**Hashmat Suddat Struggles to Find Peace for his Family, an interview by Hilary Langford**

When they handed out the envelope with our acceptance, when they said the word "refugee," tears came to my eyes. This means we really have to leave Afghanistan now. It's a really bad experience to leave your homeland. Where you were born, lived ... your community. Everybody cried. We were happy to get out of there, but everybody cried when we got the letter that stated we were accepted as refugees.

Hashmat Saddat is not your ordinary nineteen year old. Against the din of coffeehouse chatter, grinding beans and bursts of steam, he speaks softly of his refugee experience. He has survived a war, held a family together, and most recently took on the daunting task of helping plan his sister's wedding.

"We had a very comfortable life. Life was great. Parents. Home. Education. It was just as normal as people live here. Everything was nice before the war."

As a result of hostilities in Afghanistan, Hashmat lost both of his parents. At the end of 2000, he and the remaining members of his family fled their home in Kabul. Hashmat, along with five sisters, a younger brother and an aunt sought refuge in Pakistan for nine months. During this time, they applied for refugee status with [UNHCR](http://www.unrefugees.org/site/lookup.asp?c=lfIQKSOwFqG&b=4865427).

"I filled out an application that said we came here, we were forced to get out of there. When we applied for status, the UNHCR person came for verification ... to see how we live, our house, the condition that we were in. When we were accepted as refugees, we got a letter. Until then we were just being processed; we were not thinking about it. Then, our case processed. We were happy to be accepted and grieved to be leaving home. At that point, anywhere in the world was a better place than Afghanistan. In Pakistan, however, we were facing an unemployment situation. No education, no work."

Although there was a refugee camp nearby, Hashmat and his family chose to live discretely in a residential area approximately fifteen minutes from Islamabad. In Rawalpendi, Hashmat kept a low profile for fear of being noticed by the Taliban. "I was not in contact with the community," says Hashmat. The situation in Pakistan was less than ideal, but it was significantly safer than Taliban occupied Afghanistan.

"There was no way to make a living. My sister was a teacher. Then when the Taliban came, she could not work outside. My sisters had to stay home, and I was the only one to support the family. I could not do that by myself. The Taliban cut power, education, and freedom. Women were not allowed to go to school. Men could go to school, but there was no education. It was just by name "going to school", sitting on the desk, wearing dirty clothes. If someone had new clothes, they were beaten. It was said that women should be born and die at home.

"Every single family in Afghanistan, during Taliban, every second . . . they were unsafe. I was with my sisters and the only man in the house. Every minute I was worried that one of the Taliban would come and take one of my sisters. If they knew that a family had young girls, they came and took them forcibly." En route to Pakistan, many young women felt threatened as their departure clearly indicated their dislike of the Taliban. "We were all very scared," says Hashmat. "The Taliban have never gathered and eaten with a mother, father, brother or sister. They do not know what a family is." Hashmat attributes much of the group's brutal behavior to this fact as well as the misinterpretation of Islam.

Hashmat and his family did not have an idea as to where they would like to begin their new lives. Everyone agreed that anywhere would be fine. The United States would become their new home. On November 16, 2001, the Saddats arrived and came to realize that their hardships were not entirely behind them. The pain of being forced from their home weighed heavily on the family. "It's really hard. It's a really bad feeling. You don't want to do something, but you're forced to do it. It's the same as if someone said to you, "Now you have to leave the United States. How do you feel?" It's really hard."

Making matters more complicated for the family was the fact that they were arriving in America just three months after the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center.

"Because of September 11, I suffered a lot from the backlash. Students, people in the community, they thought that Muslims were killers. Terrorists. People don't know and I don't blame them, because they are ignorant.

People didn't want to shake hands with me. 'You might have shaken Bin Laden's hand' and I explained, 'I was a civilian. Just an ordinary civilian.' We didn't have power for many years. 'You met Bin Laden before I did.' You had his picture on the t.v. In Afghanistan, we didn't have TV. or power. When I came to the United States, I saw this picture . . .who Bin Laden was for the first time. We didn't want to be around him. That's why we left.

Hashmat tried unsuccessfully to keep his sisters from working upon arrival in Virginia. He wanted education to be the focus and for them to study. His initial plan was not to attend school and work to support the entire family. He wasn't aware that he could not do it alone. "In Pakistan or Afghanistan, one or two of the males can work and support the family. Here, they cannot do that," notes Saddat. "When I first came here, Refugee & Immigration Services told me I had to go to school. I said, 'no' I want to work; I don't want to go to school. I want to support the family. They said, 'no' education comes first. They sent me to school and my sisters started working."

The first days of school were exceptionally difficult for Hashmat, as he was disturbed by how impolite students were to their teachers and annoyed by their incessant complaints about the work being assigned. He was so distraught that he vowed his first day of school to be his last. He soon overcame his feelings. ...Eventually, Hashmat found a job and admits that he is still adjusting to the relentless schedule. "Here, the work is very hard. The money you make, you spend and people don't have time for their families. I live under the same roof as my sister and sometimes I don't see her for a couple of nights."

"It was really hard to adjust to life here. It's not impossible, just hard. It's good now, but when I first came here it was very hard. You have to pay taxes, utilities, car repairs and insurance. Health insurance. I don't have it. In Afghanistan, we did not have those things. This is stuff you never dream about."

When he feels "perfectly secure" he wants to return to Afghanistan. I will go there when I finish my education to help educate people, to tell people about how hard they should work. If someone would have told me that at night, I would look out as far as my eyes could see and one side of the road would be all white lights and the other all red moving at 60 miles per hour, I would have said that they were exaggerating. That many cars! I would never imagine how American people are living. People cannot imagine how it is living in Afghanistan. There is no war in Afghanistan, but that does not mean peace. Peace means education, construction . . . everything, you know?

Hashmat recently graduated high school in Richmond, Virginia and is currently beginning his first semester at a local college where he is studying computer science. When he is not at school, he works part time at an off site data production company as an Operations Service Specialist. His priority is supporting the family and getting an education. Saddat also vows to remain committed to the refugee community. When his schedule permits, he helps a newly arrived family from Iran in the area. "Since we were helped, by our American mentors, I learned that we should help people. I believe in humanity. I love humans. If I have time, I go and help other people."