think that we've come to the end of my questions. I don't know if you want to make any last comments or reflections about how the U.S. did with the surge of Afghan parolees.

THAYER: I was very dismayed by the whole thing. I guess, under the circumstances, we did the best we could. But it was terrible. I'm old enough to have been around during Vietnam. I worked in Central America during the 1980s, in Argentina during the "dirty war", in Kosovo during the Balkans wars, the Middle East, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon.

The idea of a refugee program is to provide temporary assistance until the powers that be can sort out whatever is causing people to flee. So they can return home. Durable solutions for refugees are, first, voluntary repatriation to the country of origin, then, settlement in the country of refuge, and only last, resettlement in a third country. But

conflicts today are rarely really resolved and the numbers of refugees and displaced persons keeps rising, now in the many tens of millions worldwide.

My first and only PRM job as a Foreign Service Officer was from 1986 to 1988. I headed refugee assistance programs for Latin America. That was during the Central American wars, where we ostensibly fought communism in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. I traveled throughout Central America for two years, spent time in those refugee camps.

I recently wrote a short piece about one of my proudest career moments. It was in 1987, when thousands of Salvadoran refugees who were living in refugee camps on the Honduran border under UNHCR protection insisted they were going home. The camps suffered violence, theft and forced recruitment by rebels, harassment by locals. UNHCR and the Salvadoran government opposed the move, considering it too dangerous. Salvadoran rebels didn't want to lose access and power in the camps. The refugees said they were leaving anyway.

I recall being on a phone call with senior PRM, UNHCR, and Salvadoran government officials. President Jose Napoleon Duarte, a Christian Democrat, decided the refugees would not be forcibly stopped. They would be escorted back, provided busses and security, and resettled in designated safe areas inside El Salvador, where they continued to receive UNHCR protection and assistance. A first in Latin America.

The Salvadoran refugees had learned in the camps to build shacks with chimneys, in order to keep smoke out and reduce respiratory diseases; to build latrines downstream; plant kitchen gardens; apply basic medical treatments; organize local administration; bring women into decision-making. All these steps improved their lives, and they continued them in their new community.

Q: I like that story, thank you. You are retired from PRM work. My understanding is there is a bubble of Afghans that are about to come. There's been a couple of years of the processing of P1 and P2 visas and more SIVs, and there is going to be a whole other round of Afghans arriving in the United States. Have you heard that as well?

THAYER: I read recently that Congress approved another 12,000 Afghan SIVs. I think it was in the big budget authorization bill a few weeks ago. I saw reports that roughly 5,000 Afghan SIVs have been processed per quarter. I don't know how many claimants are still out there, but I think many thousands of Afghans feel they have a claim for SIVs, which means many more family members as well.

Q: I appreciate your generosity with your time. There's one more question, Yvonne. Can you tell me what kind of recognition people in PRM ended up getting.

THAYER: Three PRM resettlement officials received Sammies [Service to America Medals] in 2022 for their work resettling Afghan parolees: Refugee Processing Center Director Hilary Ingraham, Domestic Resettlement Section Chief Holly Herrera, and Program Officer Kiera Berdinner, wonderful colleagues all. Sammies, considered the

“Oscars” of public service, recognizes extraordinary achievement. I’m glad to have been a small part of it and very proud of them.

Q: Thank you again.

THAYER: You're certainly welcome.

End of Interview