**Hometown Interview with Nasratullah Khalil, Season 7, Episode 3**

Janet Morford: Well, thank you so much for joining us today, Khalil. As you know, the name of this podcast is HomeTown, and it was born out of a conversation around what home means or what home represents, especially for people who have been forced from their home and find themselves making a home in a new land. So I'd love to begin our conversation today by asking you about your early years growing up in Afghanistan. Can you tell our listeners about the amazing place where you grew up?

Nasratullah Khalil: Yeah, thank you very much for your question. I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Kabul is the capital city of Afghanistan. And I was born in Kabul in Bagh-e-bala in 1980.

Janet: And can you tell us a little bit about Bagh-e-bala?

Khalil: Yeah, Bagh-e-bala is a Dari name. In English, we can call it “high garden” because it's located on the hillside, in the upper side, and it has a lot of trees. And there is an Intercontinental Hotel, the famous hotel of Afghanistan, it's also located in this park. So it has a beautiful view. You can see most of the Kabul area from this park because it's located in the hillside. So mostly people, I mean, families and also individuals, they are coming there for picnics, especially in the weekend, which is Friday -- in Afghanistan, Friday is the last day of the week. So it's a public holiday. People are coming for picnics. And also, people are coming there for exercises, especially in the early morning. So, yeah.

Janet: It really sounds lovely from your description. I just think of all the almond trees and fruit trees and it sounds like a beautiful place. Besides the fact that you lived in this beautiful place on the outskirts of Kabul, what else do you think is important to know about your early years?

Khalil: Actually, I was grew up in Bagh-e-bala and I studied at school, I mean elementary, middle and high school, I completed all in Bagh-e-bala and its famous place in Kabul. My parents were there and we were all living together there.

Janet: And when you think of home during those early years in Bagh-e-bala, what smells or tastes or sounds or habits do you associate with home in that place?

Khalil: Yes, actually when I was coming from the school around 12:30 -- the school is usually from 8 AM till 12 or 12:30 PM -- so when I reached home around one o 'clock -- the school was very close to my home – and then we were sitting together in our yard. We had a big yard in our house. My grandmother, my mother, my aunts, they were all gathering together for the lunch. So I was eating lunch together with them.

And then after that I was playing with my siblings, my cousins, my neighbors. Usually the famous game was kite. We were playing [with] kites. We were doing our homework together in one specific room which was dedicated for our homework. So we had the best time of our life in the first decade of my life. I mean in [the 19]90s, that is when I was in the elementary and middle school. So it was my golden time.

Kendall Martin: That sounds really lovely. I'm also curious about your education experience growing up. I mean, during the years of ongoing civil war and rocket attacks, what conditions were like in your school during those years?

Khalil: Yes. As I mentioned before, during my time in elementary and middle school, everything was normal. I mean the security situation was good. We didn't have any issue with that. But after middle school when I went to high school, the civil war started. So it was really difficult for us. Not only for me, for everyone like me. The high school was 10 minutes walk[ing] distance from my house, but still it was very challenging. It was difficult time for us. Mentally, we were not ready for the lectures, for the schools, for the classes, but physically we were there. Because every day we witnessed the rockets, the bombing. And even one day we were at the class and two rockets hit our neighborhood. So everyone escaped. A lot of students were injured because of the rockets, because the window was broken. So everyone escaped. It was really a difficult time for us.

Kendall: Yes, it had to be incredibly stressful and distressing for everyone. During that time, what did you learn from those around you and how to, I guess, really adapt and make your way through what was really intense and stressful for everyone around you?

Khalil: Yes, yes. But even if, I mean, there are these problems, tensions, difficulties -- my parents and my teacher encouraged me to complete my education and [all the] time they were asking me, “Never give up!” This is the time that I complete my education. So in order to have a better future, in order to continue your education, you have to go to the class, there was no way, no way. That was the path forward -- was education. Yeah.

Janet: Khalil, you also mentioned that by the time that things had gotten so bad that you were looking to leave Afghanistan, you had four young children. Would you mind telling us a little bit more about the growth of your family?

Khalil: Yes, after the completion of the high school and university and then my master's degree, in recent years I was working with a U.S. Army subcontractor company as a finance assistant manager. So I had a SIV case and I was eligible for the SIV case. So I applied for that SIV case and I almost completed all the process and I was waiting for the visa interview at the Kabul [U.S.] embassy. Unfortunately, the previous government of Afghanistan fell, so the US embassy in Afghanistan stopped its works and activities in Afghanistan. I had no choice. I had no choice.

Then I was at home with my four children. We didn't go outside, just except for some groceries and some other occasions. We were staying at home. We were just changing our home from one place to other place, to relatives, friends. Because at that time, between when the previous government of Afghanistan collapsed and the Taliban came and captured Afghanistan, there was a gap. There was a gap between this period. Yeah, so it was difficult time too for everyone.

Janet: Right. If we could, I just want to make sure we understand this whole sort of transition, because it sounds very, very difficult. I think it's also very important to your story. So after you finished high school, you did go to the university in Afghanistan?

Khalil: Yes. Yes. After high school, I went to Kabul University, after the entry exam. I studied at the economics faculty, and then started work with the government at the Kabul International Airport. And after a few years, I quit the job with the government and I started work with private companies.

Janet: Okay, but you said that those private companies that you worked with, one was a subcontractor with the US Army?

Khalil: Yes, yes, exactly. It was a subcontractor with the US Army.

Janet: And so that is what made you eligible to apply for a Special Immigrant Visa?

Khalil: Yes, exactly.

Janet: You had applied for that visa and you were waiting for it when the Americans pulled out and the government of Afghanistan fell. And it was after the government fell that you and your family had to start moving around the country from place to place?

Khalil: Yes, because as I mentioned before, there was a gap. It was when the previous government of Afghanistan, I mean, they escaped from Afghanistan. There was some security issues. No one was in power at that time. (Right.) Yeah, even some criminals escaped from the jail. You know then -- what will happen in that case?

Janet: How long did that sort of gap without a clear government in place last?

Khalil: Almost, let's say...it was less than a month.

Kendall: So then within that time frame, like, can you walk us through what the steps in the process were, for you applying to get Special Immigrant Visa status?

Khalil: Actually, as I mentioned before, I was waiting for the visa interview. I already filed the application. I mean, the DS-260 -- I can't remember the name of that form, which is the application for the visa -- I already submitted everything and I was waiting to schedule my visa interview at [the U.S.] embassy [in Kabul]. But due to the situation of Afghanistan, the embassy stopped their activities, their works in Afghanistan. But before the government of Afghanistan, I mean the previous government of Afghanistan fell, American forces started to evacuate their Afghan colleagues, their Afghan colleagues. And this process was going very well.

But after the previous government fell, lots of people rushed to the airport and tried to include themselves in the evacuation flights, regardless of their experience with US Army. And you know, then unfortunately, some people hung themselves from the airplane, fell down and were killed. So this rush disturbed the evacuation process.

However, I received an email from Afghan SIV and they sent me an airport visa and they asked me and directed me to go to the east gate of the airport. But when I went there, there was a large number of people, let's say more than 50,000 people were there. They were trying, they were trying to escape. They were trying to enter the airport and include themselves to the evacuation flights.

And at that time, I decided to stay home because it was very dangerous for me. My children were not in the age. I mean, they were too young. I have four children. They were too young. It was very difficult for me to enter the airport with these young children.

Kendall: Right. And what was your expectation at that point, for how long it was going to take for you to be able to get you and your family safely out?

Khalil: Actually, it was not clear, honestly. It was not clear. Everyone was optimistic about the situation to be changed soon, but it was not clear. So it took almost three months. All international flights were stopped. So yeah, it took almost three months.

Janet: That must have been just horrific. I mean, seeing the rush on the airport, knowing that you wanted to get your family out, knowing that you had the documentation necessary, but not being able to get there and not, not, you know, just not feeling safe. That sounds really difficult.

So you said then when you were in that situation and just waiting, you and your family just kept moving from one place to another?

Khalil: Yes, to our relatives' houses. Not only because of the Taliban, but because of some other people, unknown people. They were looking for those people who were working with the U.S. companies who had got salary. So they were looking for those people, I mean those criminals who escaped from the jail.

Kendall: So after several months, then you were able to make it to the U.S. Embassy in Abu Dhabi for your interview. Is that correct?

Khalil: Yes, that's correct.

Kendall: OK. And so once you had the interview, then you knew when you and your family would be able to leave?

Khalil: Yes. Actually, when the international airline or the domestic airlines resumed their flights to Kabul, I purchased a ticket. You know, the tickets before, it was, let's say, $300 for a return ticket to Dubai, then [back] to Kabul. But at that time, it was around $2,000 for *one-way* trip. Yeah. So it was a really difficult time. So I was up late and I purchased tickets for all my children and my wife.

So I [we] moved to Dubai. I stayed there for almost four months. Then I requested to transfer my case from US embassy in Kabul to Dubai. It took almost three months that they transferred my case to Dubai. And I had a very difficult time. You know, the living costs were very high in Dubai, staying in a hotel is not fun. It's very expensive, especially with a family of four or five. In total, we were six people. So for six people, it’s very expensive to stay in a hotel for four months. Yeah.

Finally, I decided after three months, I decided to go back to Afghanistan because of the economic situation. I was decided to go back to Afghanistan. But for the last time, I sent an email to the US Embassy in Abu Dhabi and I requested them for the last time. So luckily, they replied to my email and they scheduled the visa interview.

So we went there. First. we completed the immigration medical examination. And then we went to the US embassy in Abu Dhabi and attended to the interview day.

Kendall: And can you tell us how it felt when you finally obtained your SIV status?

Khalil: Yeah, we were very happy, especially my children. Yes. My children, they were very, very happy because before that, I told them, I asked them to be ready: “We are going back to Afghanistan because I don't have money. I don't have money for our living costs, for the hotel costs. So we must go back to Afghanistan.” They were worried about that. And when they heard that our visa interview is scheduled and then the approval and they were very, very happy.

Janet: It’s just, it's really remarkable -- that whole process of having to figure out things sort of one step at a time. And I can only imagine how stressful that was, to do that with four young children and a spouse and trying to figure out how to wrangle all of that. It was really difficult.

Khalil: It was really stressful.

Janet: Yeah. And you said that once you knew that you had the Special Immigrant Visa, you asked to be resettled in Syracuse, New York, because you had a cousin living there? (Yes.) Did you know anything else about Syracuse before you arrived?

Khalil: No. Actually, when I received my visa with my passport and my address, [at the] hotel, then I received a call from IOM, and they were asking me about a place where I want to be resettled. I was asking my cousin, I was in touch with my cousin. (Okay.) And they [my cousins] asked me to come here to Syracuse. She was studying at the Onondaga Community College and my grand-cousin was working at the Syracuse Community Health Center and beside that they had a business here [unintelligible]. So they asked me to come live here. And I didn't know anything more about Syracuse. What was important for me was to be resettled in the U.S.

Janet: Do you remember any of your first impressions of Syracuse and the United States?

Khalil: Yeah. You know, Dubai is a very advanced city, in all aspects. I mean, Dubai has a very, very high living standards. So everything is modern and standard. When we entered to the -- first we arrived in JFK and then we transferred to another local airport, then we reached Syracuse. My children asked me, “Father, is this US? Is this America?” (laughter) “Yes, this is America. Be patient, be patient!”

Janet: It [Syracuse] was a little underwhelming. (laughter)

Khalil: Yes, this was really strange.

Janet: It must have been quite a shock. (Yeah.) So you were resettled with support from InterFaith Works of Central New York. Could you tell us a little more about the specific services and direct assistance that InterFaith Works provided to you and your family?

Khalil: As I mentioned, my cousins were living here, and she was my US Tie. She informed me that someone from InterFaith resettlement agency contacted her and they were asking about me and everything. They discussed some issues with my US Tie.

And then when my flight is scheduled and I arrived at the Syracuse Airport, I was welcomed by my caseworker from InterFaith Works. And she was really professional. She welcomed me with a good way. Then she transferred me to the hotel because the apartment that they rented for us was not ready -- it was under maintenance. Or the maintenance work was finished, but the paint was wet. So I stayed for a couple of days at the hotel and they served me at the hotel. And after a couple of days, they transferred me to the apartment.

Janet: Did the fact that you were from Afghanistan and had an SIV, did that determine in any way the kind of services or support that you were eligible for at that point?

Khalil: No, actually the services, I mean the service that the InterFaith provided for me at that time, it was the same for all immigrants [all refugees or SIVs assigned to the agency]. It was the same resettlement process for all.

Janet: And out of those, you know, resettlement services that all refugees and SIV holders receive from an organization like InterFaith Works, what was most important or most helpful to you and your family during those first few months in Syracuse?

Khalil: Yeah, you know when an immigrant enters to the new country, everything is completely new for them. InterFaith Works, I mean the resettlement agency, they helped me with shelter, with education, I mean with school enrollment, medical appointments, establishing care, connecting to the benefits system, like food stamps, insurance, rental assistance, these issues, which was very, very helpful for me. And also with transportation.

Kendall: Yeah, those are all very integral services to receive if you're going to be able to get on your own two feet. And I'm curious for you, I mean, it's a lot to juggle coming to a new country with four children and a spouse and then figuring out your next step. And I'm curious what the experience was like for you, looking for work in an unfamiliar place and figuring out what that next step would look like.

Khalil: Yeah, it was really difficult because I didn't know how to apply. Where should I go? But my caseworker, I mean, after 90 days period of their services at InterFaith Works, when they closed my case, they referred me to the employment specialist of InterFaith Works. I had a couple of meetings with these people and they were really helpful. They helped me with my CV. Then at the meantime, I heard that InterFaith Works announced some job opportunities, and I asked my caseworker if I can apply to this position. She told me, “Yes, of course it is open for everyone. You can apply and you can follow the process and after the interview they will decide.” So I applied and I followed the process. After the first and second interview, they announced that I can start my work from this day.

Kendall: That's wonderful.

Khalil: Yeah, it was really...

Kendall: Yeah, can you tell us about your role with InterFaith Works?

Khalil: Yeah, initially I was working as an ASA coordinator, [that] means Afghan Supplemental Assistance Coordinator. It was specifically for Afghans. I was supporting Afghans with their needs, such as medical appointments, insurance, and bill payments, and some other issues and referrals like immigration status change, these transportations.

Kendall: What do you enjoy about your work?

Khalil: It was really enjoyable for me because I was working with those people who passed the same process that I passed when I came from Afghanistan. I knew their problems, their difficulties, and they can easily share their problems and their concerns with me because I was in the same level.

Kendall: In addition to finding employment and finding that stability, were there other things that helped you and your family start to feel settled in your new community?

Khalil: Actually, my cousin's family, besides the InterFaith workers and my job, in these issues, my cousin's family, they directed me, they helped me a lot. Most of the issues, most of the things, because they have been living here for the last five years. So they have enough experience in each field. It was very helpful for me.

Janet: It's interesting because your cousin helped you and then in your first role with InterFaith Works, you were helping newly arrived Afghans, you know. So there's this process of people who have been through the process being really helpful to others. Were there people who are not Afghan who made you feel welcome in Syracuse or more generally in the U.S.?

Khalil: Yes, yes, of course. At InterFaith, they have different programs. I mean, different budgets. So as I mentioned my previous job as a ASA coordinator, it was just specifically for the Afghans. But my current position is for all immigrants. I have some clients from Syria, from Afghanistan, from Yemen, from other countries as well. So the service is the same for everyone. We welcome every and each client and immigrant. But the funding cycle is different for Afghans and for Ukrainians. We have different budgets and for the other immigrants we have separate budget.

Janet: Right. So there are different funding streams but most people who arrive as refugees are, regardless of where they have come from, they are offered the same services.

Khalil: Yes, yes. The service is the same for everyone.

Janet: And in your current role? Did I understand?

Khalil: Oh, yeah, sorry. Yeah. Currently, I am working as an Intensive Case Coordinator. Mostly, I help and I assist those clients [who are], I mean, above their 90 days period, above their 90 days period with the caseworker. And when the caseworker see that this client needs extra assistance, extra support, then they refer the client to our program, to the PC ICM, which is Preferred Communities Intensive Case Management. And then we have some procedure, I mean, pre-enrollment assessment or interview, and we ask some questions from the client. And after the pre -enrollment assessment, we see if they are eligible to receive our services or not. Then we inform the client that you are eligible to receive our service and we can start our work with the client.

Janet: So the Preferred Communities Intensive Case Management program, it sounds like it's designed to help people who need longer than 90 days [of support for resettlement], often for very good reasons.

Khalil: Yeah, yeah. The immigrants, I mean the clients feel much better. After the 90 days, if they need extra support, extra assistance, there is a program which is called PC ICM. So they feel much comfortable.

Janet: So now that you work for a resettlement agency, has that changed your perspective on the process of welcome?

Khalil: Yes, of course. Of course, because every day I'm dealing with new clients. So it's adding up to my experience.

Janet: What do you wish more Americans understood about how to make newcomers feel welcome?

Khalil: I think there should be no discrimination -- that there are newcomers, that they are new immigrants. We are, for example, here for the last 20 years, you are a newcomer. And I think it's the responsibility if we want to help the newcomers, new people -- because they left everything that they had in their own country. Everything is new for them. They don't know the rules, the law, the culture, even the language of the country. So they should help him. They give him, they should give him hand, give them hand and they should direct them. It would be much helpful for the newcomers.

Janet: And in your own experience, and in working with clients, what have you seen? What can Americans do that actually helps newcomers integrate -- not just live on their own, but integrate into a new community?

Khalil: Yeah, actually, I see some volunteers, Americans, help with the families, with the newcomers. They are going to the newcomers’ home and they are talking, they are talking with them and they are improving their knowledge about their culture, about their communities and some other issues which is very helpful.

Janet: So what have you learned about that process of adapting to working and living in a new society and culture?

Khalil: To live and to work in a society that you don't have any idea about, that you don't have any work background, and you don't know anything about the culture, about the societies, about the rules, laws -- it's a little difficult, but we should be ready. We should search, we should Google, we should ask our friends, our relatives, friends, and some other people to give us information. And that's what I did. I asked from people, from friends, I searched, I searched Google. I made a lot of American friends. So they helped me, they directed me about the rules, about the cultures and some other issues.

Janet: Yeah. So it sounds like you have been very proactive in looking for information, paying attention, trying to figure things out. Can you tell us more about where and how you made friends with Americans?

Khalil: Yes, yes. When I was, I mean, in my 90 days period at InterFaith Works, I was supported through the agency. I mean, I was receiving food stamps and rental assistance, everything. So I was not responsible to making money. I had enough time for searching, for talking with people who were around me, who were in my neighborhood, my cousin's friend who were American and also another person who was the ex-CEO of a company. And I was introduced through the InterFaith Works employment specialist. And he was very, very helpful guy. And he helped me a lot with this information.

Kendall: What have you found to be the most helpful for your children feeling settled and integrated in their community. Has there been anything in particular that you think has been most helpful?

Khalil: Can you explain a little more?

Kendall: Yeah, absolutely. I just think about how resilient and adaptable children have to be, and especially in situations where they are forced to go to a whole new land and make a whole new life and go to a new school and make new friends. I'm just wondering if you found that there's anything within the community that's been really helpful to make your children feel welcomed and a part of the community. I know sometimes it's sports or it's a local community organization or a special group. And so I just wondered if that had been your experience?

Khalil: Actually, I didn't have any experience about that. But when my children start going to the school, it's cool. They had a special program for them, an orientation program and some other programs and they made a lot of friends at school. Initially, they were not happy to go to the school. (Right.) Yeah, you know, everything was new for them, and they had language barriers, they didn't know English. [But] after a couple of months, they were happy. They were going to their school without any force and the school was providing them some exercises, some entertainments, some programs with families, with other students. So yeah, it taught them a lot to adapt to the society.

Kendall: Oh, that's wonderful.

Janet: It sounds like they got over their disappointment, after coming from Dubai to Syracuse. (laughter)

Khalil: Actually, they like the high building of Dubai, but when they entered the Syracuse, they said, “Oh, there's no building, no high building!” After a couple of months, I took them to New York City. (Oh, lovely.) I took them to the Times Square. (Oh.)

Kendall: Oh, I bet they love that.

Khalil: Yeah. “Oh, this is the real America!”

Kendall: Yes. Because the podcast is called Hometown, we like to close each episode by asking our guests what home means to them. So can you tell our listeners what home means to you?

Khalil: Anywhere where you live, you work, you study, you make money, that's home. So it totally depends on us how to choose it, how to make it.

Kendall: Thank you.