**Refugee Realities**

**Episode 1: Charlottesville, A Safe Haven**

[Calm music, “Passing Time,” beings to play]

Amanda: I want you to imagine a scenario. Imagine that it’s night time, you had a long day, and you’re getting into bed. Your family members are in their rooms, the house is quiet, and after tossing and turning for a while you finally fall asleep…. [“Passing Time” Ends] [Start “Undercover” and a ticking clock sound - tense, dramatic] *Suddenly*, you are being shaken awake by your Mom, and she tells you that you have to leave your home **right now.** Even worse, you may never return to your country again. There’s no time for questions [ticking sound ends], all you know is that you are in danger and you have to **leave.**

[“Undercover” fades out] [Podcast theme song fades in]

Brad: I’m Brad Joseph…

Amanda: And I’m Amanda Patton…

Brad: And this is Refugee Realities, a podcast series where we interview local refugees to explore their individual journeys and the obstacles they’ve had to overcome. Over the course of three episodes, we will be talking to several refugees in the Charlottesville area to learn about how their lives have changed since they were displaced from their homes.

[Theme song fades out]

Amanda: To offer a basic definition, refugees are people who have been forced to leave their country in order to escape war or persecution. Seeking asylum in another country is often a long and difficult process. Many refugees spend months or years in refugee camps, where they may struggle to obtain visas and become stuck in limbo between countries and borders.

Brad: In today’s episode, we’ll be talking to the director of a Charlottesville-based non-profit that provides support for refugees to learn more about why refugees are relocated here. We’ll also be interviewing a refugee from Western China to get a glimpse into the violence that forces people to seek asylum. But before we get into the podcast, I want to give a quick shout out to the other members of our team at Refugee Realities, including Ahmad Frahmand, our outreach manager, and Melvin Mora, our audio engineer.

[Start “Ether,” serious and calm mood]

Amanda: This podcast began with one simple question. When refugees are seeking asylum, what brings them to Charlottesville, Virginia? [End “Ether”] For those of you who aren’t familiar, Charlottesville is a large town in central Virginia with a population of approximately 48,000 people. Many people know that Charlottesville is home to the University of Virginia, but fewer people may know that Charlottesville is also home to a significant refugee population.

Brad: 6% of Charlottesville’s population are refugees. That’s approximately 3,000 people, which is a fairly substantial amount for a town this size. So, to get a better understanding of how Charlottesville’s refugee population came to be, we spoke to Kari Miller. Kari is the founder and executive director of International Neighbors, a non-profit organization in Charlottesville that works with refugees. Kari used to teach English as a Second Language here in Charlottesville, and working with students who are refugees opened her eyes to how many people need help in our community.

[Start “Wish You’d Come True,” uplifting tone]

Kari: International Neighbors was considered for probably a decade. I was a teacher in the city and for about ten years thinking somebody should do something somebody should do something. We're getting these refugees placed here through the government but they were missing so many things and so I realized nobody else was doing anything about it, and so in 2015 Incorporated IN to serve our refugee community. We have programs for children, for families, for men, for women, and community. [Fade “Wish You’d Come True”]

Brad: Kari has worked closely with many of the refugees in the city for the past few years and she knows a lot about what they have gone through and where they come from. So we wondered why Charlottesville is the new home of so many refugees. Are refugees placed in Charlottesville because of the resources available in this city, or just because there’s space here?

Kari: Apparently it is because of three factors: one being the public transportation system, that we have one, low unemployment rate, and UVA Medical Hospital. So those are the three reasons.

Brad: With an extensive public bus system, ample job opportunity, and a top tier health system, Charlottesville has been selected as a suitable city for refugee relocation. We asked her to tell us more about the refugee population in Charlottesville:

Kari: Fifteen years ago there were a lot of refugees coming from Somalia and now most recently we have Syrians being placed pretty often. I think Charlottesville accepts 240 each year. And so now quite a few from Afghanistan and Iraq many are refugees or SIVs, which are special immigrant visa holders. They come the same path but the SIVS worked for the US military in Afghanistan or Iraq and often as interpreters or translators so, so they are coming and really are war heroes you know. They worked alongside our soldiers and they can't live back in their country because they are known to have jumped over the fence to our side. But I know six families who have been here and also returned back to afghanistan or iraq because it was too difficult to survive in Charlottesville. We also have quite a few from Burma via Thailand and then Bhutan via in Nepal and the Congo also Burundi so anywhere that there's really been atrocities and war that these remarkable people have been able to overcome.

[Start “Laid Back Guitar,” melancholic mood]

Brad: It’s a common misconception that the entirety of the refugee population originates from the Middle East. When in reality, refugees exist wherever there are atrocities in the world. Some people come from China to escape religious persecution at the hands of the Chinese government. Some come from Afghanistan to escape an active war zone. Some come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to escape the ongoing armed conflicts in the country. And many come from several other countries, like Syria, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia.

[Fade out “Laid Back Guitar”].

Amanda: For today’s episode, we spoke to a Uyghur woman from the Western part of China, officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of Western China. If you were to look at a map of China, the entire northwestern chunk of the country that borders Turkey is the Xinjiang region. The Uyghur people are an ethnic minority in the region who speak Uyghur, a Turkic language, and primarily practice Islam. Currently, many ethnic minorities in China face persecution due to their minority status and religious affiliation. The woman we spoke to asked us to omit her name for this interview, so for the remainder of the podcast we will be referring to her as Emily.

Emily: I’m from the Western part of china called Xinjiang. I lived there till I was 16 years old.

Amanda: Emily arrived in the US in 2013 as an international student, and she explained how appalling the conditions in her home of Xinjiang were. She shared one of her first memories of the Chinese government infiltrating her hometown and persecuting her people. Just a warning, there are mentions of intense violence and mass killings in her interview.

[Start serious, sad song, “The Dark Glow of The Mountains”]

Emily: One of the events I remember very clearly, it happened in July of 2009, which is the second to latest massacre which I witnessed by myself. That was the end of middle school that summer. So me and my brother were went outside to meet with my parents. However, in that day we came across this killing, the people are running and the mob actually are you know beating those people on the ground. And I was so terrified. We were so terrified that we don't know what to do. So we hide into a shop and wait till my parents comes to pick us up and take us back home.

Amanda: Just to reiterate, Emily was only in *middle school*. At ages eleven to thirteen our biggest worries are typically about keeping up with the latest fashion trends, who has a crush on who in our math class, or petty fights with your BFF. But for Emily, her only worry was to stay alive. She realized that she was in the middle of a protest of the Uyghur people against the Chinese government.

Emily: So the next day the Chinese people, actually those Chinese citizens, and together with their military forces they marched towards our Uyghur concentrated area. And they are pulling out the people from the building and they are killing them in the yard. You know, in the community some people are being killed right away. Some are you injured very badly. And that events continue for about two days and nobody come out. No military police has come out to beat them back or protect us. They just allow them to kill our people.

[End “The Dark Glow of The Mountains”]

Brad: After witnessing this horrific massacre of her people, Emily hoped that the violence would end. However, she explained that the situation only got worse for Uyghur people. Emily and her family members experienced intense discrimination at work and in school from other non-Uyghur Chinese people.

Emily: My parents were receiving all kinds of discrimination and prejudice. You know, all those negative comments so from that Chinese people. So they have suffered enough and they don't want the same thing happened to us. So they spend the money and all they have to send us abroad. So I'm able to come to America as an international student. But once we came to America we changed our status, we apply for asylum approval and we've been granted in 2014.

Brad: When they first arrive in America, refugees do not completely escape the situations they are fleeing from. Some of them still face the repercussions of their escapes in various ways. Emily told us about the persecution her family faced from the Chinese government. Although Emily and her brother managed to escape from China, her parents had to stay behind. The Chinese government constantly questioned her parents about the whereabouts of Emily and her brother. Their goal? To recruit Emily and her brother as spies so they could gain information on the whereabouts of other Uyghurs living in America. Emily and her parents were not able to stay in touch due to the phone tapping and surveillance of the Chinese government. So their only option was to cease all communication.

Emily: So I'm really glad that I cut off my relationship but that's a really painful decision to do because I'm not, I was not able to talk to my mother for completely no message from her for a semester or so and I now get to know that actually she got some psychological problem why she's been depressed she wanted to kill herself because she's living such a big pressure, even though she's not in the re-education camp or should I say re-education prison but she's feeling like living in an open prison already because police are everywhere and she's been constantly being contacted by the police to give our information.

Amanda: To clarify, the re-education camps that Emily mentions are internment camps set up by the Chinese government. These camps operate outside of the legal system and are used as a prison for Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities living in China. They are detained without due process and for indefinite sentence times. Emily emphasized the importance raising awareness about this massive human rights violation happening in Xinjiang.

[Start sentimental music, “Passing Time”]

Emily: There is a lot of people who actually do not know the existence of the refugee or asylees. This reeducation camp issue happening in the Western part of China, my hometown or Uyghur Xinjiang. There is about 1 million people being detained at these reeducation camps and even though there is a lot of voices coming out who are supporting us, and we really appreciate that, but I want more people to hear about what's happening to us. What's happening to this 1 million people Uyghur people living in western part of our western part of China.

[End “Passing Time”]

Brad: So Emily had to start an entirely new life in America. She had no choice but to come to a country where she was unfamiliar with the language and culture to escape persecution. And so many people around the world have similar experiences.

Amanda: After listening to Emily’s story, and the larger experiences of the Uyghur people, I felt angry about these injustices. I understand why Kari felt compelled to action after hearing about the stories of refugees in the Charlottesville community. Clearly this is a huge global issue, but we wanted to get a better idea of what we can do right now in our community to help. [Start hopeful music, “Keep Going”] So we asked Kari what were some of her goals for International Neighbors and the community.

Kari: Eventually I'd love to have a center International Neighbors neighborhood where people could come. It could be a resource center for refugee families. Also a place where where we could hold classes or get more information out to the community learning about the cultures that exist around us. We always need volunteers. We're always in need of financial support so anybody can be an involved. Anybody can do something. And even if it's not something with International Neighbors hopefully when they see someone that doesn't look like them or has a hijab just to say hello. I've had women cry literally at the grocery store if you just say “As-salamu alaykum.”

Amanda: For some of us, Charlottesville has been the only home we’ve ever known. But for others, it might be a new home that they are still settling into. Regardless of how long someone has been a part of our community, they are our neighbors. We all play an important role in making our city a great place to live in. [Fade out music]

[Begin Refugee Realities theme song]

Brad: Thank you for listening to Refugee Realities, a podcast series revealing the stories of refugees in Charlottesville. In this episode, we looked at some of the struggles refugees go through that force them to leave their homes. Next time, in our second episode, we will be interviewing two refugees from Afghanistan, a mother and her son, to take a look at the generational differences that have affected their experiences in America. [Theme song fades out]

**End.**