

Together We Rise: Embracing Refugees in Our Own Community

By Elise Matney



Refugee: A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their country to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

I've always known about Sahana, my good friend from Washington, D.C., and her beloved grandfather, who was once a refugee. He fled to the U.S. from Pakistan many years ago in search of safety. While I was aware of his story, I didn't truly grasp its significance until Mr. Somerville, my 6th-grade Social Studies teacher, brought the realities of refugees to life. He shared harrowing stories of violence, war, and forced labor, sharing that 73% of refugees currently come from just five countries: Afghanistan, Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Sudan. We learned that nearly half of all refugee children are unable to attend school, which leads to a widening gap as they grow older. Reflecting on Sahana and her family's journey ignited a desire in me to help. Mr. Somerville's lessons on global citizenship and cultural understanding fueled my desire in the uphill battle refugees face and inspired me to take action.

After researching online and discussing it with my parents, we attended a meeting at Alight, an international organization dedicated to supporting displaced families. During our first gathering, we learned about the opportunity to sponsor a refugee family, which involves financial support and community integration. This program, a public-private partnership through Welcome Corps, launched in 2023, brings together local volunteers to help incoming refugee families start anew. Our group, formed during that meeting, consists of eight community members from the Twin Cities—ranging from senior citizens to students like me. We decided to focus our efforts on supporting Afghan refugees, recognizing the challenges they face simply to survive in their

home country. Women, in particular, endure severe restrictions—they are often stripped of their rights, denied education, silenced, and forced to cover their faces.

Over the past nine months, our group has prepared to welcome a family. We launched a GoFundMe campaign to cover initial expenses like housing, food, and transportation while the family transitions into their new lives. I helped organize a bake sale and reached out to neighbors for donations of money and household items. My garage became a hub of generosity, filled to the brim with contributions that would provide essential supplies for the family.

We were recently “matched” with an Afghan family that includes a mom, dad, and two daughters around my age! This week, we’ll pick them up at the Minneapolis-Saint Paul airport after their long journey. Excitement and nerves are all around, and I can only imagine the whirlwind of emotions the family must be experiencing. Our top priority is to ensure they feel safe and supported during this transition. I can’t wait to show them that they have a voice and freedom here, empowering them to take control of their destinies through education. One of our first jobs will be to help the girls enroll in school and assist them as they learn English alongside their native Farsi. I’m also eager to introduce them to all that Minneapolis has to offer—5,000 acres of parks, the downtown skyways, the Museum of Art, and endless lakes. And yes, I’ll be preparing them for the Minnesota winters—they might be in for a surprise!

Reflecting on Sahana’s grandfather, this journey has given me a much deeper understanding of the challenges refugees face. I remember how Mr. Somerville taught us about empathy and community service in 6th grade. His lessons on global citizenship and cultural awareness sparked my passion for refugee issues and inspired me to make a difference. It feels as though everything has come full circle as we prepare to welcome this family tomorrow!

GoFundMe: <https://gofund.me/c6a93be8>