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WKU program seeks to build bridges for refugee students

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Western Kentucky University junior Ataulah Tahiri, a Afghan refugee w
Program, and Dr. Sunnygard, the associate provost for global learning an
College and International Center on Thursday afternoon, March 2, 2023.
campus life, both academically and socially, and remove some of barrier
Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com)

Grace Ramey

When Afghanistan's government fell to the Taliban, Ataulloh Tahiri fled.

In November 2021, after several stops and weeks of processing, he arrived in Bowling Green, considered a safe place for young refugees coming to America with nothing, Tahiri said.

A month later, the tornadoes struck. Tahiri had never seen one in his life.

"It was very dark, scary," he said.

But he didn't let the double disaster stop him from helping out his new neighbors. The following day, Tahiri joined a group of people going from home to home to clean up until the late hours of the evening.

While cleaning up debris, Tahiri shared his story. He had been working for the United Nations World Food Program and translating for the U.S. State Department at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul when the Taliban took over.

He had been enrolled in his first year at the American University of Afghanistan, studying accounting. But now, everything he knew was wiped away.

"I started in the U.S. from zero," Tahiri said. "It was hard to start from zero, but the good thing is I never gave up. It was hard for me to continue to motivate myself, to encourage myself, but I never gave up."

Tahiri's dream was to continue his education, but unlike free public Afghan universities, American universities came with a hefty tuition.

He shared this dream with Miki Padgett, a former Marine who had spent time in Afghanistan. Padgett connected Tahiri to a WKU alum who bankrolled his first semester at the university.

Immediately, Tahiri ran into problems. He didn't have Kentucky residency, so he couldn't qualify for in-state tuition. He needed to fill out the FAFSA, but he didn't have a Social Security number or know how to report his parents' income.

"He can even barely prove that he exists," said John Sunnygard, WKU associate provost for global learning and international affairs. "We were encountering this and realized that there's a lot of holes. We're not designed to handle this."

Tahiri eventually got his first semester paid for by alumni, but he worried what he would do come second semester and beyond. And finances weren't his only struggle.

Tahiri was the only refugee on campus his first semester, and he said he felt isolated and stressed.

He worried about the state of his homeland after hearing about women losing their right to education in Afghanistan. The stress of being separated from his family

for the first time, while trying to adjust to American social and cultural life, was a lot to bear.

"I was not able to make a lot of friends in the first semester. So that was also a stress," Tahiri said. "After all these problems, I was just alone. There was nobody that can guide you or say, 'Hey, this works like this,' 'You should go to this.' There was no mentor. There was no line for me to walk on that path."

Tahiri was a trailblazer. In light of his difficult experience, WKU established a Refugee Task Force in January 2022 to address various gaps keeping refugees from becoming successful WKU students.

While international students typically have planned their entire lives around studying in the U.S., refugees are forced into an undesired situation, carrying trauma from the lives they've fled.

Refugees often have to start their education over in America. Sunnygard said one Afghan refugee who had been a practicing OBGYN for 15 years is now pursuing a nursing degree because her medical degree is not recognized here and it would take too long to re-earn it.



There is also a tension between the desire to pursue an education and the need to work to support a family.

"Oftentimes, the person who is best suited to go to university is the person who also has the best prospects of making money for the family," Sunnygard said.

The task force created the Resilient Refugee Program to build a bridge for refugees and help them work through these obstacles.

Resilient Refugee has three parts. First, prospective students who need a high school degree or to reach a higher level of English to enter college take classes at Refuge BG.

The advanced English classes are taught at WKU in an attempt to make the campus feel more welcoming, Sunnygard said.

Second, refugee students take a series of classes designed for international students getting used to an American classroom during their first year at WKU, called the International Pathway for Academic Success.

IPAS classes are general education courses that might teach students how to write a U.S.-style essay, introduce them to WKU resources or offer enrichment experiences to foster a sense of campus belonging.

"It's designed to provide a successful transition," said Lauren Reyes, WKU assistant director of international student success.

Third, refugee students are paired with a Navigator, another student who is there to provide guidance and answer questions.

"Through the lessons that we had from working with Ataullah and Sodaba (Rahmaty, another Afghan refugee), we learned that really what what the refugees need ... is a peer mentor, someone who they can relate to, someone who they trust, someone who will take the time to go to the financial aid office with them, to advising appointments with them," Sunnygard said.

The General Assembly gave the Resilient Refugee program life in its 2022 budget with the Kentucky Innovative Scholarship Pilot Program, which allocated \$10 million to a scholarship program for Kentucky refugee students from 2022-2024 from KEES program funds.

“There's a lot of dissatisfaction with the way that the United States left Afghanistan,” Sunnygard said. “So this, I think in part was a response from the state legislature to say, we are going to welcome to Kentucky these people who we made a commitment to. If the federal government doesn't, we as Kentucky will do that.”

This semester, WKU is home to 17 refugee students, mostly from Afghanistan and Ukraine.

It's still in its beginning stages, but the program recently got a grant from the NASH Catalyst Fund, which recognizes and supports hotspots of best practices. In April, WKU will host an Every Campus a Refuge training for the entire state.

The KISPP scholarship will be up for renewal in 2024. Without it, Reyes said many refugee students would be left behind.

Sunnygard called the program a “win-win” for the Bowling Green community and the refugees.

“We're not without our challenges, but these students, through this scholarship program, are going to make significant contributions to Kentucky in the future,” he said.

Now a sophomore Honors student studying finance and economics, Tahiri is opening the door to other WKU refugee students.

"I'm happy. I'm helping the other refugees," he said. "I'm glad I will be a light, the light that I didn't have the first semester. I will guide them and will not leave them in stress and anxiety."

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