



The CommUUnicator

**Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist
Fellowship of Waynesboro**

Update on our Refugee Family Sponsorship

By Laura Riggan

Almost four years ago, our Fellowship welcomed the opportunity to sponsor a refugee family from Afghanistan who had evacuated as the US military pulled out of Afghanistan. The family consisted of a married couple, their six children, who ranged from age 11 years down to three months, and the husband's younger brother, age 27. Within days of their frantic departure from their homeland, they arrived in Charlottesville. The local office of the International Rescue Committee placed them, along with two other Afghan families, in a hotel in Waynesboro, where they lived for over six months.

Under the direction of the IRC, UUFW built a "Home Team" of eight individuals who took action just as the family finally moved into a home in Augusta County. We divided duties and helped them navigate through all the areas of need we could identify: settling into their house, attending English classes, enrolling the kids in school, seeing doctors, and managing transportation—using bikes, buses and rides from Team members at first, and later getting driver's licenses and buying a car. All of us did whatever else we could to help, and we all were enriched by the friendship we developed with the whole family.

Recent events have raised concerns among many of us for all Afghan refugees in the United States, but most especially for our local friends, and I'd like to share an update.

All six children now attend public school. All six children speak and understand English, with

the middle two having become fluent enough to exit direct English instruction. The oldest two are in high school. The sophomore hopes to enter a nurse training program at Valley Career and Technical Center and is also considering an AP class for junior year. The freshman is busy with soccer pre-season training, and looking forward to playing on the school soccer team for another season this spring. The third child is thriving in middle school, and the youngest three are growing and happy in 5th grade, 1st grade, and preschool, respectively.

Their uncle is looking forward to his wedding at the end of this month! His bride is an Afghan refugee currently living in Woodbridge. He has rented an apartment and is working on furnishing it. He continues to work at a local business, where he has been employed since the spring of 2022.

His brother and sister-in-law, the children's parents, are heavily involved in planning his wedding. Though the traditions and details differ, wedding planning for Afghans is no less complex than it is in American culture—from venue to clothing to food.

The head of the family took a more lucrative job two years ago at a local factory, and continues to be happily employed there. His wife is always busy managing this large household. Like the men, she successfully earned her driver's license, no small feat for a woman from a culture that limits women's opportunities as profoundly as Afghanistan. Each of the brothers has purchased a car, which of course has greatly increased their mobility and opportunities. In

addition to regular daily errands, they have been able to venture on longer trips. Once they drove to Virginia Beach for a first look at the ocean, and they have also enjoyed a trip to Washington, DC.

These nine members of our community are warm and funny, generous and patient people. They are also worried and scared about their security in the United States. All have been granted asylum, and one has received a green card. The others wait hopefully for theirs. Though the Home Team's official duties ended within the family's first year in Waynesboro, we have maintained contact and friendship. They have expressed deep appreciation for connection with their UU friends. The father, justifiably anxious, views his situation with wisdom and insight: "People are the same," he says. "There are good and bad people everywhere, and they don't always understand people who are not like them. I am so thankful for the friends we have here, to know that you are here for us."

Special Collections Update

The UUFW's Sunday Special Collection is one of the UUFW's longstanding and impactful programs. Each month, the Fellowship invites a representative from a selected organization to share a brief overview of their mission and goals with the congregation. After this presentation, a special collection is taken to support the featured organization. Over the years, the generosity of the Fellowship has made these offerings an effective way to provide immediate assistance and support to important causes. In addition, the Social Justice Team ensures that a special collection is included in the two annual services they organize, both of which focus on social justice themes. Maribeth Nolde, a member of the Worship Arts Team, is the coordinator of special

collections. Let her know if you have an idea for a collection.

In this and upcoming issues, this newsletter will provide updates on organizations we supported through this collection in 2024-2025.

Magnolia Rose: Healing Rooted in Hope

Magnolia Rose is a non-profit organization located in the Shenandoah Valley dedicated to supporting girls and young women who have been affected by or are at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking. The organization provides a comprehensive range of services, including transportation, housing, food, medical care, detox and recovery assistance, therapy, vocational training, and educational support.

To date, Magnolia Rose has assisted 193 survivors. Following their special collection from the UUFW, the organization made significant progress by breaking ground in Augusta County for a new home and an adjoining detox center. Additionally, Magnolia Rose has welcomed a therapy dog named Flynn, who offers comfort and support to survivors during their healing process.

Donations to Magnolia Rose are first allocated to meet the immediate needs of survivors. Once those needs are addressed, funds are directed toward the construction and development of the new home and detox center, ensuring sustainable support for future survivors.

Magnolia Rose is seeking volunteers to assist at their retail store located in downtown Staunton—a wonderful place to shop for holiday gifts! There are also opportunities for volunteers to work directly with the women supported by the organization. For those interested in contributing, donations can be made online at www.magnoliarose.org or by mail at PO Box 268, Waynesboro, VA 22980.

