**Refugee Realities**

**Episode 2: Stuck Between Two Identities**

[Tense music fades in, “Spilth”]

Ahmad: My brothers would talk about how they just walk to school or walk to the market and see Taliban soldiers with guns on the back of trucks. Just going through town....

[“Spilth” fades out]

[Start Refugee Realities theme song]

Brad: I’m Brad Joseph…

Amanda: And I’m Amanda Patton.

Brad: And this is episode two of 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.

Brad: In today’s episode, we will be interviewing two different generations of refugees, one mother and one son, emphasizing their respective journeys before and after immigrating to the United States.

Amanda: I spoke to Ahmad Frahmand, a member of our production team, to gather his insights and reflections on his own refugee experience.

[Theme song fades]

Ahmad: My name is Ahmad Frahmand. I'm twenty-two years old. I was born in Peshawar, Pakistan but currently I'm a fourth year at the University of Virginia majoring in English and History.

Amanda: Ahmad and his family of eight are refugees from Afghanistan, but Ahmad himself was born in Pakistan. Ahmad and his family came to America 19 years ago to escape the war and violence that plagued Pakistan. Ahmad explained that the war between the Afghan and Pakistani government against the Taliban made daily life dangerous.

[Sad, tense ambient music fades in, “Drone in D”]

Ahmad: It was wartime. So there was a lot of violence, a lot of unsureness about, you know, if you could if you would see the end of the day or make it back home safely… A lot of the war stems from just the Afghan slash Pakistani government against the Taliban who wanted to overthrow them so they can put up an Islamic regime, like a fundamentalist backwards regime on the country. So a lot of it was just bombings and shootings and stuff in between the two sides. And then the Taliban terrorizing townspeople in order to cooperate with them. [Music fades out]

Amanda: Although Ahmad was only 4 years old when he left Pakistan, he shared stories about what daily life was like in Peshawar that he heard from his family members.

Ahmad: My brothers would talk about how they just walk to school or walk to the market and see Taliban soldiers with guns on the back of trucks. Just going through town. And that was basically them trying to intimidate the people, "You should do what we're telling you to do. Don't play sports, don't talk to the other side. Don't do anything that's like non Islamic, non-hardline Islamic, or else we'll potentially come kidnap you or kill you or something like that.”

Amanda: Ahmad described how his family was constantly under the threat of being injured or killed by the warring groups in Pakistan. But these stories are mostly relayed to him by his family, since he was too young at the time and has a limited memory of life outside of America...

Brad: To get a deeper look into what life can be like for refugees before coming to the United States, we spoke to Ahmad’s mother over the phone about her experiences in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Kamela: My name is Kamela Frahmand. I'm originally from Afghanistan. I’ve lived in the States here for 19 years. And before coming to America, I was living in Pakistan almost 40 years I was living in Afghanistan. … Yes, that's my home country and I love it, that's, you know, my sweet town Kabul. So I enjoyed living there.

Brad: Kamela described her family’s life in Kabul, and up until a certain point, their lives were fairly stable and well, you know, ordinary.

[Start calm, bright song, “Secret Conversation”]

Kamela: I mean, my husband was working initially in the previous regime before, you know, before Mujahideen, get to Afghanistan. We had a decent life, like my children will go to school. I was a midwife. So, you know, life was okay, not perfect, not wonderful, but you know, we were making a living. [“Secret Conversation” fades out]

Brad: And then, danger and uncertainty became much more commonplace in their lives, and Kamela’s home country of Afghanistan grew unsafe.

Kamela: And then when when Mujahideen came, my husband did not want to leave the country...

Brad: To clarify, the Mujahideen refers to islamist military groups in Afghanistan that were fighting for power during the time that Kamela was in the country.

[Start tense ambient music, “Spilth”]

Kamela: Like, one time, we were about to die. And the apartment building that we were living in at, there's a, you know, there was a big argument and fighting between two different groups of Mujahideen. And then finally my husband decided to leave. [Pause] So, we left overnight.

[“Spilth” fades out]

Brad: For many refugees, the dangers in their country may mean living in your home one day and suddenly leaving it the next day. So Kamela and her family headed east and resettled in Peshawar, Pakistan. For the next few years, Kamela would travel back and forth to Afghanistan to visit one of her daughters who was finishing school there. And over the years, Kamela noticed how drastically Afghanistan changed due to the presence of the Taliban.

[Tense, dramatic music fades in, “In the Past”]

Kamela: Speaking of the time of Taliban, the whole, uh, environment of Kabul changed, from allowing women to go and study, go to school and work. Everything shut down on, especially on women. But men still had the same, you know, uh, freedom as they used to be prior to the regime change. But for a woman, it was basically, it was not a good environment. I could not practice as a midwife.

Amanda: Her story portrays the dangers of life in Afghanistan during this time in the late 90s and early 2000s, especially for women.

Kamela: I was feeling that any minute, as a woman, if I step out they can beat me. They will simply used to beat women just because part of her skin was showing. Probably, maybe part of her hand or a little above the wrist area. Even the burka, if the holes were bigger than normal, they would beat you. They will say this is not appropriate. You should wear something that really covers you. [Music fades out]

Amanda: Every day in Afghanistan, the Frahmands would face new challenges. And when they later moved to Pakistan, their daily lives were still fraught with danger. In Pakistan, Kamela’s husband, Habib, wrote for a liberal radio station called Freedom Radio. Habib’s anti-Taliban journalism made him a target of the Taliban, who were big on censorship. They sent him death threats, they had him followed, and made it clear that his life and his family’s life were in danger.

Kamela: After some time they start controlling him and trying to follow him a few times and warning him that if he continued to give the correct report… my husband had to listen to them and uh, controlling him basically. And then he decided to leave because otherwise they were about to come to get him and I don't know what was their plan? Maybe they were God forbid trying to finish, you know, kill him or uh, like kidnap him. I don't know what was their plan.

Amanda: The Frahmand family finally decided that they needed to escape the violence and leave their home country. Kamela knew that America was safe and secure, so they left Pakistan and Afghanistan to come to the United States. They left their family and everything they knew behind to start a new life for their children. And when they arrived in the country, they had to learn how to live in a new environment and a new culture.

Kamela: First when I arrived, I heard a lot of great stuff about America, but just for my age when I arrived, basically I was in my late forties. I'd say it was difficult for me personally because I left all of my families, all of my sisters, my siblings and my loved ones behind and I came to a yes, I get it, to a world of opportunity, but no families whatsoever. I didn't know. We did not know anyone in Virginia. So of course I felt a little bit isolated initially.

Brad: Kamela told us that even though her husband had a PhD, he couldn’t find work making more than minimum wage. So to support the family, the Frahmand’s two oldest children had to get jobs to supplement their income. After months of hard work, they were able to pull themselves out of their section 8 apartment and move into a house. Kamela recognizes how hard her family had to work to get used to the culture in America, but she understands that her younger children, like Ahmad, might have a different mentality regarding the culture shift moving to America.

Kamela: I came with a different mentality. And that's, that's the truth. But I personally never went out of Kabul and forget about coming to the West. For me, it was complicated. It was interesting. It was fascinating. But for my children, my grandkids, they only, no, just one culture, which is American culture, right.. [Fade in “Secret Conversations,” setting hopeful mood] I think the great thing about me is bringing another culture and knowledge and all that, what I learned and what I built prior to coming to the States.

Brad: Kamela said that her younger children did not have to experience the same hardships that she did in her home country, since they grew up in America. But she does not want them to forget what life could have been like if they still lived in Pakistan or Afghanistan.

[Fade out “Secret Conversations”]

Amanda: For Ahmad, leaving Pakistan meant that he did not have to grow up in a war zone. But that doesn’t mean that life was easy from the moment they arrived in America.

Ahmad: I think the threat here at first was like the threat of starvation like the threat of losing your house losing your means to buy stuff, buy food, etc. It was more poverty and then just a very small threat of like drive-bys.

Amanda: The first house that Ahmad and his family lived in in Alexandria, Virginia was... not in good condition. I think you just have to hear Ahmad describe it:

Ahmad: After that we went to Annandale um, and a slightly larger house. Less roaches. Like our old house was like roaches on top of roaches when you would turn on the lights. They were stacked. Yeah. So they they needed more surface area and they were just climbed on top of each other.

Amanda: Yeah… it wasn’t pleasant. While refugees can escape the violence of their home countries, it does not mean that their lives become easy as soon as they arrive in the country. Many people struggle with language barriers, culture shock, and poverty, relying on organizations like the International Rescue Committee or International Neighbors for food, housing, and language classes. [Fade in “Lightning Bugs,” bright music] Since Ahmad knows what it is like for people who are forced to leave their home countries and come to America, he has participated in humanitarian work helping refugees. At UVA, Ahmad helped to found the Charlottesville Alliance for Refugees, or CAR, to assist refugees in the Charlottesville area through fundraising, English lessons, and journalism. During our interview, Ahmad described his own experience coming to Charlottesville and the culture shock he experienced. [Fade out “Lightning Bugs”]

Ahmad: UVA in general I feel like I had another culture shock experience where it seemed way too rich and white compared to what I had gotten used to. And it just took a little while to become comfortable here because I was so sheltered where I'm from where I didn’t, I just didn't see these aspects of American society before I came here.

Brad: For many refugees, moving from a foreign country to a city like Charlottesville can be extremely tough, and isolating. According to the US Census Bureau, the Charlottesville population is almost 70 percent white, with a median household income of almost $55,000, that is only slightly below the median income of $57,000 in the United States. For people leaving war torn or impoverished areas, the culture difference experienced with this move can be astonishing. *Especially coming to America*, where anti-immigration sentiment is *so high* due to misinformation. We asked Ahmad what he thinks about people in America characterizing refugees as dangerous:

Ahmad: I don't try to directly blame them because most of their beliefs are off of just not knowing. So if you don't know anyone personally you can't humanise them. You haven't known people like that in your life. You're just gonna go off what you hear. But I would definitely try to tell them like try to get to know people personally try to see the families who are working hard every day just like any other American family, and just you know get to know that we're people just like you and also that you know we are warm, welcoming good people who just want to make a living, integrate into American society, and just have happy lives.

Brad: There is no doubt that the Trump administration is not always welcoming towards immigrants. With policies like executive order 13769, sometimes referred to as the Muslim Ban, the administration has tried to reduce the amount of refugees that the United States would accept. However, it’s important to consider what these refugees have been through before rushing to assume that they are a threat to our country or that they are undeserving of our help. Refugees are simply trying to keep *themselves* and their families safe and create a better a life in America.

[Song “Keep Going” fades in, serious and sentimental tone]

Kamela: Who wants to leave their homeland? And so, I mean I can put myself in the shoes of those individuals. It could be people from Middle East, it could be people from uh, Mexico. You name it, as long as they are trying to get out of there, 99% I'm sure they're aiming to come here because this is the world of opportunities.

Ahmad: We're just like you. We have very similar life goals. If we're somewhat different culturally when we first come here, you know, people change over time, but mostly we all are after the same thing. Life happiness and success. [Fade out “Keep Going”]

[Podcast theme song starts]

Amanda: Thank you for listening to Refugee Realities, a podcast series revealing the stories of refugees in Charlottesville. Next time, in our third and final episode, we will be discussing how we can raise awareness about the refugee crisis and how we can work together to help people in need.

[Theme song fades out]

**End.**