

Immigrants bring important skills

Every immigrant's story is unique.

Mine began with the 1979 Russian invasion of Afghanistan. As a respected man in the community, my grandfather, Sidiq Karmand, a British-trained physician, was put under a lot of pressure by Soviets to publicly claim allegiance to the newly arriving regime. Whatever truly transpired during that time will never be fully known because of Karmand's reluctance to discuss the conversation with his family.

Within a few days, though, as the family arose in the morning, the family patriarch announced with little warning that everyone needed to prepare to leave the country immediately. The Karmand family quickly made their way to Pakistan, where they stayed while waiting to go to Costa Rica, where a colleague from Sidiq's medical school days had agreed to host the family.

The family settled in Costa Rica and began life there. Eventually my grandparents were able to make their way to Alexandria, Va., where my mother and I joined them soon after my birth. Though Spanish was not a language that was native to either of my parents, mother was adamant that I speak the language of the country I was born in and was very intentional in raising me in a trilingual household. My Spanish-speaking has proved very useful to me in my job.

I serve as manager of the New Neighbors Coalition in Jamestown. It is a consortium of several churches and numerous volunteers who assist in helping newly arrived immigrants settle in the area. Basically, I am working to welcome newcomers as my family was welcomed to America three decades ago.

I often think about Fred Rogers' quote about the cyclical nature of help and how everyone will find themselves



Momina Di Blasio and Jamestown volunteers follow Fred Rogers' advice.

in a position to help others and in turn find themselves in need of help: "All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That's one of the things that connects us as neighbors – in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver."

I have a 24-hour job, helping some 175 newcomers become familiar with their new and confusing environment. One moment I am discussing a location for English classes and the next I'm helping a family find transportation to a medical appointment in Buffalo. No two days are alike, and I can never predict what my job will entail from one second to the next.

We have been at this for more than a year now, and our efforts are starting to show solid results, even as we bring in additional immigrants. More and more local firms are opening their doors to new neighbors, welcoming them through community engagement and employment opportunities.

Several women with an affinity for caregiving are working in that field, facilitating the lives of the native-born Americans who are receiving their services.

As the economist Paul Krugman notes, immigrants are making America stronger and richer (NYT, Feb. 5, 2024). He says: "Immigrant workers often turn out to be complementary to the native-born work force, bringing different skills that, in effect, help avoid supply bottlenecks and allow faster job creation."

I witness this process every day.