



Nazanin

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.

Hi, I'm Naz. I'm 21 years old, and I was born in Iran, and I don't really remember much, because I left Iran when I was probably two, and I went to Afghanistan, and I was there for almost 14 years, and then I went to Turkey, we crossed the border like twice. The first time we went all the way to the border, and then it was just really hard to run. We were pretty tired, and then for the second time when we tried, we were successful. And then from Turkey, I lived there for like two and a half years, and then we came to U.S.

Can you give some descriptions about where you lived in Afghanistan?

It was, well, I'm originally from Kabul, but since Kabul was not the safest city to live in, we were like kind of moving back and forth into a smaller city, and yeah, pretty much, we were just going back and forth the whole time. It was, it was like a hot city, and I remember going to school there. And then we lived in a really, really big house with my home, my uncles, my aunts, grandpa, everyone. We all lived together in a really big building.

Can you tell me about your childhood?

Well, I don't really remember much from trauma, you know, how your brain tries to, like, kind of keep it from you. My childhood, I went to this private school, and then I was studying Arabic, English. I was really interested in English since I was young, and then I went to public school. It was like big transition, and it was like, kind of hard for me, but like I got used to it. It was like all girls' school, so it was easier. I remember the head of school, she was super mean, so when I left, I was so happy to not see her again, but I had classmates sometimes I remember, like, I missed them, but, besides that, we used to go shopping sometimes for Eid, and then the public showers, *hamams*, that was kind of, kind of nice, sometimes, sometimes not. Depends, like,

when it was the winter, it's like snowing. We had to go, and it was super slippery, but it was nice. Honestly, I missed that part, but that's about it.

How old were you when you left Afghanistan?

I was almost 14 when I left.

What was it like growing up in Afghanistan?

I would like to tell you more, but since I was a girl, I was mostly at home in school, like my school was like five minutes away from where I lived, and that was like I didn't go out that much, so we would just go like for eat, like we would go shopping, like there's weddings, there was a lot of weddings, like weddings every week, probably.

Who did you leave Afghanistan with?

I left with Emily and my sister. She was like eight, I think. Yeah,

What happened to your family members who stayed behind?

I think they're just living the life. I don't really know much about them, because when I left, I slowly just kind of distanced myself.

Do you know why you left Afghanistan?

Well, it was like war, I mean, there's bombing every other day, it was pretty dangerous, and I just wanted a better life, and I was really interested in art, which is not something you can do over there, like you can't really express yourself over there, so yeah, just for a better life.

Can you talk about what led to this decision?

So I was away from my mom for like a year, maybe a little bit more, and then we left because I wanted to see my mom, and also for a better life, and I knew I'd be happier with my mom.

Can you give us some details about the time you left Afghanistan?

So, during that time, a lot happened. We left from Afghanistan. We left to Iran. We were there for like a short period of time, like two weeks, probably, like two weeks, probably. And there was like we were talking to the smugglers, like how to cross the border, and I saw a girl that was my age, probably, and I became friends with her, and she was getting married, and I give most of my stuff that was in my backpack to her, yeah, I give her most of my shoes and stuff like that, and she was like talking to, she was like, I know how it is, like, you, you're not going to be able to carry all of this, because, like, I was 14, I couldn't really carry much with me, tiny backpack, so yeah, I give it all to her, because, like, she was getting married.

And then we, we were like walking, probably for six hours or more on the mountains to cross the border, we were super thirsty and hungry, and the smugglers just left us on the mountain. Me and my sister, we were super worried, and there was a guy that was helping us. He even carried me on his back, because at some point I couldn't walk. There were stuff in my shoes, like

needles, and yeah, I was super tired, and he even, like, at some point we did get water, and he gave me the water first, he was like, 'you drink it first'. He was like, such a good guy, I'll never forget him, but yeah, and then the second time we were successful, we went through the water, and we got, we got to Turkey, we got into a van, and then the van was going super fast, the cops were coming from the back, and I was just like praying, I was praying so much that God, I'll do whatever you want, like I'll do everything right after I like cross the border, after I'm safe. And then we were safe. I was trying to communicate with the smugglers that were in Turkey. I didn't know any Turkish when we went there. I was trying so hard, like with my English, I didn't even know that much, but just a little bit, and he didn't understand what I was saying, and I was just like giving him a thumbs up, I was like, yes, go be good, and then he was like he was giving me a thumbs up, like yeah, you're fine, yeah, and then after that we went to see my mom, and we lived there for two and a half years. I went to this art high school over there, it was pretty cool. I tried so hard to get in, my teachers helped a lot. And then I slowly learned the language. At first, it was pretty hard, like I thought I was never gonna learn it, because new country, new language, everything starting from zero.

But slowly I made some friends, and I learned the language, the culture, everything, and then we found out that we're coming to us and Arizona, and it was, it wasn't much of a choice, really. So the US was probably like, 'yeah, either take it or you'll wait more as a refugee in Turkey', but I knew I wouldn't have a life in Turkey. It was a cool art school. I wanted to become a fashion designer and artist, but we couldn't get citizenship over there unless I married someone Turkish, which I was not planning on. So I took the chance, and I came here, but after a while of being in here in high school, I remember I was, I still wanted to become an artist. I talked to the community here, the Afghan community, and they were like, "So, what do you want to do in the future? And I was like, "I want to become a fashion designer and artist, I don't know, and they were all like disappointed, and they were like, "Oh no, you should become a doctor, a nurse, this and that, you should go to college, or this". And honestly, I feel like it shouldn't have affected me, but it did, because when we first got here, I didn't have access to talk to a lot of people who were like open-minded into art and stuff, and yeah, those people's words kind of did affect me, and I still tried. I went to, I went to high school, and the class was kind of like dead, like everyone was on their phones. It was nothing like art school in Turkey. I kind of like became, what is it called... art block, yeah, and it's been four years, and I'm still there. I'm still trying. I tried to draw here and there, but I don't know. I don't know about a career in art anymore. I'm pretty confused, so.

Was being a refugee hard in Turkey? Were you ever discriminated against?

Yes, yes, I was talking about the good things about Turkey. Mostly, it is a beautiful country, but people.. well, we live in a smaller city, so people were more conservative, and I was having a hard time, especially in the first year where I went to, I had to repeat eighth grade. It was horrible, like the kids were younger than me, and they were super racist. They were kids, but it was pretty hard for me. I think I got really depressed. I would come home every day and cry

because I was getting bullied. I wasn't talking much. They were always bullying me, waiting for a reaction, which I never gave them, but it passed.

Everything got better after getting into art school, but even in art school, they were kids that were still close-minded and didn't have a lot of information about how being a refugee is. But I found my people, I feel like, and outside of school, I don't really know much. Well, actually, every time I met someone, even outside, they were like, "So, where are you from? Because they couldn't tell I was, like, from somewhere else, that I was a foreigner, and I was like, "Yeah, I'm from Afghanistan. And they were like, "Oh", like their facial expressions would like, show something else, but like, oh, so when do you plan on going back? I was like, I'm not going back, like there's a whole war going on, like we're not safe. Um, men and women, they all had mostly the same reaction. They're like, well, I mean, you shouldn't go back to your country, you know, you can't stay here forever, like this is our country. And I was like, yeah, I mean, I don't know, they didn't understand, but some people were nice, and they were understanding, they're like, yeah, I'll never go back.

What was it like when you first arrived in the US? Were you disappointed? Were you happy? What were your emotions?

I was super excited. The plane was like, I don't know how many hours it was. It felt so long. I was like, I was there for days, but eventually we got here. I was in the airport, and through the company, we came here. There was a worker, our caseworker, who came and picked us up. And then I remember I was talking to her a little bit in English, and she was surprised that I knew a little bit, and we got to the car, we got closer to the car, and I looked around, and there was like a bunch of cactus, like everywhere, we were surrounded by cactus! It was so, I was like, wow, that was my first time seeing like these giant cactus, and it was super hot, it was like in the middle of August, it's like the hottest in Arizona, and then I couldn't even breathe, like it was so hard to breathe. I remember in Turkey, like in the mornings when I used to go to school, my nose, the hair in my nose would get frozen, and then in here I couldn't even breathe, it was that hot, and I was like so disappointed, but I was like, it's okay, it's okay, it's better than, you know. Just think about the future, it's not gonna be like this forever. And I kept asking the case worker, I was like, is it hot like this all the time? Is it gonna get better? She was like, most of the time it's gonna be this hot, and I was like, wow, okay.

I was excited to see her apartment. We went in, and there was like so much food on the floor, and there was like beds, and like everything you need to start in your life, but there was so many cockroaches everywhere on the food, it was everywhere. It was my first time seeing that many cockroaches in my whole life, and yeah, it was horrible, scary. We slept on the bed, and then I was covering myself and all the bedsheets, like I, I was so scared of getting the cockroaches going to my ear or something. I don't know, I was just really scared, but yeah, we slowly started the life, and I went to high school. They took me to this high school that was mostly refugee kids, and I took these ELD classes for my English, which I was doing really good, and I made a friend there, which I'm still friends with, and yeah, it was pretty good. It really, like,

my confidence went up. I remember I was super shy and quiet as a kid, I was always like, yeah, don't talk, and a girl should be like quiet, and we call it like *sanguine*, like you have to look like you're always like calm and quiet, don't give your opinion, yeah, stuff like that, but here, honestly, it changed me in school, the teachers were super nice, and like the classmates, like I remember the class when I, when I like went there, and I was introducing myself to class, everyone was like, oh my god, she's so pretty, oh my god, look at her curly hair, was something I was super insecure about my whole life, but it kind of like opened my eyes, I was like. Yeah, I am pretty. My hair is good, and my English is good, because they kept telling me your English is really good, even though, like, I didn't think it would be that good. But yeah, it was pretty awesome in the beginning.

Compare your experience of going to school and starting school, both in Turkey and the United States. In which country did you feel more welcomed and supported?

I would say in the US, I feel like people were more educated on how refugees are. They had, like, an idea of how life over there is.

How did you do at your school in the US?

I would say it was pretty good in the beginning. I didn't really have, like, I didn't know what was going on. Most of the time, I was pretty excited about my English classes, like the ELD ones, because I was good at it, and, but I didn't know the credit system, like, you need to have so many credits to graduate, like everything was so confusing. Probably after, like, two years, I realized that I needed specific credits to be able to graduate, and I was freaking out, like no one told me that stuff. They just put us in this high school, and they're like, "Yeah, you're good to go. I was shocked. So I changed schools all the time, like I probably changed like three schools, high schools. I went to this big school, it's called Tucson High, that was my second school. I tried so hard to get there, and then it was pretty busy all the time. There's too many people like I thought would like it, but I did not. And then it was like during Covid too, it was really hard to make friends, so I would say like I only made one friend over there, and then it was I was still missing so many credits, so I had to go to a charter school, and it helped me so much. Like, I'm really, really grateful that I found that school. I finished school in like three months, I graduated. It was awesome, and I told my other Afghan friends who were here struggling with the same thing, and they also came with me to that school, and yeah, we all graduated, and it was amazing. I wish I knew sooner about that school. Honestly,

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

I would say, like, the schooling stuff, like, because I said the system was completely different over there, and I'm still struggling, like I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do this, the college, and how it works. I think the education is like mostly what I'm struggling with, and making friends, like I was super social one in the beginning, but recently it's been really hard, because I have, like, there's two sides of me, like, there's one that's like, so I came from Afghanistan, mostly live there, and I came here, like, I relate to these girls that also are from Afghanistan, and then here I'm also gay, and then it's, it's super hard to make friends from

Afghanistan. I do have some. They're pretty understanding, like I explained to them how it is like everything, like I educated them, and they're pretty supportive. But it's not like, like when I meet someone from Afghanistan, and we click, it's amazing. But then there comes that part that I say, oh, I have a girlfriend, and they all talk about boys, and I'm just like, I can't tell them, or when I do, they look at me completely different, and they distance themselves. And then, when I hang out with Americans, like, there's this culture difference, like I talk about the food we have, and they're pretty excited, and then I'm like, oh yeah, I'll make you this food, and they tried, and they love it, and there's things they talk about, like from their childhood, and I don't relate, because I didn't grow up here. There's still, like, slang, I don't know, and a bunch of things, like, I don't know, it's really hard to make friends.

What are some positive aspects of moving to United States?

The education, definitely, because when I was in Afghanistan, I was thinking, what can I do, like what can, like after school, and there was not many options for me, really, like over there, you can become a judge if you're a woman, like, and not that I want to become a judge here, either, but it's just like really messed up, so I was like, here I'm like, here is better, I have more options, education, and how you're accepted, like in the gay community, like it was pretty hard for me, and I'm more accepted here in gay community, like I could never do that in Afghanistan. Gays are getting killed over there.

Most people think that if you're from Afghanistan, you're automatically like no way you can be gay because it doesn't exist in our culture, and I'm like, yes, it does exist, but it's pretty hard for them to understand this, like people from Afghanistan. So I've been posting about it a lot recently, and I found multiple Afghans that are also in the community, in LGBT community, and yeah, so I feel like I'm slowly finding my people.

What do you like about Tucson?

Can't tell you a lot. I mean, I like the art gallery here. We come here, it's been amazing. I found a mentor here that we're still friends. It's been like four years. It's amazing to find people like that. I met my girlfriend here, not in Tucson, but it's like around Tucson in Arizona. I was, so I'm pretty grateful.

Do you ever dream of going back to Afghanistan?

Yeah, but it's just a dream, like I've tried to be open-minded and positive about it, but I think it would take a really long time for them to accept gay people. Like, I would like to go there and take my girlfriend, and you know, show her all the good things, like there's like Afghanistan is beautiful, like it's surrounded by mountains, and there's so many natural like beauty, and I want to show her, like I talk about it, and she always like listens to me, but I want to show her like the street food, how delicious it is, or like the public showers, like I always tell her, like I want to take it in the public showers over there, and she laughs. She was like, "Oh, hell no, I'm not going, but I just want to show her where I grew up in my childhood, but as long as it's not safe and people are not accepting gay people, then I think it's kind of impossible.

Do you wish you never came to the US?

I don't know, maybe sometimes, because sometimes I have a hard time here, and I'm like, I wish Afghanistan was a better place, so I didn't have to go through all of this, but I'm glad I'm here now.

What are some of the struggles you're facing right now?

Right now, I'm pretty confused about what I want to do, like as a creator, because I actually went to beauty school for a year, and I was like, I was like, this is it, I'm going to become a makeup artist and hairstylist, I was super excited, even though the community was like, no, you can't make anything with that. I still want to, but recently I had an injury in my right hand, that's my dominant hand. There's nerve damage, so we don't know how long it's going to take to heal. That's been kind of making me feel like sometimes I feel like it's never gonna get better, so I should choose a career that doesn't involve so much of using my hand, but I'm pretty confused right now, and right now everything's expensive. I want to leave Arizona because, like I said, I came here and I was disappointed, because how hot it is, and I don't know if I was depressed since the beginning, I don't know, or I became depressed here, but I feel like if I live somewhere else, like let's say Oregon, like it's so beautiful. It's like I went there for a week, it was like heaven, literally. I did not want to leave, so I imagine living in Oregon, and I'm like, I would never be depressed, even though, like, my therapist, like, no matter where you live, if you're depressed, you will be depressed, but I don't know, I feel like you're where you live does affect on your mental health, so financial stuff is the most problem right now, because of my hand, like, before that I was like, oh yeah, I'll move wherever I want to, because I'm healthy and I can work and I can support myself, but right now I'm just like, spot that I'm stuck here in Arizona, and there's not really much I can do about it.

What message would you give to the Naz who just moved to the US?

To not be so hard on myself. I should have started therapy the second I came here. Shouldn't have worked so much, like maybe my hand wouldn't have got messed up if I overworked and overworked myself so much. Yeah, and like I wish I'd made more friends and kept up with it, maybe created a better relationship with my family, but I don't know how I would have done that, because I did my best to come out slowly, and my mom was asking me growing up, she was like, "Are you a lesbian?" I was like, "I don't know", I always said I don't know, and then the day I came out to her, she freaked out. I think that traumatized me the most. I just knew that it was gonna get better, even though it was like one of the lowest points of my life. It got better. I'm living on my own now and. My relationship with her is better, so if there is anyone else in Afghan community who are thinking about coming out, I would say save up as much as you can, because I had nothing, I didn't even have a job, and I left the house, but everything worked out, so just be brave and live your truth, and everything's gonna work out, and I'm also posting a lot about it on TikTok, which people have been supportive, but more than support, I've been getting more hate, mostly, but it doesn't really affect me, really. In the beginning, it did, honestly, it made me cry a couple of times, people were being so rude, but I just know that, like,

it's just over the phone, like I even met one of those people in person, and he didn't even have the courage to look at me, he just left because, because he knew he was in the wrong, but yeah, so just live your truth, no one's gonna do anything. At least I haven't gotten anything yet. I'm hoping not to get anything in the future, but yeah, just just know, like, like when I go to the community, like I go to like weddings and events, I just go and have fun. I don't tell them about, like, my sexuality, like, you don't have to tell everyone about your sexuality, that's not, like, not like your whole personality, you know? Like, don't make it your whole personality, but I do understand that you want the people you love to know who you are and love you the way you are, so, like, yeah, just go and have fun here. This museum, the Moca Museum, Hamrah Art Club. I, in the beginning, I wanted to create this community for like queer people, like mostly from Afghanistan, even Iran, and other countries, you know, people who are thinking of coming out, and they're scared. I just wanted to create this safe space in the beginning, but I got busy with life, and then stuff happened, but I still want to do that. I just don't know where to start from, and I'm also thinking about my own safety, because I am here alone, and but if I, in the future, if I get like support and enough support, I would create something like that to help other other people, because I wouldn't want them to go through the things I went through, which I didn't say all the things I went through, but you know there's a portion of it that I did say. It was pretty hard.