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I needed a place for 124 Afghan refugees who needed homes. I needed it fast. Everyone said, go to Houston. | Opinion

By Rebecca Blumenstein

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 Gift Article



A cyclist passes in front of the former US embassy while a vendor waits for customers, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Thursday, June 5, 2025. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi)

Ebrahim Noroozi/Associated Press



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I needed a place for 124 Afghan refugees who needed homes. I needed it fast. Everyone said, go to Houston. -- Opinion

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I have to admit something. I had never been to Houston and didn't know much about the city before landing here with a group of more than one hundred Afghan refugees five years ago.

On Aug. 15, 2021, Kabul fell to the Taliban less than a day after they stormed into Afghanistan's capital. The Afghan forces trained by the United States crumbled far faster than anyone had imagined. Then a deputy managing editor at the New York Times, I became deeply involved in a desperate, round-the-clock effort to evacuate the Afghans who helped us staff and cover America's longest war.

Those who worked for the Times and U.S. news organizations — as well as with the American military — were deemed to be at great risk of reprisal from the Taliban.

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I had never been to Afghanistan before, though I had long managed foreign bureaus where local staff are essential to keeping us safe and helping us cover stories. Besides reporters and their translators, the Times decided that the group should include everyone who worked in the bureau over the 20 years of the U.S. occupation, including cooks, gardeners, security guards and their immediate families. Most had only half-an-hour to run for their lives.

After a harrowing escape through the chaos at Kabul's airport, they journeyed through Doha and Mexico City before we got permission to bring a group of 124 into

the United States. We were instructed to bring them to Houston, and we landed at Bush Intercontinental Airport on Aug. 31, 2021 unsure what to expect.



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Suddenly, the Times had become the largest private sponsor of refugees in modern U.S. history.

Once we got the refugees into the United States, we could have gone anywhere. But everyone I asked said that we should stay in Houston. The city has a proud history of successfully resettling refugees dating back to the influx of Vietnamese in the 1970s. Plus, it is known as a place where immigrants find work and relatively affordable housing.

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“We have this great tradition of refugee resettlement,” says Aaron Tate, a longtime refugee resettlement specialist who the Times hired to help with our group, along with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. People in Houston jump in when there is a need, he assured us. “It’s very unpretentious, very low-key. People here are doers.”

It didn't take long for us to realize what a special place Houston is.

As large as it was, the Times group was only a small part of the 200,000 Afghan refugees who arrived in America after the fall of Kabul. It was the largest influx since the Vietnam War.

Almost 6,000 of them resettled in Houston in the wake of the Afghan crisis — likely more than any city in America at the time.

Five years later, Houston’s mobilization was so impressive that even longtime residents look back on it with awe.

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The city sprang into action largely without knowing what — if any — assistance its network of agencies would get from the federal government, according to Ali Al Sudani, who has led refugee resettlement programs for 16 years at Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston. Sudani himself originally came to the United States as a refugee from Iraq.

“I told my friends it was a pivotal moment in U.S. history,” he remembers. “We will look back and ask, what did we do?”

As word of our group’s arrival spread, donations of food and clothing poured into the extended stay hotel near the Houston Medical Center where they were staying.

One Houstonian owned an Afghan bakery with the special oven required to make Afghani bread. He met almost all the new arrivals into Houston with fresh loaves, no matter the hour.

Our group — stunned at the speed at which their lives had been upended — was grateful for it all.

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When Kabul fell, Marwa Rahim, a young woman whose brother was a reporter for the Times, had been about to return for her fourth year of medical school in Afghanistan. Like many in our group, she was understandably dazed. But she remembers the warm welcome our group received at Houston's airport.

Fozan, an Afghan coordinator who worked for Catholic Charities, the agency the Times contracted to help resettle the group, met them there.

"She was the first person we talked to when we got to Houston. She was so nice to all of us," says Rahim. "In September, she celebrated my birthday — and the birthdays of other kids at the hotel."

Rahim is one of four women whose journey over the past five years is documented in "The Last Free Women: A Daring Escape from Afghanistan and Coming of Age in America," a book I co-wrote that will be published Sept. 8.

Houston naturally plays a central role.

Dawn Blitz, a consultant to nonprofits and philanthropic organizations, had been following the Afghan crisis closely and offered to help as soon as she heard about the Times group arriving in her city. The group had been largely stuck in their hotel for days during the Houston heat. Blitz came up with a simple but ambitious idea: to take them all to nearby Levy Park. She sent texts looking for help. Everyone she asked raised their hand immediately. They set up all kinds of activities at the park, from coloring to soccer. An initial hesitation from the kids when they got off buses soon melted away.

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Later, a restaurant owner Blitz found not only offered one of our people a cooking job, but later a car so he could get to work.

“It didn’t surprise me at all that people were willing to jump in,” says Blitz, who herself came to Houston as an evacuee from New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. “Houstonians are willing to help when asked.”

Key to Houston’s response is a deep network across various faiths that come together in a time of need, along with the infrastructure of four agencies — Catholic Charities, Interfaith, YMCA International Services and Church World Service — that have long resettled refugees.

Perhaps even more powerful is the urge felt by people who have come and succeeded here — people like Al Sudani and Blitz — to help new arrivals.

“That is a tradition, giving back and giving back,” says Ardiane Ademi, vice president of Catholic Charities, herself a refugee from Kosovo. “They want to give back to the community for services they received.”

Maiwand Ahmadzai is one of them. An Afghan who arrived in 2014, he started by working in restaurant kitchens and went on to open his own restaurant after an influx of Afghans arrived in 2021. He also works as an employment specialist with Catholic Charities.

“I feel it is a kind of responsibility on my shoulder that I need to give it back to the community. I feel their challenge because I had to go through these things,” says Ahmadzai.

But even for Houston, the influx of Afghan refugees was staggering — and not just because of the large number of them. Humanitarian parole, the criterion used to admit them to the United States, came with no guarantee of government funding or work permits.

The experts were initially flummoxed. “I took it to the CEO and the board,” remembers Al Sudani, who estimated it would take up to \$1 million to resettle 200 refugees. “I told them: ‘This is what we are up against. They may not be eligible for public benefits. But this is a crisis.’”

Stunningly, the board of Interfaith Ministries approved his emergency proposal.

Even more stunning: When Al Sudani appealed to the greater Houston community for help, he raised far more than his \$1 million goal — an initial \$3.5 million.

Ultimately, that money helped Interfaith Ministries settle more than 1,500 Afghan refugees.

“The support we received from the faith communities was remarkable,” recalls Al Sudani. And, he adds, the support came from a wide array of religions. “The Jewish community, the Muslim community, the Christian community, the Church of Latter-day Saints community.” They all showed up.

Interfaith had to staff up so quickly that Al Sudani was interviewing candidates at midnight until volunteers stepped in to take over a rapidly accumulating list of tasks.

Despite the many challenges they have faced, the young women we followed feel an acute sense of gratitude for their freedom, and a determination to make the most of this opportunity — for themselves, but also for the women left behind in Afghanistan, many who are not even allowed to leave their homes.

The cause for optimism really began in Houston, a city that set a tone for all of us by responding with such a can-do spirit. It should help restore our faith in this country and the ability of individual, ordinary people to make a difference.

Houston should take pride in giving these refugees the confidence they needed as they attempted to restart their lives as some of the last free women of Afghanistan. Their tenacity, as well as Houston's response, represents the best of our country and should be remembered for generations to come.

Rebecca Blumenstein is the co-author, along with Diana Kapp, of "The Last Free Women: A Daring Escape from Afghanistan and Coming of Age in America." She is now president of editorial for NBC News. The authors will be at Brazos Bookstore on Sept. 11 from 6:30 to 8 p.m. to discuss their book.

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Rebecca Blumenstein

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