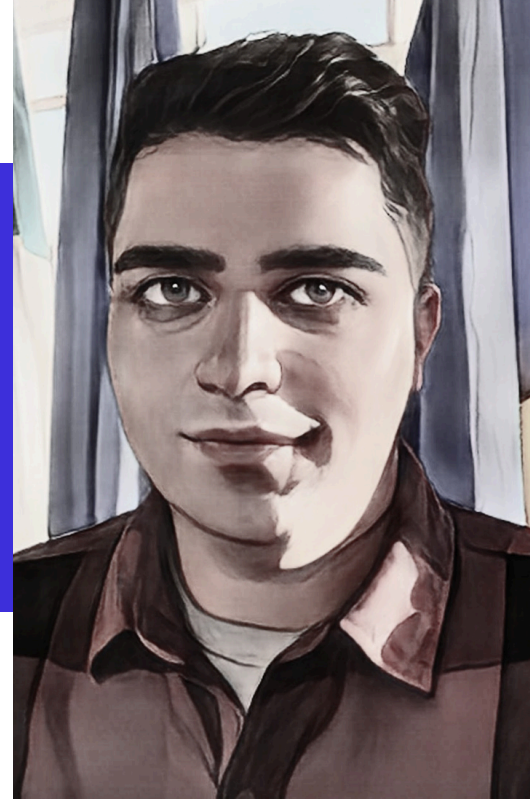




ROCKY

“ People would not treat us like we were refugees. We didn't feel like ‘oh we’re someone else from a different country.’ We felt like we're all just one.

Sawt: An Oral History of Resettlement Campuses was funded by an Emerson Collective Fellowship.



ARRIVAL

I came from the other corner of the world to a different country.

I had no idea what's going to happen. I have a wife, I have a child, how [am I] going to be able to find a job?

When we arrived on campus, everything was so quiet. I think it was the weekend. . . they showed us our apartment. We don't see anybody around the campus. In the Afghan culture . . . if somebody comes to the neighborhood, we Afghans go to their house, right? . . . [M]y wife is saying, no one is coming here to my room to invite me to say, “Oh, welcome to the neighborhood” . . . We thought “no one is welcoming us.” What's going on?

I think it was very surprising for us the first few days. But eventually, when we learned how to approach a neighbor, how to approach someone else on campus it was a lot of fun. . . it turned out to be wonderful. We loved it. We made a lot of friends, eventually. . . And it was great. Even . . . if you’re in your own country, if you move from one place to another to a new place, it's going to be [hard] for the first few days. But eventually, you get used to it. You make friends.

We were in the family graduate housing. So there [were] families with kids. They're asking about my son, about my wife, and the ladies are calling my wife. . . it's like a relationship we created with our neighbors.



Hosted by:

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY



Interviewed in English by:

ZAKIA ANWAR

With the informed consent of participants, interview transcripts have been adapted here in narrative form for clarity and efficiency with a commitment to retaining the intended meaning.

everycampusarefuge.org

SUPPORT ON CAMPUS

In the beginning, it was a lot of people [who had come from Afghanistan]. It was hard. . . . there was only one case manager, one case worker dealing with 70 or 80 people. But eventually . . . they put one volunteer with a certain family. If that family needs to go grocery shopping, for example, that volunteer will go and help them out . . . If somebody in the family needed to take [the] written driver's license test, that volunteer is going to help them. And if a person needed to learn English on their off time, the volunteer was there to help them.

In terms of jobs, in terms of medical services, transportation, language, computer literacy, writing skills, reading skills, all these things were provided . . . everything was organized. More case managers joined; volunteers joined to help.

Especially the ELIC* . . . help[ed]. . . all the Afghans [become] self -sufficient. They were able to learn English, which is so important.

I was lost, but the people around me, the case managers, like the director of ELIC, the staff at the university, they were the ones [to] direct me [in] the right direct[ion]. If I had a question . . . like, “how can I get a job?” they would help me go online and install an app, Indeed, on my phone and create a resume and tell me that's how you're going to apply for jobs here in the US. Or LinkedIn . . . that's how you create your resume. These are simple things . . . It is not like I didn't know these things, but the system here is different . . . compared to where I came from.

*The English Language and Intercultural Center (ELIC) is a program under the Oklahoma State University Global Department.

Everyone was there to help me and my family – not only me and my family, but the rest of the Afghans. They would go and reach out to the family, “what do you want? What are your needs?” And based on the family's needs and wants, the university will go and tackle your issue and address your needs.

There were some very good, talented ladies [who] wanted to sew things and design things – clothes, bags, and everything. . . [t]he university eventually provided that equipment. They provided fabrics for them, sewing machine[s], classes for the ladies. So the ladies were successful [in] hav[ing] a job to sell their products online.

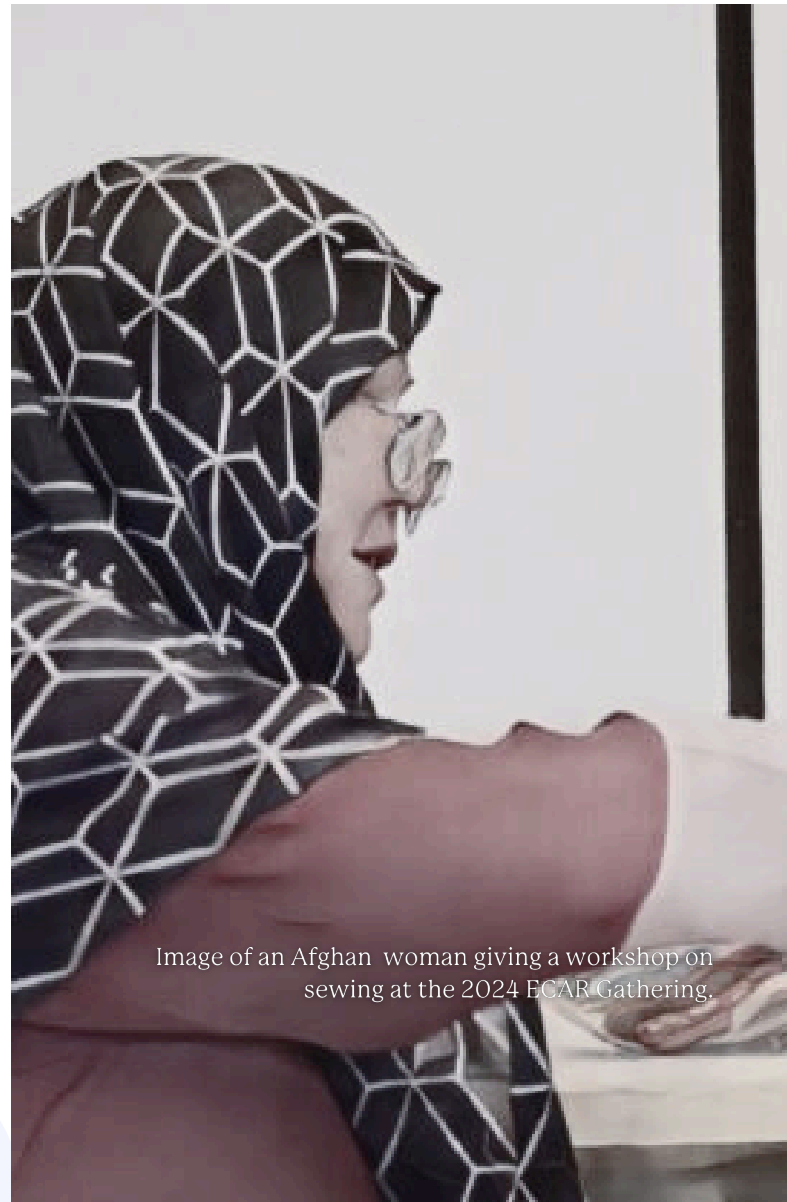


Image of an Afghan woman giving a workshop on sewing at the 2024 ECAR Gathering.

NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES

This one night, it was like three in the morning. My wife had a certain medical condition. I didn't have a car. And I didn't [want] to bother people. . . And I didn't know how to go to a doctor. I didn't know how to find a hospital. And I think that was the first week when I arrived on campus.

When I had to go grocery shopping, I had to walk miles and miles and get a bag and put all my groceries in the bag and . . . put it on my back and walk home. And that wasted a lot of my time.

Oklahoma, Stillwater – it has a beautiful public transportation [system]. We had a bus system, but unluckily, we didn't know how to use the bus. But eventually . . . we had this added to the classes, how to use a bus . . . how to use transportation. Transportation is important for a newcomer.

CREATING LASTING COMMUNITY

The one and a half years that I was there [at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma], the connection that we created, the bond that we created as a family . . . people would not treat us like we were refugees. We didn't feel like "oh we're someone else from a different country." We felt like we're all just one.

I'm in North Carolina right now, but I still consider everyone a family. I give them a call. I send an email. . . I still reach out to my friends there in Stillwater, and they don't say no to me.

I'm still working with Oklahoma State University as a part-time[r]. I'm still in contact with the case managers, and also I'm still working with the attorneys in Oklahoma, with the lawyers that are working on the immigrants' legal documents. I'm still working with these people, and I'm still in touch with most of the instructors there, the teachers there, the families there, you know, the Afghan families or the refugee families. So I'm keeping all pretty much what I was doing there; I'm still keeping it right now, but I'm not physically there, but I still represent myself from North Carolina on the phone if they need my help. . . We're still connected.

I miss those days . . . I'm appreciative of those events that they organized once in a while, that we go to . . . it was wonderful.

Artwork by Zakia Anwar

