



Najia

Hamrah, together on a journey— The Hamrah Oral History Project is a series of interviews with immigrants, refugees, and asylees in Arizona, people who had to leave home due to oppression, war or violence, pursuing their future elsewhere. These are personal accounts of life between places and cultures, exploring how we arrived here and why we left home. Listen to stories of joy, dream and emotional pain that comes with the relocation and separation. Recorded at KXCI Community Radio's Historic Armory Park Studios in Tucson, Arizona.

My name is Najia. I'm 21 years old. I was born in Kabul, Afghanistan. Kabul has four seasons of beautiful weather greeting people.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

I was a lucky child. I was born in an open-minded family. Unfortunately, when I was born I was not able to see my father. I was born seven months after my dad died. I am the youngest in family and the most spoiled one. I have sweet childhood memories such as playing with my toys.

Do you have any memories from your childhood that you want to share?

When I was a child, we used to play hide and seek. We used to play with our dolls and things like that.

When did you leave Afghanistan?

I left Afghanistan on August 19th, 2021.

Who did you leave Afghanistan with?

I left with my family. We left to airport with my family, my sisters and brothers, but something unfortunately happened and they were not able to come with us. So, it's just me who came to us.

Can you talk about what happened at the airport that they couldn't leave and you were the only one who left?

I was standing next to a family who has US citizenship, so they thought that I was a part of that family. They led me in, but my sisters and brothers were much behind us, so they weren't able to ride the plane.

Are your sisters and brothers still in Afghanistan?

One of my brother is living in France and my other siblings are still living in Afghanistan.

Are you in touch with your siblings who are in Afghanistan? Can you talk to them?

I'm still talking to my family by WhatsApp.

Can you talk about what happened in Afghanistan that made you leave?

So when Taliban took over Afghanistan on August 15th, 2021, Afghanistan was basically a scene out of a horror movie. Everyone was so worried, everywhere was so dark and no one was able to come out of their house because they were scared of getting killed by Talibans. When Talibans took over Afghanistan, the woman wouldn't able to get out of the house and basically everywhere was so weird and so depressed and anxious. It was a really big problem for us, especially because my family was working for government. I was able to run away from Afghanistan, but unfortunately my family is still living there and I'm scared for them.

Can you tell us a little bit more about those three days between August 15th to August 19th that you lived in the Taliban, the Afghanistan of Taliban? Is there anything that stands out? Any memories, anything that you want to share?

So the first day that Talibans took over Afghanistan, we were shopping with a really big problems we were able to run to house. We weren't able to find any cars. Everyone was in such a hurry and everyone was so scared and anxious. They were just thinking of leaving. So basically it was a really bad scene. Everyone was so surprised that Taliban took over Afghanistan because they already knew that Talibans took over other cities in Afghanistan, but they never thought that Talibans would be able to take over at Kabul because it's such a strong city and it's a really popular city, everyone was in a shock and they were just so, so scared. During those three days, everywhere was closed from schools to jobs to everywhere. So basically supermarkets, schools, barbershops, anywhere that you can possibly think of. Everyone was thinking of running away from Afghanistan. Everyone was thinking of the ways that they could possibly run away from Afghanistan. As you guys saw from the news, many people tried to hold on the airplane wings, but they were not able to survive. Many people tried so many different ways, but unfortunately many of them died and many of them are still in Afghanistan. So that was a really scary moment for us, for everyone. That three day was basically like hell. Many people were trying to run away, but closed the door and they were hitting everyone. Doesn't

matter if it was a woman, man, a child, a newborn, a toddler; They were killing everyone, hitting everyone, and that was the cause. Since many people lost their families, many people were not able to find their families, one because they were dead and maybe because they were under the feeds and many people died right there. It was a really scary scene. It was so crowded. Everyone was running around with no hijab on, with no shoes on. Some people's clothes were ripped off because of the cause, and many people were just screaming and crying and running after their children and trying to get out of that situation, but it was impossible for them because Taliban surrounded people and they were basically keep abusing them sexually, mentally, physically, altogether, and they were just scared to death. Everyone was just crying, womens, children because they were scared of their future and they just want to survive, live like a human.

Can you tell us from that airport what happened next? Where did you fly? You flew with the Americans right?

When we crossed the third door, I was keep telling them that my family is still there and I need to go and get them, but they would keep telling me that they're not going to come with you and you got to go alone. I was telling Americans that, what do I do without my family? They were like, keep yelling at me in a way and keep telling me that if your family survive, they will survive. If they can come, they will just come, go and basically leave us alone and don't make stuff harder for us. A family told me that everything will be all right and just trying to relax and stuff. They were with me till Washington DC. They were taking care of me and trying to relax me. They closed the door behind me. I was on other side of the door and my family was on the other side of the door. I was keep telling them that if my family doesn't come with me, I'm not going to go to US alone. And they didn't let me to go with my family and they didn't let my family to came with me. I was crying, I was scared. I was just in a really bad situation.

We went to Qatar around 12:00 PM. It was a military airplane. There were more than 2000 people inside of the airplane. There was nowhere to walk or nowhere to even raise their hand. So, many people were scared and just trying to survive because there weren't much space and there were many crying children inside of the airport, and it wasn't any better inside of the airplane too.

How long did you stay in Qatar?

I arrived at Qatar at 2:00 PM. I stayed there for almost a day a night, and then we moved toward Washington DC.

And how long did you stay in the camp? Around DC in Virginia, right? Is that where you stayed?

When we arrived at Washington DC we were there just for one hour, then we rode on, rode in a military airplane again, then we went to Texas.

How long did you stay in Texas?

We were inside of the camp for 45 days.

And after that you came to Tucson?

And after that, on October 4th, 2021, I came to Tucson, Arizona.

How was it like when you first arrived in the US?

So when I first arrived at Washington DC it was actually the way that I expected US to be: Tall buildings everywhere was so bright, and it looked like a really happy city. But then when we went to Dallas, Texas to the camp, it wasn't how I thought it would be. It was just a depressing, sad, and just a really non pleasing space.

What has been the most difficult part of adapting to life in the US?

The hardest part of adopting to US was language, English, cause I didn't know any English back then. And also staying away from my family because as I said, I was a spoiled one. I was the youngest one. Everyone loved me so much, cared about me and my siblings, my mom, and just everyone in my family. It was my first time staying away from my family, and it was just so hard for me, unexplainable hard, like really, really hard.

It was hard to come from a third world country basically to a first world country, which freedom exists. And there were a lot of stuff that I was unfamiliar and I'm still not familiar with. I didn't have my family. I didn't knew no one in here. I had no friend, no family, no one that I knew, no one that I loved, no one that I thought cared about me. So that was actually the hardest part of trying to adapt to US.

What do you like about Tucson and what are some of the fun things you do here?

I like Tucson because it's a calm city. There aren't much traffic and it's just really peaceful— The Wii U, the parks and the nature basically. One of my hobbies are playing basketball. I really like playing basketball. I used to play basketball for two years in Afghanistan before Taliban took over. Then I decided to start over and start doing that hobby again to just make me happier. And I feel like it has helped me.

Do you ever dream of going back?

Not in this case. I would love to go back to my country when there is peace, when there is equality, when there is safety, freedom and all the things that I want and every human needs to be comfortable in. But in this situation, definitely not because I run away from that country and there are many unhappy peoples. There are a lot of poor peoples right there, and I just don't want to experience the things that I went through all over again. But after, Afghanistan hopefully become a better place to live, a first world country, maybe. I would love to go there and see my family and just stay in my land because that's the place that I was born in and that's the place that I have the most memory in. That's where I was born. But in this situation, no. I actually want to invite my family here. I want to bring my family here, but it's not as easy. So I'm trying and hopefully they'll be with me.

What do you miss most about Afghanistan and the culture?

I miss my family. I miss my people. The things that I used to do. I miss basically everything that I had. Hopefully one day there will be peace and then I'll be able to go back to my country or I will be able to bring my family here and just continue living the dream that I had, or the life that I had in Afghanistan.

Have you found something you really like here? For example, food, new friends, new experiences that you didn't know before?

I have tried some new foods from different cultures. I have found some friends, but not as much as I had in Afghanistan and I don't really think that nothing can replace the things that I had in Afghanistan. I like the opportunities that U.S. gives to people.

So my major is computer science. I studied that in Afghanistan. Now I will be able to continue this major, learning about this major. Just getting my certificate and creating my happy life and bringing my family. Unfortunately, I grew up in a society that did not let women drive, did not let women do any stuff. But when I first got here, I didn't know how to drive. But now I know and I'm really thankful for driving and being able to just do everything by myself without needing no one else.

How has your experience leaving your home country affected your identity or sense of belonging?

So when I was in Afghanistan, my own homeland, they weren't asking me where I was from or my family or anything. They knew that I was Afghan and I was really happy about that. But since the day I came to US, they keep questioning my identity, my nationality, my race and everything. They keep asking me if I'm Mexican or another race, which I forgot. So that makes me kind of uncomfortable that I'm not in space which people knows who I am and basically care who I am, but not in a positive way, in a negative way. The way that they're questioning me every single time that they see me and just, yeah.

Have you faced any discrimination or prejudice in your new home?

I've never actually experienced racism, but when they ask me where I'm from and when I tell them that I'm actually from Afghanistan, they get emotional. They keep telling me that we are sorry for what is happening to Afghanistan, and I feel really grateful that they feel like that. I've actually never experienced racism, but when someone asks me where I'm from, when I tell them that I'm from Afghanistan, they come to me with cheery eyes just like how they're about to cry. And that makes me unpleasantly sad and just unhappy because why would someone get the need to cry? When I tell them about my country, I obviously know that it's because of the things that are going on in Afghanistan about the Talibans and the policies and everything. But I wish that people would just say positive things when I would tell them about my country. If I told them that I was from Afghanistan, they would go and be like, oh my God, I love the city of that. And then basically talk about the culture and say positive things.

What hopes do you have for the future, for yourself and for your country?

My first goal for the future is to bring my family here. Live, make a happy life with them. Then study my major, just get a job that has to do with my major that I studied at Afghanistan because I studied IT, computer science and I want to do something with it. And another hope that I have for my future is actually not just my future, for everyone in Afghanistan or everyone in the world, is to experience a safe environment. I want Afghans and Afghanistan to see and experience happiness and experience being safe and Afghanistan without experiencing the things that I experienced, such as crying and staying away from their family and all the negative things that are going on in Afghanistan. I want peace for Afghanistan.

What advice do you have for yourself when you had just arrived in the U.S.? And what advice do you have for other people who just get here under a similar situation as you did?

So when I first got here, I had a lot of worries. I was worried of living alone. I was scared. I was wondering how I can live alone because I have never done that before. Then I told myself that, Najia, you can do it. You live with your family in Afghanistan, but let's make a new change and just let's start a new life so you could help yourself and your family in Afghanistan and just not make life a miserable place, but a happy place that you can feel safe in. And I want people to not be afraid when they first get here. I want them to feel happy and empowered and just like they can do it. This is a country full of opportunities, full of many positive stuff. So I just don't want them to go through the things that I did and just be positive to themselves and just make them feel like they can do everything they want to.

Thank you.