



OTHER LIVES

Afghan men form deep bond with US agricultural adviser

American woman rescues Afghans: They become family

The US soldiers called them “Caroline’s guys.” They transformed farms in a war zone — risking their lives for the program she built, sharing her belief that something as simple as apple trees could change the world.

The university-educated Afghans helped turn land in an overgrazed, drought-stricken and impoverished region in eastern Afghanistan into verdant gardens and orchards that still feed local families today.

In the process, the 12 agricultural specialists, all traditional Afghan men, formed a deep, unexpected bond with their boss, an American woman who worked as a US Department of Agriculture adviser in the region for two years.

Now Caroline Clarin is trying to save them one by one, doing it all from the 1910 Minnesota farmhouse, drawing from retirement funds to help a group of men who share her love of farming.

Clarin has helped get five of her former employees and their families into the US since 2017.

Since the Taliban seized power in August, texts from those remaining have grown more urgent and Clarin says she can “feel the panic increasing” and food shortages grow. She has stepped up her efforts, working endless hours, diligently tracking their visa applications. She calls senators to apply pressure so they don’t languish like the thousands of other visa applications in the backlogged system for Afghans who supported the US government during the long war.



Caroline Clarin rides with Ali Patan, 7, as he drives her riding mower at her home in Dalton, Minn. (AP)

She’s driven by fear her team will be killed by the Taliban, though the new government has promised not to retaliate against Afghans who helped the US. She also wants to give them a future.

Since US forces withdrew, more than 70,000 Afghans have come to the United States and thousands are languishing at US military bases as resettlement agencies struggle to keep up.

Clarin knows she cannot save everyone, but she’s determined to help those she can.

After she left Afghanistan in 2011, she was consumed by anger over her program being gutted as the US government changed its priorities.

“When I got on the plane, it was like leaving my family on the helipad,” she said. “I felt like I deserted

them.”

The most recent of her friends to escape was Ihsanullah Patan, a horticulturist who waited seven years for a special immigrant visa. After he texted her that two of his close friends had just been killed, Clarin withdrew \$6,000 from a retirement fund to get him and his family on a commercial flight to Minnesota before the Taliban took control of the country this summer.

When Clarin picked them up at the airport in Minneapolis at midnight for the three-hour drive back to Fergus Falls, she was consumed with joy.

“It was like my son came home,” she said.

Patan arrived in Minnesota with saffron, Afghan almonds, and 5 kilos (11 pounds) of Afghan green tea to share. He also gave Clarin seeds from Afghanistan tender for their garden.

He was the first member to join Clarin’s team after she was sent to Paktika province. A confident, young university graduate, Patan spelled out what was needed in the region. It would become the basis of her program: Seeds, trees and the skills to plant gardens and orchards.

Patan considers Clarin and her wife family. His three sons and daughter call them their “aunties.”

In fact, he’s decided to live in nearby Fergus Falls, a town of 14,000, instead of moving to a larger city with an Afghan transplant community.

Surrounded by farmland stretching to the North Dakota border, the town’s skyline is dominated by grain elevators and the spires of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, a reflection of the region’s Scandinavian roots.

The only other Afghan family in town is his cousin’s. Sami Massoodi, who has a degree in livestock management, also worked for Clarin’s team in Afghanistan and arrived in 2017. He and his family lived on their farm before they got established in Fergus Falls.

“In Fergus Falls, they have really good people, really friendly people,” Patan said as he drives his minivan down the tree-lined streets to pick up his 5-year-old daughter at a Head Start program.

It is a place where neighbors pay unannounced visits to say “hi” and people greet the postmaster by name. It is also staunchly Republican. Fergus Falls is the county seat of Otter Tail County, which voted twice for former President Donald Trump.

But people in town say friendships and family take precedence over political views, and there is broad empathy for the struggle of immigrants since many people’s parents, grandparents or great grandparents came from Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

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Palestinian amputees compete in a soccer match while using their crutches during a training session, organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross with the Palestinian Amputee Football Association, at Palestine Stadium in Gaza City, on Dec. 5, 2021. They are the first Palestinian national soccer team made up entirely of amputees — players drawn from a population of hundreds that has grown in recent years. (AP)

New soccer league helps Gaza amputees cope with war trauma

Where a score is not the goal

The players race across the pitch on crutches, jostling for the soccer ball and passing it back and forth, their prosthetic legs lined up along the sidelines at a stadium in the Gaza Strip.

They are the first Palestinian national soccer team made up entirely of amputees — players drawn from a population of hundreds that has grown in recent years through several rounds of fighting between Israel and the territory’s militant Hamas rulers.

They say the game helps them cope with the trauma of their injuries and the hardships of living in a crowded territory that has endured four wars and a blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt since Hamas seized power from rival Palestinian forces in 2007.

“We feel we have something, we can give something,” said Ziad Abu Halib, 41, who lost his right leg in 2008, during the first Israel-Hamas war. He hasn’t missed a single practice or match since joining the local league after it was founded in 2019.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, working with the Palestinian Amputee Football Association, sponsored the long process of forming the national team. The players hope to compete regionally, their sights set on the World Cup for amputees in Turkey next October.

Qualifying matches will be held in Iran in March — they can make the trip if the border opens to allow them to travel through Egypt.

Coach Simon Baker, a Red Cross consultant and founder of the Irish Amputee Football Association, oversaw a final training session of the season on Sunday.

The rules are modified in accordance with the World Amputee Football Federation. Players leave their prosthetic limbs on the sidelines and move about with crutches, which cannot be used to advance or direct the ball.

Baker selected 20 players from a pool of 47 athletes representing five Gaza clubs.

“They were tested (for) speed, agility, fitness and also looking at the skill,” Baker said. “We want the player that has everything” and is also a team player, he said.

Sadly, the war and unrest of recent years have provided hundreds of potential recruits. Gaza is home to an estimated 1,600 amputees out of a population of more than 2 million.

Hamas organized violent protests along the heavily-guarded frontier with Israel for several months in 2018 and 2019, with the aim of easing the blockade of Gaza. Thousands turned out every Friday, many of them bused in by Hamas, an Islamic militant group hostile to Israel. Protesters burned tires, hurled stones and firebombs, and many tried to breach the security fence.

Israeli snipers behind sand berms on the other side of the fence fired live ammunition, rubber-coated bullets and tear gas. They usually aimed for the

legs, sparing the lives of demonstrators but often leaving them with permanent disabilities. Many were shot far from the border fence.

More than 200 Palestinians were killed and over 8,000 were wounded by live fire, with at least 155 undergoing amputations, according to Israeli and Palestinian rights groups. An Israeli soldier was killed by a Palestinian sniper and several others were wounded.

Rights groups accuse Israel of using excessive force and of failing to hold its soldiers accountable for deaths and serious injuries.

Israel says its forces acted to prevent thousands of Palestinians — including potentially armed militants — from pouring across the border. It says it investigated allegations of wrongdoing and held soldiers accountable. Israel and Western countries view Hamas as a terrorist group.

Baker first visited Gaza in 2019, while the protests were still underway, with the aim of creating a league for amputees. He trained referees and players, and eventually helped organize a league consisting of five clubs with over 100 players. He also started a junior league for amputees as young as 5 years old.

Baker brushes off any talk of politics. The goal, he says, is “to create an environment whereby the players come to the field and they leave the trauma behind.” (AP)

editor’s choice

