The work of welcome in the wake of war

The story of Neighbor to Neighbor

Andrea Cramer

After growing up in a Christian community where support for the US military and its global dominance was assumed, I became drawn to nonviolence in my mid-twenties through exposure to Anabaptist thought. Initially, I thought of nonviolence in terms of what I was against: the physical violence and terror of war. Putting nonviolence into practice meant expressing my disapproval of the military industrial complex. But through my encounters with refugees and asylum seekers, I have been challenged to think of nonviolence not only as what I am against but also as what I am for, not only *how to resist war* but also *what to do in the wake of war*. Below I tell the story of how I came to found the non-profit organization Neighbor to Neighbor after encountering those displaced by violence, followed by an account of how Neighbor to Neighbor welcomes those fleeing violence into our community. But, first, it is necessary to describe what those seeking refuge and asylum in the United States are up against.

The plight of refugees and asylum seekers

The Refugee Act of 1980, signed into law by US President Jimmy Carter, established a permanent system for the admission and resettlement of refugees into the United States and provided a uniform definition of the term *refugee* as a person who is "unable or unwilling" to return to their home country of origin "because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." In 1982, US President Ronald Reagan set the ceiling for the annual number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States at 140,000. While the number of displaced persons worldwide has increased, the number of resettled refugees to the United States has decreased since that 1982 ceiling. During his first administration, President Donald Trump reduced the ceiling for refugees admitted to the United States to a record low of 15,000 for fiscal year

2021. While President Joe Biden increased the ceiling back up to 125,000, it was difficult to reverse the effects of Trump's reduction on the actual number of refugees admitted. Moreover, Trump's starkly xenophobic rhetoric during his 2024 campaign suggests that he will once again severely reduce the ceiling. Currently, the United States only resettles around .0001 percent of displaced persons worldwide.[1]

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Along with refugees, who are granted rights and protections before resettling in another country, are asylum seekers, who enter another country to seek protection, sanctuary, or asylum. In the United States, the process of being granted asylum can take years, as it requires establishing probable fear; undergoing extensive background checks with Homeland Security, the FBI, National Counterterrorism Center, and the State Department; and successfully working one's way through a string of court hearings and interviews.

As of May 2024, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that 120 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide, representing one in every sixty-nine people. This is the twelfth consecutive annual increase in the number of people displaced from their homes due to conflict, persecution, human rights violations, and instability. The number of displaced people includes 43.4 million refugees and 6.9 million asylum seekers, along with another 63.3 million people who have been internally displaced.

Each phase of the displacement and resettlement process—preflight, flight, and postflight—comes with its own challenges. The preflight phase is the experience of war, conflict, or discrimination. The flight phase is the process of displacement, often just as dangerous and traumatizing as the conflict itself. The postflight phase involves resettlement in a new, safer place. While the postflight phase brings protection from the violence that led to displacement, it often comes with new feelings of isolation, depression, and resentment. Just as there is work for peacebuilders to address the root causes of displacement, so too there is much peacebuilding work to be done in this postflight phase. The work is our focus at Neigh-

1 For more information about these numbers, see Diana Roy, Claire Klobucista, and James McBride, "How Does the U.S. Refugee System Work?," Council on Foreign Relations, March 26, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-does-us-refugee-system-work-trump-biden-afghanistan.

bor to Neighbor, which arose from a growing awareness of the plight of those in this phase.

How Neighbor to Neighbor came to be

In 2011, Texas experienced its hottest, driest summer ever recorded—the same summer that my family moved from Northern Indiana to Waco, Texas, where my husband was starting a graduate program at Baylor University. Walking out to the mailbox and back was an act of bravery. I would be winded and sweating by the time I reached the front door, just to be burnt by the door handle. The steering wheel of our car would be gummy and soft. My laundry could dry outside in minutes. There were many days that I questioned our move. We didn't know a single soul, and we had an almost two-year-old son and a baby daughter on the way. And, for the first time in my life, I felt like a stranger in a strange place.

It wasn't until I met a fellow Midwesterner at the Mennonite church we started attending—Hope Fellowship—that I was able to imagine this place becoming home. This Midwesterner taught me important tips and tricks for surviving the hot Texas summer: run your errands before 9:00 a.m., take a cooler with you to the grocery store, be wary of fire ants. This friend, and eventually many other new friends, extended welcome to me in a time and a place where I felt alone and uncertain. These relationships gave me a sense of belonging and peace.

A couple of years into our time in Waco, my son—who was then four years old—found a magazine we had lying around the house. In it was a spread of profile pictures of Afghan refugee children taken by photographer Muhammed Muheisen.[2] Intrigued, my son began asking me questions. *Who are these kids? What's a refugee? How do people become refugees? What can we do to help?* I answered him as best as I could, realizing there were some major gaps in my knowledge of the issue. We, mother and son, wept together and started brainstorming how we could get involved. I started a deep dive on forced displacement and human migration. This was when the Syrian conflict was regularly making the news in the United States. The plight of Syrian refugees trying to escape by inflatable rafts across the Mediterranean became all I could think about. My son started designing and painting T-shirts to sell to donate the proceeds to local

2 See his and his wife's non-profit the Everyday Refugees Foundation at https://everydayrefugees.org.

refugee resettlement agencies. Later, he and our daughter hand stamped Christmas cards for the same purpose.

In the summer of 2014, we learned of the thousands of people crossing the Mexico-Texas border, seeking asylum from the violence in their home countries in the Northern Triangle: Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. We learned of organizations doing relief work with the migrants on the border and called one such organization, Catholic Charities in McAllen, Texas, to see if it would be helpful for a small, young family to volunteer for a few days. They welcomed our help, so we packed a van full of donations and drove six hours to the border. This was our first direct interaction with newcomers, and the experience helped solidify the realization that I had been slowly coming to: I wanted to dedicate myself to the work of welcome.

After our time in Waco, we returned to South Bend, Indiana. South Bend has a history of refugee resettlement, but when we moved back, the work had become unofficial, ad hoc assistance. After a year surveying the needs in the community, I decided to start a non-profit to provide welcome and friendship to refugees and asylum seekers who found their way to our community. With a board of directors in place, I filed for a 501(c)3 nonprofit status, and in December 2017, Neighbor to Neighbor was born.[3]

The work of welcome at Neighbor to Neighbor

The mission of Neighbor to Neighbor is to foster mutual relationships between newcomers and local community members in order to empower newcomers and engage community members through friendships, education, and advocacy.

Intercultural friendships are the backbone of Neighbor to Neighbor. We build community through the art of neighboring and connecting newcomer immigrants with local community members. We strive for friendships that are mutual, hospitable, and listening. We want to help our newcomer population navigate the new set of challenges they will face living in the South Bend area: getting a city ID and library card, learning the tax system, writing resumes, seeking sustainable employment, learning English, finding community events, and feeling comfortable in our community.

3 Learn more about Neighbor to Neighbor at n2nsb.org.

We also provide education to the local community through onboarding and training volunteers and hosting and promoting events to raise awareness of issues related to forced migration. In addition, we provide educational opportunities for newcomers, including English acquisition and topical workshops. We strive for education that is non-judgmental, practical, and empowering. We value the passions and creativity of all—young, old, and everyone in between. Involving everyone, even at a young age, teaches that we can all be welcoming, and anyone can join a movement for change.

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Finally, we strive for advocacy that is engaged, focused, and effective. When we learn of systems and structures that create barriers for our newcomer neighbors, we take action. Within our first year, we noticed that a major barrier was the knowledge exam required to receive a driver's license. In Indiana, the knowledge exam is offered in fourteen languages. However, when helping one of our first newcomers study for this test, I discovered that the manual to study for the test was only in English. Many people come to the United States having driven for many years in their home country. They are confident, good drivers. But because they are not yet proficient in written English, the study manual creates a barrier to gain a driver's license, which in turn hinders their independence and ability to gain employment.

Neighbor to Neighbor reached out to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to see if anything could be done. They responded that we had a case based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. So with the help of the ACLU, we asked the Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV) to provide driver's manuals in more languages than English. After a few months, we came to a settlement, and the manual can now be accessed in eleven languages. We later learned that the BMV had wanted to make this happen, but they needed outside pressure to show that it was a need that was worth the cost of the translation. In the end, members from the BMV thanked us for our advocacy.

Welcome in the wake of war

In February 2020, then US President Donald Trump signed a peace agreement with the Taliban, which included a complete withdrawal of all US

military forces within fourteen months of the agreement. The following year, then US President Joe Biden delayed the date of withdrawal but ultimately stuck to the agreement. The US military, which had been a presence in Afghanistan for twenty years, withdrew its last troops by August 30, 2021, as the Taliban had already retaken control of Kabul and most of the country. Suddenly, those Afghan nationals who had assisted the US military, along with their families, were threatened with retribution.

Of those who were able to get out of Afghanistan and seek asylum in the United States, around seventy of them were relocated to South Bend. In the wake of this crisis, two resettlement agencies reopened in South Bend after being closed for ten years. As these agencies were trying to rebuild, we were able to place volunteer teams with several of the Afghan families right away since we already had our infrastructure in place.

One of the families we worked with was the family of Ali.[4] Ali is in his late thirties and so lived with the presence of the US military since he was a teenager. As soon as he was able, he enlisted to serve alongside the United States as an interpreter and a medic. When the Afghan government fell, he, along with his wife and seven children, fled the country. By the time they arrived in South Bend, they were shell-shocked. In addition to trying to process the traumatic events of their lives, they now faced a cost of living that was exponentially more than they ever experienced, socially progressive people that dressed differently and interacted across genders loosely, a strange new language, household appliances that they had never seen, and more. They were thankful that they were safe and that they had each other, but their trusted circle did not go beyond their family.

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After a couple of months, Ali began a full-time job, the kids were enrolled in and started school, and, as often happens, Ali's wife Myriam was isolated at home. Neighbor to Neighbor put together a volunteer team that started to meet with the family regularly, usually socializing over cups of Afghan tea and disjointed conversations. Eventually Neighbor to Neighbor launched a program for Afghan women that meets weekly to offer an English lesson and a private story hour for the women and preschool-aged

4 Names have been changed for privacy and protection.

children. This program allowed the newly arrived Afghan women to meet each other for the first time since transportation caused barriers to doing so previously. Over the three years that Ali and his family have been here, they have had another baby (a US citizen!), their oldest child was able to get a driver's license and is on track to graduate from high school this year, the younger children have become fluent in English, and Myriam and their oldest daughter have started learning to drive—something that seemed unimaginable before. While there are still everyday difficulties and sadness for their homeland, we celebrate with them and their ever-growing network of friends for all that they have accomplished.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my journey, I can't help but be amazed at all the people that have led to and allowed for this work of peacebuilding. If the photographer Muhammad Muheisen hadn't cared about and photographed those fleeing war, his photos of Afghan refugee children would never have found their way into my child's hands. If my child hadn't been curious and empathetic, he wouldn't have asked me those simple, yet challenging questions. If Catholic Charities in McAllen, Texas, hadn't welcomed a young family to volunteer, we wouldn't have caught a vision for postflight relief work. If hundreds of South Bend residents hadn't caught that vision with Neighbor to Neighbor, we couldn't have connected with all the hundreds of newcomers that have relocated to our community.

True peace, full peace requires attention to the post-war, postflight landscape. In the wake of war, I have found a space to practice the beautiful, messy, complex work of welcome. My life has been enriched by the many friendships that I have been able to build with people from all over the world. One such friend told me recently, "When we arrived we didn't know anyone here. But we didn't feel that we were alone." This is what the work of welcome—the work of peacebuilding—in the wake of war is all about.

About the author

Andrea Cramer is founder and executive director of Neighbor to Neighbor, a post-resettlement non-profit in South Bend, Indiana. She is a candidate in the Master of Arts in Theology and Peace Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. She lives in South Bend with her husband and two teenage children.