**Hometown Interview with Karimullah Kamwar, Season 7, Episode 5**

Kendall Martin: Thank you so much for joining us today, Karim. As you know, the name of this podcast is Hometown. And we chose this title because we really wanted to understand what home means, and especially to those who have been forced to leave their home for a variety of reasons. So we'd like to begin the conversation today just by asking you about the city where you're from, Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan, where you grew up in the [nineteen] eighties. When you think of home as a child, or the daily aspects of your life growing up, what your home was like?

Karim Kamwar: Thank you, Kendall. I was born in Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in the north of Afghanistan in 1980. I grew up there with my family. Mazar-e-Sharif is a city, actually, [when] we are celebrating Nowruz, during this ceremony, people from around Afghanistan are coming to Mazar-e-Sharif and celebrating Nowruz. So I love my city and also I love the local restaurants, food and people there. At the same time, Mazar-e-Sharif, it was a city [that was] always insecure, honestly. I remember my childhood there. Sometimes the government was ruling in the cities, sometimes Taliban, Mujahideen group, and sometimes it was not clear who was ruling in the cities. Yeah, I was born in that city. I [was] educated there and love it. Just at the hand, I immigrated from that city to the United States.

Kendall: And when you think about being there as a child and growing up, are there certain, like, smells or sounds or sights, things that really have like stuck with you, that for you represent what your home was?

Karim: Especially during the spring, it was a beautiful city. It was with different flowers, especially the roses. We say, *golelola*. And also, it has beautiful mountains and weather and lovely people. It's all about my home. Honestly, it's more than two years that I'm not living in that city, but every night when I dream, in my dream, I'm in my city. Yeah, I still, I dream in the city, but my parents, my siblings still they're living there. Every day I'm in touch with them during asking about great thing or asking about each other. Once again, I will ask about the city I was going on the city. Yeah, it's sweet home. I never can forget this.

Kendall: Is there anything you think that is important for people to know or understand about the conditions in which your family and others like your family were living in Afghanistan in the 80s and 90s?

Karim: The decades between the 80s and 90s, and up to 2000. So yeah, it was actually decades. That was the years, actually, it was not a developed city and there was not diversity. There was not people coming as tourists from other countries because mostly it was insecure. But I remember the local people, they were living with peace. They were living with each other's -- actually, people were celebrating traditions. I remember that mostly people were using newspaper. I have read that there was a newspaper or publishing, there was a cinema, and everything seems so beautiful in the cities, once the war started, but unfortunately everything is destroyed.

Janet Morford: So just one quick question of clarification. I think you mentioned Nowruz. Is that holiday the celebration of spring? Is that right?

Karim: Yeah, Nowruz is the first day of spring. In Afghanistan -- actually this ceremony is celebrat[ed] in Afghanistan and some countries around us like Tajikistan, Iran and most of the countries celebrating those Nowruz -- but the center of Nowruz, if you ask me, the main place for Nowruz is Mazar-e-Sharif.

Janet: So we want to hear a little bit more about your education. We understand you went to college and you studied journalism at Balkh University, and then you earned a master's degree in business management at another university, Kazakh American Free University. Could you just give us a little bit of a sense of what it was like to go to college, to pursue education and plan for a career when you're growing up in Afghanistan at that time?

Karim: I studied journalism at Balkh University and graduated in 2008. For a while, I worked as a reporter with local media in Mazar-e-Sharif. So after working one, two, three years, then I understood being a reporter, [one is] faced with two main challenges there. Firstly, a reporter is always at risk in Afghanistan and risk is a concern everywhere which there is not a secure country. Secondly, journalism itself, the field, is an occupation with very low income.

So I decided to change my field from journalism to working with nonprofits. It was 2009 or 2010 [when] I joined nonprofits and I started working there as a trainer, program officer, program manager for a while. When I started working with nonprofits, it provided a lot of opportunity for me. One of them was I had time to study to do my master's degree at the Kazakh American Free University. Because I was working in the field of management, I could build my career there and studied business management. So it was that time. On the other hand, higher education, it was very common in Afghanistan. Mostly young people were dreaming to study higher education, but it was all about the bachelor's [degree]. And it was another thing for people after completing their bachelor's, they study to master it and do their PhD on some things, to go further. Unfortunately, there was no university and professors for continuing education. Mostly the young preferred to go outside of the country and do their master's or PhD and come back to the country. Overall in Afghanistan, this was the process of education. In Afghanistan, the government was providing the education opportunity for young [people]. Besides the government, the private sector also are providing those services, but the fees and tuition was very low. We cannot compare with any countries. If you ask about the quality of these educations, yeah, the quality was unfortunately a little not suitable. Most of the young, after graduating from those universities, when you travel to other countries for working, they faced many challenge about the quality of [their] education.

Janet: We understand that you have a family, right? Could you tell us a little bit about your family and the sense of responsibility that you felt for them as you grew up and started to work, and particularly as you felt that the situation in Afghanistan was changing? Can you tell us a little bit about sort of how you thought about your life as an adult?

Karim: In Afghanistan, there was a lot of challenge for finding jobs as well, like other countries, especially for the job markets. But actually, the government, working with government, it was not difficult finding a job. Government was very easy, but the government was not paying enough for the families, for the employees. But the private sector as well. So most of the people were educated to find job at nonprofits, especially international organizations that were providing funds for the programs. It was the reason everyone had a desire to work with those organizations. I was one of them. Fortunately, I found the opportunity to apply to some positions and finally received an offer and started working with one of those nonprofit organizations.

Kendall: Can you tell us about your journey leaving home to come to the U.S.?

Karim: It's a story for me. It was about August 15, 2021, when the U.S. military withdraw from Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the government collapsed, and the Taliban seized power, and we left the house. And it was, in fact, no one was anticipating such issues that the government would collapse. But shortly it collapsed, and so we were in a bad situation, honestly.

So finally, our organizations at the main office in Washington, DC, and we decided [we had] to evacuate from Afghanistan to the U.S. At first, we flew from Kabul to Doha, Qatar, and we stayed there in a military camp for more than two months. Finally, we flew from Qatar to the US. We landed at Dulles Airport in Washington, DC. Then we camped at Fort Dix, New Jersey for about two months. After that, we settled in Syracuse, New York.

Kendall: Just so I can wrap my head around it, what was the timeframe from like that very first point of leaving your house to arriving in the U.S., to being processed?

Karim: We arrived at the U.S., it was December, end of December 2021.

Janet: So we understand that when the U.S. military pulled out of Afghanistan, you said August 15th, 2021, it created enormous chaos and many things happened very quickly. But most importantly, it left many Afghans at risk of persecution under the Taliban. So many people were trying to leave as quickly as possible.

We understand that Afghans who were able to leave, if they were admitted to the U.S., they might come to the U.S. with one of several *different* legal statuses. Some people came with an SIV, some people came as refugees, and some people came with another status like humanitarian parolee. So much was happening in a very short time, as your family's experience shows. But we understand that you and your family, when you arrived in the United States in December 2021, that you were granted this third status of humanitarian parolee. Is that correct? Could you explain how that was determined?

Karim: Yes. When the U.S. military withdrew from Afghanistan and the government collapsed, in fact, many Afghans faced heightened risk under the Taliban rule and sought to leave the country urgently. Upon arrival in the U.S. in December 2021, my family and I were granted the status of humanitarian parolees. As you know, this designation was determined based on the urgent humanitarian need for protection and assistance. As humanitarian parolees, we were allowed to enter the U.S. temporarily due to compelling humanitarian reasons or significant public benefits. This status provided us with temporary relief from deportation and allowed us to reside in the U.S. legally for a specific period. However, unlike refugees or Special Immigration Visa (SIV) holders, humanitarian parolees do not have the same access to certain benefits and the pathway to permanent residency. For us, being granted humanitarian parole means having a lifeline aimed at a dire situation. It offers safety and protection from [passage unclear?] in Afghanistan and provides us with the opportunity to rebuild our lives in the U.S. While it was not a permanent solution, it allowed us to be in the process of seeking more stable and secure long-term immigration status.

Janet: Thank you, Karim. I think you explained that really well, that it was really valuable to have the safety and the protection. At the same time because it happened so quickly and for these humanitarian reasons, there was a time limit to it. There was no *clear* pathway to permanent residency. You had to go through other obstacles to get there, right? So we'll talk a little bit more about that, but that's really helpful. And I think for a lot of our listeners, many people saw the images and understand how horrific the situation, how quickly things turned in Afghanistan, and yet people don't always understand those details. So thank you very much for explaining that.

Kendall: Like many Afghan humanitarian parolees, you and your family were first taken to a U.S. military base. And as I understand it, your family was taken to Fort Dix in New Jersey. Could you tell our listeners what that was like? What were you told when you arrived to the military base, and what was the understanding of how that was going to be processed?

Karim: Yeah. So for me, both camps, Al-Saleem Camps in Doha and Fort Dix Camp in New Jersey, played a key role in these evacuations for all Afghans and provided excellent support for Afghan refugees. They offered essential services such as food, place, medical care, and other necessities. Additionally, the military personnel in the camps were very kind and polite. And we always appreciate their exemplary behavior. Once again, I'm very thankful of those military people that provided service for us. And honestly, they were very kind, very supportive for those refugees because I already never thought, never I was in touch with military. I had another idea, they are military, maybe they will be very serious people. When we entered in the camp, they said to us, “Welcome!” They were very kind people. I honestly never can forget their services.

Kendall: So you were at the military base for two months, right? So in order for you to leave the military base to go to the community that you were going to live in, what were those steps? Did you know when you were going to be leaving to go to Syracuse?

Karim: No, just my wife and I didn’t know any civilians or relatives in the U.S. Honestly, we were just searching on Google and YouTube about the cities of the United States. Which city is better? Which one of them is beautiful? How we can live there? We were searching about this. So the procedure was like administration were deciding to resettle the people in different cities. During staying in camp after one month, when they informed us, we will resettle in Syracuse. So do we are accepting or not, they asked, was the question. So we can come, And at first we start Googling about Syracuse. So we found that Syracuse is a beautiful city with very kind people. Then we did some pros and cons. The living cost is very low here. We can have a good life, the community is very friendly. So we accepted, we accepted Syracuse. Although it's a little cold, but [that] doesn't matter. People are adapted with everything and Syracuse, we have accepted Syracuse. So when we arrived in Syracuse, yeah, the day, it was February. Honestly, it was snowing. It was snowing, but we started adapting. We started adapting with the weather, with community, with people, with system. So [after] a while, we secured home, then the child[ren were] going to school. They learn language and after two years, we are feeling that now Syracuse is our home and we can only say it is.

Janet: I also was really touched to hear that you found the welcome of the US military personnel, both in Qatar and in the United States, to be so warm and welcoming. I'm wondering, is there any moment from that, that kind of stands out in your mind of -- how the military personnel interacted with families who were arriving from Afghanistan?

Karim: Yeah. The procedure was for SIV holders, they were issuing visas at the camp at Qatar camp, the US embassy was issuing visas. For humanitarians, there were no visas, just they were evacuating them to the US and we were receiving visas at our arrival. So the immigration officer was stamping our passports. We were afraid: maybe they will deport us, or give us visas or no visas. So when we arrived at Dulles airport, the officer, immigration officer, was checking our passports. So finally she stamped and gave us the passport for us. My wife can't speak English. So when I was checking the passport, a military soldier said [to us], “Welcome, brother, to the U.S.” My wife said, “What he said?” I told her, he said welcome to us and here's the visa. And it was the moment that honestly, we were laughing. It was the moment, I've been in this moment, I never can forget the speech [when] military soldiers told us welcome. It was the best welcome in my life in the U.S. (Yeah.)

Overall, when we arrived in the camp, they said [to] us welcome. When we arrived in Syracuse, at the resettlement agency, everyone is saying welcome. So overall, based on their behavior and warm welcoming speech, we see they are happy for our immigration, so there's not any [concerns] in this regard. Yeah, it seems so. Honestly, some of my friends and colleagues immigrated to other countries. As we are discussing with them, they are not remembering such moments. It was their appearance and what they are saying on their heart, it was the same and it was really a very warm welcome. We are thankful of them.

Janet: Well, I think many people in the United States -- in the military and beyond the military -- are also keenly aware of just how much the U.S. military in Afghanistan depended on Afghan nationals, because we don't speak Pashtun or Dari or any of the languages that you needed to get around in Afghanistan and to feel welcome there. And Afghans have been very welcoming. Many Afghans have been very welcoming of Americans.

Karim: Thank you.

Janet: So in early 2022, I think it was around February, you said, you and your family finally left Fort Dix and came to live in Syracuse. And at that point, you were connected with Interfaith Works, the organization that was assigned to oversee your “reception and placement,” to help you really get your feet on the ground during the first 90 days. You talked a little bit about some of the services that you got from them. Was this support available only for 90 days? Was that the understanding, or could it go longer than that?

Karim: Initially, I'm grateful to InterFaith Works for taking on our case and providing food, shelter, and housing for my family and me. However, as I have experienced the immigration process, there have been challenging [parts of the] resettlement process. Overall, it was not an easy process. For example, caseworkers are often overloaded with numerous clients, resulting in limits available for individual support. Additionally, that 90 day support period provided for refugees seems insufficient. Specifically, considering the language barrier that many immigrants face in the US. At the same time, there's a lot of difference when we immigrated into the U.S.

The second issue was the digital world. We are struggling with digital applications. It was a little difficult to find public transportation, making appointments, shopping for something online, paying bills. It was all another challenge for us. Actually, the resettlement agencies providing those 90 days service, I think that was not enough for me and other refugees. Firstly, it's a short period. Secondly, the caseworker is overloaded. The caseworker has not enough time, and therefore refugee families.

Janet: That makes a lot of sense. You pointed to some of the things that are often difficult for newcomers, depending on their English -- and your English is quite good, by the way -- depending on their digital literacy and their ability to do all these things and fill out forms. And I mean, there are a lot of those tasks that are hard for Americans, let alone someone who's coming from a completely different culture, who may not have the digital skills, may not have the English skills. So those are all really hard barriers.

Karim: I would like to add something. This is the point that I am also suggesting for communities. For communities, they need to take part in the resettlement process with resettlement agencies. Every community, there should be at least a team of volunteers, a team of volunteers. When new immigrants come, they should be in touch with them and should share their numbers and say to them, “We know the caseworkers are overloaded. Please contact us if you need some things. Maybe you need some things that we can provide you -- for housing, maybe food, shelter, clothes, and providing services.” I think beside this, resettlement agency, community organizations, especially the community, the team of volunteers should be taking part [in] this process. It's very difficult. Honestly, the U.S. is very [different] from other countries that we [have lived in]. Here everything is developed, most developed. So it's very tough for new immigrants to start new life here, faced with many challenges. At least we need some directions, some training. We don't know about the roads, the policy. There's a lot of things the community or those volunteers can teach them slowly, slowly. Then the person will be an active member of the community. Although it did not take part, I'm sure it will take more than one year to two years for the person to adapt to live in the community.

Janet: Yeah, that aligns very much with what we see and know -- newcomers who are matched with a team of local volunteers, it really helps them. It really helps the caseworkers who, as you said, have a lot of cases to work with. And every case is different! So it's really hard. You're working with families, you're working with people! It's really hard to have -- it's not like an assembly line. It's not like a factory. You can’t treat everybody the same. And so, so we do need lots of people to be involved.

If you think back to those first few months when you arrived in Syracuse and you were finally where you were going to be, what was most important to you and your family during that time? What did you most need help with?

Karim: The most important for me, honestly, you are overall thinking about how to start a new life in the U.S., how to engage with those communities and how to work and how to find jobs and use those services. It was a little difficult. So the only things -- but at the same time, one thing make us sure there will be a lot of other organization, even governments will assist us. We will find food, shelters and jobs finally. It will make us sure we'll find it. It does make us some confident. But at the same time, yeah, you are thinking about the kids, how they can enroll them in the schools, how they will be able to go to school and come back home. It was a little different. So, by the way, we overcome those challenges, but I never can forget to assist anyone, even case workers, the resettlement agency, the neighbors and other people, yeah, they assisted us.

Kendall: What was your experience like having to search for work in Syracuse? Because I think one of the things that always sticks with me is -- I can't imagine what it feels like to go to a country and you have humanitarian parole, but all that's telling you is you have this limited amount of time and protection. But then if you're also expected to find employment, to care for your family, I mean, that's a lot for anybody. So I'm just curious, like, what was that process for you?

Karim: Yeah, there was a time when I had to start working despite uncertainty about how long my family and I would be able to stay in the U.S. Upon our arrival in Syracuse, I felt strong sense of urgency to find employment, to support my family and contribute to our new community. Regardless of our immigration status, my search for work in Syracuse was challenging, yet determined. I utilized various resources such as online job boards, community organizations, and networking opportunities to explore employment options. Despite facing challenges, barriers and unfamiliarity with the local job market, I remained persistent and adaptable. I actively sought out positions that aligned with my skills and experience as I worked in non-profits as a manager. While I also being open to opportunities that could provide stability and growth. Through perseverance and determination, I eventually secured employment that allowed me to support my family and establish roads in Syracuse. Now I'm working at the Syracuse North Community Center as program manager, and it was my field.

Kendall: That's awesome. And can you tell us about the work that you do at the community center?

Karim: I work as a digital empowerment manager in the center. I have a team of four employees, so they are digital navigators. We are actually teaching the clients, the participants, digital applications. So most of the clients are also refugees. I was based on my understanding about the needs in the community. It was that most of the participants should be refugees. Yeah. Today there are more than 700 participants and our database, most of them are refugees. They are coming and we are teaching them those applications. We are starting them with Google Maps, email, shopping online, using public transportation, paying bills, finding insurance, and it is all applications we are teaching them in the center.

Janet: That's really, really helpful because as you observed earlier, in the United States, we continue to take for granted this level of digital literacy. And if people don't have it, then it's really hard to integrate. So that's very valuable.

So we know that you entered the U.S. with your family as humanitarian parolees, but we understand that once you got to Syracuse, you got some help from a local organization of volunteer lawyers and that you were able to submit applications for asylum. Can you tell us a little bit about that process and what happened?

Karim: Yeah, certainly. The process of applying for asylum involves several steps, as you know, that were added in the last year. In our case with the assistance of the Volunteer Lawyer Project of CNY, we were able to prepare and submit our asylum application. This application [explained] why we were seeking asylum, which typically includes fear of persecution in our home country. Asylum offers several advantages over humanitarian parole status. Firstly, asylum provides a pathway to lawful permanent residency or green card. After one year of approval, this allows individuals to remain in the U.S. indefinitely and eventually apply for citizenship. Additionally, as asylum recipients, I have the right to work legally in the U.S. and may be eligible for certain benefits such as health care and social services. Overall, obtaining asylum would provide my family and me with greater stability and security and opportunity for long-term integration and success in the United States compared to our initial status as humanitarian parole.

Kendall: So then you heard in November 2023 that the request for asylum was granted. How did that feel to find that out? I mean, I can't even imagine!

Karim: Yeah, honestly, receiving the news from USCIS in November 2023 that our request for asylum was granted was an incredible moment for my family and me! It felt like a weight had been lifted off our shoulders and a sense of relief washed over us, knowing that we could now build a future in the United States with greater security and stability. For years we had lived with uncertainty and fear but the asylum approval provided us with a renewed sense of hope and opportunity. It means that we could fully integrate into American society, pursue our dreams, and contribute to our new community without the constant fear of deportations. The milestone marked the culmination of our journey to seek safety and protection. And it reaffirmed our belief in the principle of justice and humanity. We were immensely grateful to the Volunteer Lawyer Project of CNY and all those who supported us along with way. Overall, it was a moment of humanity, joy and grateful, and it filled us with the hope for the future.

Janet: So if you kind of step back from these key points in your story, what do you wish that more people in the United States understood about the situation of newcomers and how to make newcomers feel really welcome and how to really help people, you know, give them the time that they need, give them the support that they need to not just survive, but contribute -- as you clearly are. Like what do more people need to understand?

Karim: Based on my experience, when refugees arrive in the US, at least you should consider three steps for start living in the U.S. The first will be at durations since their arrival up to maybe take them six months or one year. It is the process of completing documents, securing house and using public benefits. Secondly, getting a driving license, buying car, finding job, making credits. And the third states will be enjoy living in the U.S. They can make money. They can buy house. They can travel around the country. So this is the time they can stay here and have their citizenship, make home.

Janet: Yeah, so you can clearly trace what a newcomer can expect. But what about people like me who have lived here all our life? What do *we* need to understand about what you and other newcomers are going through?

Karim: I think most of the surveys already has been done. So, yeah. All the money that [is spent] on refugees, I know it is the money that you're paying tax. You already did your part. But during these evacuations for accepting refugees [like from Afghanistan], yeah, as I mentioned in my previous [answers], you can also contribute as a volunteer. If you are interested in assisting refugees, it will be another thing. Furthermore, being in touch with resettlement agencies and finding jobs for refugees and assisting them in different ways. But as I see the systems, the government systems, the only things which is very necessary for refugees, it is directions and trainings and teaching them what's good, what's bad in the US, what is the role. Honestly, the refugees don't know the role, even the culture of people. You can teach them the things.

Janet: Outside of the refugee resettlement agency that helped you with a caseworker, were there other places where you felt like it would be easy for Americans to step up and help newcomers like you?

Karim: Yeah, community centers are playing a key role beside the agencies, different community centers. As I see right now, there is a center [with an] English learning course, they are providing literacies, education, and also charges, providing a lot of foods and some things. There are also different programs [providing] food, clothes, and other things which is needed. And it all seems very -- yeah, this is the things that can be very key for the refugees.

Kendall: Is there any part of your journey or your story that you would like to share with us that we didn't ask you about or you think is important to know?

Karim: Honestly, when we get the decision to immigrate, it's not easy. We think a lot about many challenges or problems that we will face. But as we experience, it's worth it. It's worth it to immigrate and have a new life since our country [was] captured by Taliban and there is no chance for [returning]. At the same time, my daughter, she is now 17 so since I immigrated in the U.S. and she has dream to study, to [be] educate[d], and to become a doctor.

Yeah, if I compare this situation if I were in Afghanistan, maybe there will be no chance for [to be living?]. As I said the Taliban are taking revenge and they are seeking for different types of people, especially for the people that work with the U.S. government or organizations. And at the same time, my wife and daughter had no chance for the educations. Right now, they are educating [getting an education]. They are learning everything. My wife also is going to a course to learn the take care. Very soon she will graduate from those courses and she will provide services in a center for take care of children. So overall, I think it's worth it. It's worth it for immigrating, especially living in the U.S.

Kendall: Absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. We're really, really grateful for your time today. And I want to close our conversation out, asking you a question we ask all our guests, which is: what does home mean to you?

Karim: Home to me is more than just a physical location. It's a feeling of comfort, belonging and connection. While my journey has taken me to a different place, home is where I'm surrounded by loved ones, where I feel support[ed], and understood. My family, friends, and community play a crucial role in making a place feel like home, as well as the sense of familiarity, safety, and acceptance. Additionally, home is where I can freely express my identity, culture, and values, without fear of judgment. Ultimately, it makes a reflection of the relationship and memories that I cherish, regardless of the geographic locations.

Janet: That's so well said, Karim. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. And we're just thrilled that your home is now here in Syracuse and so delighted for you and your family -- especially your daughter, to think of her pursuing her dreams now, in the education and the impact that she wants to have. And I really want to thank you for all the contributions that you have already made to the fabric of this country.

Karim: Thank you for having me. Thank you very much.