

A YEAR OF WELCOME:

2022 was a year of challenge and growth. As the world watched the events in Afghanistan unfold, Northwest Arkansas leapt into action to welcome our Afghan neighbors, including Mursal Shirzad.



PHOTO: MURSAL SHIRZAD
By Malath Alarnosi

DREAMING OF A NEW FUTURE

AS A YOUNG WOMEN PURSUING HER EDUCATION IN BUSINESS, MURSAL FACED GRAVE DANGER IN THE FACE OF THE TALIBAN. TODAY, SHE GRIEVES FOR WHAT SHE LEFT BEHIND- BUT IS HOPEFUL FOR WHAT IS NEXT.

The day the Taliban took over Afghanistan, Mursal was home from college visiting her family. In a split-second decision, the family knew they had to get out of Afghanistan. Mursal, the oldest and only female among her siblings, was especially at risk. Her mother had lived through Taliban rule as a young woman and watched as her dream of becoming a teacher was dismantled by the extremist regime. She could not bear for Mursal, who was working on a Business Administration degree in Kazakstan at the time, to face the same future.

At the airport, Mursal's 16-year old brother Ali escorted her to the gate while their father tried to park. In the chaos of the airport Mursal's Hijab got caught on something. While Ali was trying to free her, a Taliban guard hit him in the face.

This commotion caught the attention of a U.S. soldier, who looked at her papers and quickly ushered them to the main gate for boarding. **In this moment, they realized that Ali- who had not packed a thing- would be able to leave as well.**

After hearing this news, Mursal's father frantically drove to collect the rest of the family. Tragically, there was an explosion and the gates were sealed, leaving their family on the other side. She and her brother were suddenly alone together on an uncertain path.

That path would eventually lead them to Northwest Arkansas.

Today Mursal and Ali live in a small, cozy apartment facing a park near the square in Bentonville. They have experienced kindness and acceptance here as they learn about the culture in NWA.

Mursal works as a Case Aide for Canopy and is taking a class at NWACC. She hopes to study International Relations. Ali received the highest praise from his teachers in high school and graduated in the spring. The two speak with their family through WhatsApp on a daily basis.

She knows there was no choice but to leave home, but every day that goes by Mursal struggles with worry about the future. It makes her sad to think about the people she loves, especially all of the women in her extended family, who are living life closed off inside their homes, unable to leave.

She is grateful for her parents and all of the selfless parents in Afghanistan who have had to say goodbye to their children, dreaming of a better life for future generations.