

# **Evacuees get Philly welcome at dinner**

In a city that has become a key landing spot, about 20 Afghans resettling here dined at Reading Terminal with new neighbors.





State Rep. Jared Solomon, who organized the dinner, said he wanted the Afghan arrivals to know they were in a good place.





Rashid Shirzad shows a photo of himself with members of the U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan. He served the U.S. military effort before being evacuated and now lives with his family in Northeast Philadelphia.





An Afghan family is served dinner at the event at the Reading Terminal Market on Wednesday.









Afghan women at Wednesday's dinner, where several languages were spoken. The gathering was organized by State Rep. Jared Solomon.  
JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer



BY JEFF GAMMAGE (STAFF WRITER)

Two  
months  
after he fled  
a crumbling  
Afghanistan  
, Merza  
Mohammad  
i stepped  
timidly into  
a dining  
room at the  
Reading  
Terminal  
Market.

"I'm a refugee," he said. "I really don't know  
anyone."

He did by the time he left.

And others knew him.

The act of welcome can take many forms, and on Wednesday evening it came in the guise of a sit-down dinner among strangers - 20 Afghan evacuees who are being resettled in Philadelphia and a dozen or so of their new neighbors.

Over dishes of basmati rice, chicken korma, and vegetable samosas, people who have lived in the city for ages met with those who just arrived, the cataclysm in Afghanistan bringing both to a setting where new friendships might be forged.

The gathering was organized by Jared Solomon, a Northeast Philadelphia state representative who is seeing dozens - and soon, potentially hundreds - of Afghan constituents settle in his district.



He wanted them to know they're in a good place, where he and others, physically present, will try to help them begin new lives.

"Welcome to Philadelphia!" Solomon announced at the start of the dinner.

"Thank you!" someone called back.

The conversation spun in Pashto and Persian and English, spurred on with translation help summoned on cellphones and, when necessary, with taps on the shoulders of newcomers who spoke three or four or five languages and may have worked as interpreters for the U.S. military effort in Afghanistan.

What did people talk about? Everything. Nothing. Their children. Where they live. How they like it. The work they do or did or hope to do again.



"I'm very happy to meet the new people from Philadelphia," said Rabia Ibrahimi, speaking in Persian translated by her husband, Ismail, who worked for USAID, the big government development agency. "I instantly liked the old city. The downtown of Philadelphia looks to me like an old city in Kabul."

The parents and their three sons arrived in Philadelphia 10 days ago, after nearly two months at a first-stop, overseas evacuation center. They're living in a hotel near Chinatown while awaiting permanent housing.

"Good, good, good" was the verdict of their eldest child, 12-year-old Mohammad Rahim Ibrahimi, on both the food and his new country.

The tragedies of Afghanistan went largely unspoken, set aside at least for one night.



"They want to know their neighbors - it's a brand-new community for them - and that they belong here," said Taj Sheikh, a resettlement case manager at HIAS Pennsylvania.

Philadelphia prides itself on being a "Welcoming City," and every day since August it's been asked to prove it. The nation's central arrival point for evacuees has seen 27,228 land at Philadelphia International Airport, and now is shifting toward the challenges of resettlement, as overworked immigrant-aid workers struggle to identify housing in a difficult market.

The chaotic August air evacuation has delivered about 50,000 Afghans to temporary quarters on eight U.S. military installations, including roughly 11,000 at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in South Jersey.



Now more people are leaving the bases, heading to permanent homes in communities around the nation. About 700 are expected to settle in Philadelphia, among more than 1,500 across Pennsylvania, but both numbers could easily increase.

"I'm a patriot and I love this country, and the foundation of this country is immigrants," said Leslie Spina, executive director of Kinder Academy preschool in the Northeast, who joined the dinner.

Most of the Americans who dined in the market's Rick Nichols Room live or work in Northeast Philadelphia, where the city's Afghan community is concentrated. Once a bastion of white, working-class Irish, the Northeast has grown dramatically more diverse as immigrants come from China, Brazil, Portugal, Russia, and the Dominican Republic.

Beatriz Gomez moved to Northeast Philadelphia from Colombia seven years ago, so she knows what it's like to be a stranger in this country. That's why she came to the dinner. She wanted the Afghans who sat around her to know they have supporters here.

Rashid Shirzad believes that.

He served as an interpreter for U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan and also assisted American organizations and news agencies, particularly as the country fell to the Taliban.

"It's amazing to be here," said Shirzad, who lives south of Northeast Philadelphia Airport with his wife and three young sons. "To meet Jared, and people from the agencies helping refugees."



In Afghanistan, Mohammadi was a teacher for Skateistan, an international nonprofit, founded in Kabul, that uses skateboarding to help children grow and learn. It suspended operations as the Taliban took control and two-thirds of its staff left the country.

Seated at dinner, Mohammadi said he wasn't sure of the future. But he's not scared of it, either.

He has a place to live in South Philadelphia. He's working to improve his English. And he's been to a city skate park, which offered comfort and familiarity.

Philadelphia, he said, seems like a great skateboarding town.

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