

‘No other option’: Afghans put trust in strangers from Missouri before harrowing escape to safety

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Behind the story: While I was covering the Missouri statehouse, a source alerted me to a different kind of story than what I usually wrote. After nearly a dozen hours of interviews in English and Pashto, I’d built the trust of a family of Afghan refugees who escaped the country’s governmental collapse with the help of a couple of men from Missouri. Careful fact-checking and the relentless pursuit of details allowed me to tell a gripping, inspiring story that honored the courage of the people involved. This story won a handful of awards, including being named the Hearst Foundation’s 2023 story of the year — the highest honor a collegiate journalist can win. The story reads best through the link above, which includes pictures, texts and documents from the family’s escape.

Full text: The sun has just risen, and Timothy Griffin thinks he’s killed Shela Alokozai.

He’s sitting at his laptop in Jefferson City. He doesn’t know where she or her children are, but he can assume.

Griffin is a military man. He had worked as a counterinsurgency specialist for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan. He understands what happens in these situations.

And so, when a suicide bomber detonates among a crowd outside the Kabul airport’s Abbey Gate, Griffin assumes the worst.

Because Shela was sent there, kids in tow, on his orders, Griffin also assumes responsibility. He insisted. She trusted.

After his calls to Shela, who is 7,000 miles away, go unanswered, a sleep-deprived Griffin types out a message to his military contacts.

“BREAK! BREAK! BREAK!” Griffin writes in a jargoned panic, to get their attention.
“URGENCY: CRITICAL.”

There are others, Shela’s family members, who are alive and are still relying on Griffin to escape a collapsing country.

But Griffin has lost hope. He asks himself: “Well, what’s the point now?”

‘Nobody knew who was innocent’

In the beginning, there was terror.

It woke Ahmad Siam Alokozai: People, so many people, rushing, pushing, crushing each other on the street outside early in the morning. They were headed in every direction, but many went toward the airport.

Siam reacted quickly. He collected his wife, Shela, and their four children. His sister, Bibi Nelo Babakar Khail — a widow with eight children — came too.

The Afghan government had just collapsed following a relatively quick takeover by the Taliban.

People ran to the Kabul airport. They weren't all thinking of evacuation — yet, anyway. But foreigners controlled the airport, which could mean safety.

The threat of the Taliban hit close for Siam, who previously assisted the United States' Drug Enforcement Administration.

"I knew that he would be killed for sure because of his experience," said Ahmad Elham Alokozai, Siam's brother, who also worked with U.S. forces.

Siam said that "nobody knew who was innocent, who was not innocent, in front of the Taliban."

So they went to the airport, which wasn't far from the family's apartment. That was the only plan.

'Words of comfort'

Griffin's phone buzzed. His old teacher, Elham, was on the line with a question.

The two met nine years prior when Elham taught him Pashto — one of Afghanistan's two official languages — during military training. Close in age, they bonded.

"He was one of the smartest students," Elham remembers. "He liked learning."

They would chat from time to time, but this call was different.

Elham explained the situation: There were 19 of his relatives — five adults and 14 children — who needed evacuation from Kabul.

His request for Griffin was straightforward: "Is there anything you can do?"

Griffin, the director of constituency services for Missouri Sen. Steven Roberts, shakily promised to do his best.

"Those were more like words of comfort," Griffin said. "At the time, I didn't really think I was gonna be able to do anything."

But he took on the challenge. Griffin enlisted the help of Timothy Hayes, a personal injury attorney from Springfield, Missouri. Griffin and Hayes worked together for a rescue-focused

international nongovernmental organization, so Griffin thought Hayes might know people working to evacuate former translators.

The easy part, relatively speaking, was securing access to a flight for Elham's parents and teenage sisters, who had green cards. It still wasn't a smooth departure, with vital paperwork lost to the Kabul airport crowd.

That left 15 people to rescue: Siam, Shela, Nelo and 12 children, ranging in ages from 2 to 17.

'Pure, chaotic bedlam'

In the days following the Afghan government's collapse, options were limited: Staying felt risky, but so did trying to escape.

A viral social media video showed a plane take off with desperate people clinging to its landing gear; bodies fell to the ground as specks moments later. (Siam said he spotted a childhood friend attaching himself to that plane. The friend didn't survive.)

Siam remembers the scenes, though he calls it "indescribable." He likens particular moments to the crush of angry fans at a soccer game. Parents and kids were separated. People boarded damaged planes, missing doors be damned, in the hope that they might somehow take flight.

Once the airport was cleared, the crowds waited at its boundaries, desperate for a way in through one of its gates.

The family waited, too. They stayed, diligently, among the masses — frequently until the early hours of the morning, only to return a few hours later.

Griffin and Hayes mobilized on the other side of the globe. Griffin grew frustrated with U.S. immigration offices and contacted Canada's citizenship service, which promptly issued letters certifying that the family members were Canadian citizens and should be allowed to board one of the country's remaining planes out of Kabul.

But those letters would only matter if the troops barricading the airport's gates accepted them.

At times, the American duo worked sleeplessly across time zones to make contact with someone, anyone, inside the airport who could help bring the family inside.

"It was pure, chaotic bedlam for several days there," Hayes said.

And then, miraculously, came a breakthrough. Siam made it inside.

His letter had worked. He got to a terminal.

He was there alone and told that he only had 24 hours for the rest of his family to join him. If that didn't happen, he would have to choose between leaving the airport or leaving his family behind.

But what good was it for only him to escape? Griffin had to convince him to remain in the terminal.

His sister Nelo joined him after she and her children jumped into a wastewater canal on the edge of the military barricade. Soldiers pulled them from the water. They were through.

Shela and four children were the only ones left outside. And Griffin and Hayes had a plan.

Through the founder of the organization they volunteered with, they finally secured a contact inside the airport. That contact sent Griffin the apparent key to getting Shela to a terminal.

It was a U.S. Special Forces symbol that Marines there would recognize: the name “Thor” beneath a depiction of the Norse god, with a 5 and 8 on either side.

Shela needed to show it to soldiers at the Abbey Gate.

But there was a problem: She didn’t want to go.

‘It’s impossible’

Shela was exhausted. Her kids were, too.

The days of anxiety and anguish eroded their will to wait in the sweltering crowds.

Siam’s parents, who had made it to Germany, tried to persuade her to return to the airport. Shela refused.

“It’s impossible,” she said.

Griffin understood her fatigue, but he was weighing the unrelenting pressure of time, too. There was no guarantee that flights would continue out of Kabul for much longer.

Once foreign planes left, “that’s it,” he told Elham. “She will not be able to get out.”

With this in mind, Elham eventually won her over. A cousin with a car drove Shela and the children to the edge of the crowd at the airport’s Abbey Gate.

They pressed toward the front of the crowd. Two of Shela’s children passed out, from dehydration or the grueling sunlight or some combination of both. She carried them, wondering if they would die, back to the edge of the crowd.

This probably saved their lives.

The bomb exploded at 5:36 p.m. Kabul time. Because she’d retreated, Shela and her kids were half a mile away.

Her phone was dead, so she couldn't answer calls. Those stateside felt sure she had died.

When Shela called Elham several hours later, it was pure relief, even if not all the news was good: Because of the bombing, the entire family had been removed from the airport.

It had taken so much time, so much energy, so much risk, to have gotten them to the airport — and now, they were back where they started.

Late-night work continued in Missouri without much progress. Hayes shed more than a few tears, feeling the weight of responsibility.

He and Griffin obtained visas to fly to Tajikistan, with the goal of meeting the family at that border and bringing them to a U.S. Embassy there. But the presence of Russian troops deterred them — another moment of optimism followed, inevitably, by letdown.

Griffin realized repeated failure was the harsh reality of the situation.

“Every day we would work for hours at a time,” he said. “Something horrible would go wrong. And then I started to think that, ‘all right, we’re not gonna be able to pull it off.’”

The final push

Two plans had failed. The family left their apartment, which was too close to the new Taliban headquarters for comfort.

Griffin had another idea. Crossing the Tajik border wasn't an option — but going east through Pakistan might be.

And he knew someone with the Pakistani border patrol, a contact from his counter-insurgency days. Griffin and Hayes secured the paperwork the family would need at the border.

The plan was tenuous at best, but the family agreed.

Griffin and Hayes arranged for two cars to take the 15 family members to a spot on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border called Torkham Gate.

Along the way, the family had to pass through multiple Taliban checkpoints, where guards were intent on keeping Afghans from leaving the country.

A family headed toward a border undoubtedly drew suspicion, but Siam dodged it. He or Shela pretended to be sick, telling guards they were headed to Pakistan to seek treatment.

It worked, and they reached Torkham Gate.

The border contact brought them through, and the family reached a safe house in Peshawar, Pakistan.

They sent photos to Griffin and Hayes, a sign that they were safe.

“Once they got to there, we knew they were not going to be kidnapped and killed by the Taliban,” Hayes said.

The family had to keep a low profile — they had arrived illegally, and the anti-Afghan immigrant sentiment was rife. Siam said he was repeatedly called a coward for fleeing his country.

In order to fly to Canada, the family would need to get to the capital city of Islamabad.

Elham contacted Canadian immigration services — occasionally pretending to be Siam over the phone — while trying to finalize somewhere for the family to go. Progress was slow, so the family left for Islamabad without much concrete information about what would happen there.

“I was really scared internally, but I was not showing that to the family,” he said.

An arranged driver dropped the family off in Islamabad, but in the wrong spot. The kids were tired and hungry. The adults were lost.

It was crunch time for Elham to determine their next step. Hayes booked a hotel on short notice, buying them a couple days of time.

Moments later, he received a call from the International Organization for Migration, a United Nations agency that relocates refugees. They had a hotel for the family and were apologetic for the delay — they’d simply been on the phone helping others.

In the IOM’s friendly hands, a final logistical push would put the family on a plane, with Canada as their final destination.

Sixty-eight days after they joined a throng in a dash for the Kabul airport, it was over.

‘Happy and lucky’

Siam can laugh now.

It’s been about six months since the family landed in Toronto. They feel welcomed there, he says. He considers them the “most happy and lucky people.”

That’s not to say that it’s easy for him to move on from Afghanistan. Siam describes the moment he boarded that plane in Islamabad as bittersweet. Yes, there was relief, but there was also so much was left behind.

Homes and childhoods and so many possessions are gone. Most of the family left for Pakistan with only the clothes they were wearing.

“Everything,” he said, “has been taken away.”

‘Average citizens can make an impact’

These days, Hayes focuses on a different crisis.

His daughter, a nurse, is in Ukraine helping refugees escape the Russian invasion. He checks in with her on FaceTime to make sure she’s OK.

When he’s not working at his Springfield law practice, this is what he does. He spent about \$15,000 to help the family leave Afghanistan without a second thought.

And it’s possible for him to continue to do this kind of thing, thanks to the connectivity of the 21st century.

“If you work hard enough and put a little bit of money toward it,” Hayes says, “average citizens can make an impact that was not possible 20 years ago.”

A matter of trust

There’s something that Griffin still doesn’t understand.

Why, for 68 death-defying days, did Siam, Shela and Nelo trust him?

“That was something I thought about every moment,” Griffin says. “I’m literally making life-and-death decisions, not only for these people but for these little kids. And they are doing everything that we are instructing them to do. Why?”

He pauses.

“I would like to know that.”

Maybe it was his experience, or that he spoke with them in Pashto. It could have been Griffin’s relationship with Elham, a preexisting connection to the family.

But no, it was simple for Siam. Why would he trust relative strangers half a world away with his family?

“No other option.”