

AN INTERVIEW WITH HAMED AHMADY

An Oral History Conducted by Stefani Evans

Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islander
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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Oral History Project

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Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries
Director: Claytee D. White
Project Manager: Stefani Evans
Transcriber: Kristin Hicks
Editors and Project Assistants: Vanessa Concepcion, Steve Pastorino, Kristel Peralta, Cecilia
Winchell, Ayrton Yamaguchi

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of Reflections: The Las Vegas Asian American and Pacific Islanders Oral History Project.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

PREFACE

“[Lt. Brian Gorman] said, ‘Listen, you took care of me in Afghanistan for one year. I will take care of you for the rest of your life in the United States. You are my brother.’”

Now a labor organizer with Culinary Union #226 here in Las Vegas, Hamed Ahmady has come a long, long way from his birthplace in Mazar E Sharif, the third largest city in Afghanistan. His father is a mechanical engineer at the largest factory in the city. Together with his mother, a homemaker, the parents raised Ahmady and his three siblings with an emphasis on education and their Islamic faith. But when the Taliban ruled the region in the late 1990’s, life was hard; and his parents pulled Ahmady from school in protest of the Taliban’s teachings. In the aftermath of the 9/11 bombings in the United States, and the arrival of U.S. military forces in northern Afghanistan, everything changes for Ahmady.

In this interview, he recalls being on the verge of graduating from high school in 2009, when word spread in his city that American troops were seeking employees. Bolting from his hospital bed after a surgery, still bleeding, he rode on the back of a friend’s motorcycle to the nearest U.S. military base, where they both applied, and were both accepted as translators for the U.S. Army. Selected for his multilingual ability (he speaks Turkish, English and two Pashto dialects), he was initially naïve but grew into his role while working in the field with different units and learned of the U.S. government program that offered translators like him visas to move to the U.S. He highlights the compassion shown by his U.S. Army POC (point of contact) Brian Gordon and his determination to bringing his wife and child to the United States. Arriving in the U.S. in 2015, Gordon met him in Los Angeles, provided housing near in Monterey County, and introduced him to the local labor union helped him find work.

He discusses his 2017 visit to Las Vegas, where he found a half-dozen mosques and a diverse community full of Muslims and realized he had found his home. In Las Vegas, Muslim friends provide the support system he and his wife need, while the Culinary Union local #226 offers work—not as a laborer but as an organizer. He marvels at the growth in Las Vegas, including the arrival of sports teams, tech companies and the convention center expansion; all of which offer jobs for the union work force. Ahmady also laments the more than 60,000 Afghans who aided the U.S. but were “left behind” by U.S. forces, including his brother and his fellow translator, the friend who drove him, bleeding, to his first interview as a translator.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interview with Hamed Ahmady

March 22, 2023

in Las Vegas, Nevada

Conducted by Stefani Evans

Preface..... iv

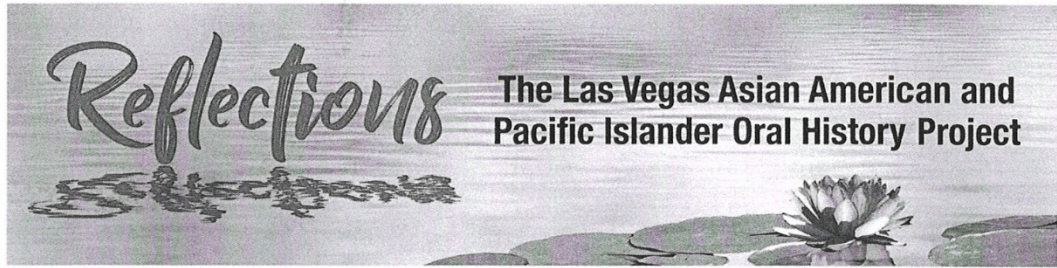
Hamed Ahmady was born in one of Afghanistan’s largest cities, Mazar E Sharif. Ahmady describes life as very hard under Taliban rule, which ends with the U.S. invasion after 9/11. Ahmady’s father is an engineer, and his mother is a homemaker. His brother is an economist, and two of his four sisters have college degrees although their ability to study and work has been “rough”. Ahmady and his wife have two children and have called Las Vegas home since 2017. They limit their visits to Afghanistan so as not to jeopardize their family’s safety there.....1–4

Ahmady was eleven years old when the 9/11 bombings occurred. He was home-schooled as his father wanted to shield him from Taliban teachings. Ahmady and his friends learn about 9/11 by hiding a television antenna in a tree to receive broadcast signals from nearby Uzbekistan. Less than 30 days later, Ahmady recalls American jets, bombers and soldiers appearing; they replaced the Taliban and began to restore some rights. Eight years later, Ahmady is hospitalized for an appendix surgery when he hears the Americans are recruiting translators. Ahmady’s friend sneaks him out of the hospital, bleeding, for a motorcycle trip to a U.S. base for an interview.....5–10

Ahmady worked for several divisions of the U.S. Army when he learned of the Special Immigrant Visa program for Afghan interpreters. Capt. Simms drafts his recommendation letter and by 2012, Ahmady is approved. The process took so long, however, that when Ahmady picks up his visa for him and his wife, they have a newborn baby. Fortunately, she receives a visa. Ahmady comes alone to the U.S. at first, with \$2,700 and one phone number. He calls Lt. Brian Gorman on a borrowed phone from Los Angeles, only to learn Gorman is hundreds of miles away. Gorman retrieves Ahmady and pledges to take care of him in thanks for Ahmady saving his life.....11–15

Gorman’s family owns rental properties, provides Ahmady a place to live in Monterey, and introduces him to the head of labor union local #483. Ahmady interviews and is hired immediately. His wife and daughter join him, but the high cost of living compels the family to move. Ahmady visits Las Vegas and finds a large Afghan community, mosques, and a thriving Strip. The family makes the move. Ahmady’s union connections land him an organizer job at Local #226.....16–20

In Las Vegas, the Ahmadays find community. They meet friends at the city’s mosques; they picnic in parks with their favorite foods from Middle East grocers. Ahmady marvels at the city’s growth including the arrival of the Golden Knights, Raiders, Formula 1 and the MSG, which provide many union jobs. Ahmady worries about the city’s water supply. He lauds the city’s diversity. Ahmady laments the 60,000 other Afghans who worked for the U.S. but did not receive visas to emigrate. Among the “left behind” are the friend who drove the motorcycle from the hospital and his brother. Some of them are hiding from the Taliban. On a brighter note, Ahmady shares that the Gormans are still doing well; and he concludes with gracious words about community.....21–27



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Good afternoon. I am Stefani Evans, and it is March 22nd, 2023. I'm here with Hamed Ahmady.

Good afternoon, Stefani. My name is Hamed, last name is Ahmady.

Ahmady. Would you spell your first and last name, please, for the record?

Sure. My first name is Hamed, which is H-A-M-E-D, and my last name is Ahmady, which is A-H-M-A-D-Y.

Thank you so much.

You're welcome. Thank you.

Tell us about your childhood, where you were born, what it was like growing up there. Tell us about your parents, your siblings.

Yes, Ms. Stefani. I am from Afghanistan. Afghanistan is located in the heart of Asia. I was born and raised in Afghanistan. All my generation, they're born and raised in there, located in northern Afghanistan, one of the cities called Mazar E Sharif; it is a town, maybe the second or the third largest city in Afghanistan. The people there are very educated people. They're open-minded people. I was born and raised there. Yes, it is a lot of memories, good memories, bad memories, because of the war that was going on in Afghanistan, which is unfortunate, and it is still going on, which is sad. Yes, it was a lot of memories from that town where I was born and raised.

It was hard at the beginning. It still is hard. It kind of got better for a while, for a couple of years, for ten, fifteen years. What I mean by that...for us to go to school, for us to learn a different language, for us to get the vote like other countries, it got easier because before the 9/11 happened, it was hard. It was like a dark night. You don't know the rest of the world, what's going on. After 9/11 happened and the U.S. came to Afghanistan, day by day when they defeat

the Taliban from the area, they're wiped out, and so we got better. The schools reopened for the girls, for the men, for everybody. For the boys and girls, we went back to school, and we started learning the subjects in school, getting better. The women become doctors. The men become doctors, engineers. For us, it was easier to learn the stuff and to see we can talk, we can communicate. Slowly, like after 2005 or '07 or something, the internet got flowing a lot in Afghanistan, which was really hard; we didn't have nothing. Social media, basically we could compete with the rest of the world. It got better.

A lot of good memories. A lot of good memories. I can share with you specific parts, what you wanted, but I am here.

Tell us about your parents. What did they do?

Actually, my mom is a housewife, which is like homemaker. She graduated from high school; that's how much she went to school. [Then] what happens in there? War and, of course, because of [the Taliban] abusing their relation, and they didn't let the women go to school.

My dad...he graduated from high school. He learned [to be a] mechanical engineer. He had been working in a factory, which is located in Mazar E Sharif, in our town Balkh Province, which is B-A-L-K-H, Balkh Province. That is the name of the province. [The] factory, if I don't be wrong, it could be thirty acres around. It's a huge factory. Almost three thousand people work in there. We call them...The Farsi name or the Persian name is Kodu E Barq. It means... "Kodu" is the fertilization for the farmers. They produce at the factory fertilization and electric, yes. We do use them as a natural gas. We extract it from the ground, and the natural gas came there, and they change it to some kind of temperature, and they produce two things: Fertilization and electric[ity], which is this power plant at the factory. My dad has been working in there for almost thirty years, or it could be more than thirty years. He spent his life after [the] military, and

he's been involved in the factory. He is working one of the main, key departments and all the big machines. It could be two or three times the size of normal vehicle engines. He's dealing with them; there are thirty or forty of those. He's been working in there for thirty years. That was his job, and he was supporting us, too, from that salary.

It had a bumpy road, like up and down. It depends on the regime. That's how they're going to control [the factory]. That's how much they're going to pay, less or more. But still, he was being honest. He was working for many, many, many years. He's been working in there, and he supported us through that. Because of that salary, we were able to go to schools, and we were able to learn languages and get involved with technologies, all that stuff. Without that support, I would not be here today. Without that support, I would not be able to speak different languages. Without that support, I was not going to be pretty much; like, I could be like those guys still sitting next to the wall. They spend their life in there, under the shade of the tree, like for thirty years, talking BS, which is the same thing, which is unfortunate. People have been in that kind of situation, and they got stuck, and they're uneducated, and even from their own family, they cannot use them in a good way. Yes, this is my situation from my family.

I do have one brother, and I do have four sisters. I am the oldest one. Yes, I am the one pretty much, the whole hope for my family. I am the only one. I have to look back always because my parents, whenever they were young back in the day, they [were] kind of pushing me. Whatever they get for salary, they try to cut off from their food, from their electric, from any kind of bill, whatever expenses, clothes, whatever, and they're trying to give it to me, and they're pushing me to go to school. They pay my fees, everything. Now it's my turn to look back.

Are your brother and sisters and parents still in Afghanistan?

Yes. I do have one brother and four sisters, again. Yes, they're all in Afghanistan. My brother

graduated from university, and two of my sisters have graduated from college and university. One of my sisters has a master's degree. My brother...he is like an economist. He learned it in the university. Yes, they're all in Afghanistan, as well as my parents, which my mom and dad, yes, they're in Afghanistan. I applied for a visa for my parents. I hope so. If I get it soon, eventually, I've been kind of rough in the last two years, back and forth with the embassy, but hopefully I get visa for them to bring them over here. My kids need them. They need to see their story because one of my kids was three, four months when we got to United States, and now she is ten years old, almost ten years. My son is born here. Obviously, they know through the picture or face call or whatever, WhatsApp or different social media things, we do make video calls. They know, too, from only that form. They don't see them in real life.

They've never hugged their grandparents.

One time we visit[ed]. It was in 2016, beginning of 2017, for two weeks, three weeks. They were young. They didn't know nothing. We were not [even] able to go to the same town that I was born and raised [in], because I don't want to put gasoline on the fire that was going down. What I mean by that...I was working with Army. By saying Army, I was working with [the] U.S. Army in Afghanistan; I was a translator with them, and I was interpreter with them for almost five years. The local residents, they already knew me, who I am. Of course, there is 50, up to 80 percent of the people, they feel like, "Oh, this guy, he used to work with Americans. He used to work with Afghan Army. He was one of the key [guys]. [Let's] just knock him down." I don't want to refresh the people's minds, to walk in the area, to talk with the people, and leave my family as a target again. That was the reason. We kind of were sneaky here and there, but my parents used to come at nighttime or daytime here or there; they visit us inside of the town because where I was born and raised, it's a small village next to a city, and that place is called

Kodu E Barq, which is the same name as the factory. It's residential. For those people, if they're employed by the factory, they're able to live in that area. That place again is pronounced Kodu E Barq which is K-O-D-U space E space B-A-R-Q.

It would be too dangerous for your family if you visited out in the open.

Yes, yes, because it's been since 2012, end of '12, beginning of '13, I've been living in the United States. That was the time I left my hometown, my village. It was already risky. A lot of people moved out. A lot of people moved in. It's already a risk itself. But if I go again and the word is going to loop around faster by the people, they're going to say, "Oh, look, this guy, he used to be an interpreter with the U.S. Army," which is going to refresh the people's mind. The word can easily be accessed to the Taliban, and my family is going to be a target again, which I don't want—that's the reason why. [Just so we could] talk in real life...I rent[ed] a house for three weeks almost—and we were in there for two and a half weeks—so they were back and forth with me. Of course, in the bigger town, nobody knows you unless you just randomly cross with some face, and they know you. It was getting better, but now at this point, it's again danger[ous]... after 2021.

How did you get involved with the U.S. Army as an interpreter?

That's a long story. Before the 9/11, I was in first grade, second grade, and then it was 2000 or 1999, my dad stopped me going to school. He told me, "From now on, you're not going to do school because..." When the Taliban took over my town—the first regime of Taliban—they invade[d] Afghanistan for three or four years. When they took over 80 percent of Afghanistan or 90 percent of Afghanistan...right away they changed the school system. They eliminated a lot of subjects, which is a lot of science, of course, languages, [and] we didn't have such a thing as computer things. Again, [I was] in the first or second grade at that time. Basically, they start

from the uniform; they eliminate the official uniform of some things. They change it to the local clothes where people of Afghanistan wear that. Nothing is wrong with that. Again, if you go to school, you're going to learn something. From your discipline, uniform is one of them. You have to follow the law, the policy of the school, and wear the uniform. Your hair, your face, everything is supposed to look like a student of a school; not randomly a Taliban member. [But for] schoolkids, there [was] no difference. They make you put [a] turban on your head, and just like normal clothes, you're walking in the school. As a kid, we don't know.

All the subjects got changed. Everything is focusing on the religion, which I'm not against my religion. I do love my religion more than myself. I'm a religious person. I learned the Koran. I know how to read the Koran. I do my prayers all the time. I teach my kids the same thing. When my dad saw me in a situation, kind of like, "What happened? Where did you go?" I said, "I was in school." He said, "Wait a minute. You walked back from school like this?" I said, "Yes, because they changed the school last week or so, the uniform." He already realizes the situation. He's like, "From now on, don't go to school. Stay at home. Study with your mom—you and your brother." By two o'clock— [he was] working from seven to two for that many years—the schedule doesn't change; it's like daytime, and that's the schedule. "After two o'clock, I come back from work," he said. "I take you guys to our little ranch." We do have a piece of land, and so we work in there. It was day and night, so my dad was explaining to me, but I was not getting what's the situation; *What does [this] mean? Why am I not going to school?* These kinds of things. Basically, he was avoiding me of getting brainwashed by the Taliban in the school.

It was a boring time. Eventually, me and a couple of buddies, childhood friends, they start going and learning English. I said, "How do you learn English?" Basically, [we started with

the] alphabet of English; simple words like *a* [for] apple and *b* [for] boy, whatever simple words. They are baby steps. I said, “You know what? I want to go, too.” I joined with them, and slowly I [got] serious on that.

When the 9/11 happened, like, *whoa!* We didn’t even know [that] what is called “9/11” happened because we were not allowed to have TV. We are not allowed to have TV, and what happens is this: Me and my couple of friends, we are sneaky. We were watching the TV, but there is no local TV [service]. Since we are living in the border...the antenna service catches [signals] from the neighborhood country, which is Uzbekistan. Again, it involved antenna. [The] antenna is supposed to be high enough to catch the service. We were, *okay, it’s a risk*, but we don’t know what’s the outcome. We put the antenna inside of the tree full of leaves, and we covered it with all kinds of wood and leaves, all kinds of stuff. From the ground, you cannot tell what’s going on, what’s in there. Under the basement, we were watching TV here and there. Even we don’t know the language of that, all we see is the pictures, the videos, everything. They are talking about America, Taliban, blah, blah, blah. We saw the two business towers that got hit by Al-Qaeda.

I told my dad the next day, “Dad, I saw this on the TV.” The minute I said that, my dad was like, “Oh, the United States said they’re going to attack those people.” I was like, “No, dad, they’re being strong enough. They’re attacking to the United States, and they’re taking over all over the world.”

Sure enough, after twenty days, or maybe at the most a month later, we saw the jets in the skies all over. The B-52s, these type of airplanes, they were circling around and popping out in the skies. Sure enough, we saw soldiers weeks later on the ground; and they’re throwing bombs on the Taliban’s vehicles. [Americans] at the bases, they defeat the Taliban, but it’s still at war.

Any minute it could happen, like ten after, they're going to pop up somewhere, and war is going to be just like a strike again in the fire.

[As]at happened in Afghanistan, we are getting closer to the American soldiers. We're trying to talk to them. We're trying to [answer] what your question was, about how [we're] learning English. We knew simple words, like hello, thank you, mister, blah, blah, blah, simple words. Running after them, just them giving us, like, a chocolate, whatever, we are being a young kid. Since then, I got serious about this language.

It became a popular language. Of course, it's the international language. Anywhere you go in other countries—the rest of the world—if you know the language of English, out of a hundred people, maybe there are a few people that can speak this language. I got serious about it. I got better, but I was not able to make a conversation. Still, like you see, I do have a bad accent. I have this heavy accent, and I cannot get rid of it, but I try to get better. I learned here, there. I just took a break on it. I just focused on different things in life. I was focusing on the school subjects. It was not just English. I learned about school subjects because I had to pass the exam. I needed to graduate from high school. Okay, that's done.

Right after that, I was in the tenth grade or eleventh grade in high school, my friends became translators. They said, "Hey Hamed, since you can speak, man, you could become an interpreter with them. Number one, you can solve the economic situation. Number two, you're going to learn the language." It's like, okay, great.

I was graduating from high school the next month, and I had appendix surgery. I was in the hospital. Basically, I got surgery this morning around ten o'clock. My friends already knew that. "Oh, he's sick. He's in the hospital." They came over to visit me around four or five p.m.

that evening. I was not...aware of what's going on, and they told me, "Hey, Americans, they're hiring interpreters again for this coming year." I said, "Are you serious?" "Yes."

Me and him made a deal. I said, "Tomorrow you're going to come here, and you're going to pick me up." He was telling me, "No, that's impossible. Man, you are sick. You just had surgery. You can't do this." But I was telling him, "Don't worry about this."

Without the doctor knowing the situation, me and him, we flew out. I sat in the back of the motorcycle, and he was [driving] the motorcycle. It was hurting. It was bleeding, my belly. But I'm like, *I don't care. I want to go.* I want to make it because this is a chance. I don't want to miss this chance. Okay, we arrive in there. There are almost five or six young kids my age. They barely graduated from school, from college or whatever. They're trying to get a job. It is a winter morning. It is really early. They were trying to push each other to get an interview with American soldiers. They are trying to get a job. Out of the blue, [the soldiers] said, "Can he speak English and Turkish?" Very few people raised their hand. I was one of them, too, because I can speak Turkish and English. Of course, the local language is two languages, Pashto and Dari. I was like, *okay, great!*

They told us, "Come in this side." There were eight or ten of us. They bring the truck, and they take us inside of the base. Basically, they're making us translate word[s] from English to Turkish, from Turkish back to English. They want to see what we are talking about. We can convert the dialogue in different languages, and we passed the exam, and they made us take a verbal test. We passed the written test as well.

Again, back to the hospital. What happened, I'm not [even] aware of it because I turned off my phone. My phone was taken [at] the gate, the entrance, ECB, common entrance point. They took our phones. Because of the safety of the soldiers, we are not allowed to bring any kind

of device inside the base. My parents went crazy because, *where is this kid?* Even the doctors are going to come [look for me]. Even without [finishing my] first visit, this guy is gone. Exactly.

I got the job. I got the job the same day, but I was [on] standby for a month or two. They called me, and I started working with American soldiers. I was a translator with them for almost five years. The first two years, I was working with the QRF—Quick Reaction Forces—and I was saving my money to go to college. Then the lieutenant colonel told me, “No. You know what? If you quit this job because you’re covering a lot of missions, why don’t you come here with me and work inside the office?” Basically, it gave me a U-turn, and he kept me in the office for a month and put me back to the mission again, so that was a trick. I was young. I didn’t know that. Of course, I was doing good, but at the same time, I realized they need me. I said, *You know what? Since those people took my hand, I’m not going to leave them in the middle. I will keep going with them.* I worked with them another two and a half years, with Army, which was more than four years, almost. It was good. It was good memories. It was great memories. That was the reason I was able to come to the United States.

Tell us how that happened.

Back in 2008, the Congress and the senators passed a law called SIV—Special Immigrant Visa—for Afghan interpreters and Afghan workers on behalf of the United States. In Afghanistan, [Afghans are] helping United States soldiers in Afghanistan, the warzone. If they work more than a year, then they’re allowed to come to the United States. I was like, *okay?* I was not working during that time. I started working in 2010, beginning of 2010, end of 2009. I started working. But other interpreters, they’ve worked a couple of years already. The team I joined with...are veteran interpreters. They’ve been working years. They are talking with each other. I am so naïve that I have no clue what’s going on. Of course, we saw the news. I saw this, this,

this. But we don't know exactly what's going on. But when I work more than a year or so, one of the lieutenants told me, "Why are you not going to apply for this program?"

I was not serious about it because I didn't believe it. I don't really know if it's true or not. They're talking about it, whatever. There was another program called "General". General was a program for only those interpreters that work with a general, and they're allowed to get a letter from them, and they get approved. What about the rest of the interpreters? They're not working with the generals. [There] could be ten, twenty generals in the whole of Afghanistan. What about the rest, the thousands of interpreters all over everywhere?

When they passed the law, they said anyone can apply as long as they work with U.S. Army as a translator or straight contractor with the U.S. Army as workers. The soldiers, like the lieutenant, encouraged me to do it, and I did it. I got a letter, too, from the S-2—which is like an intelligence officer—Captain Simms, one of our captains. She lives in Oklahoma or Alabama, great lady. She wrote a letter for me, a recommendation letter, and along with my other documents, with my immigration research report letter, I submitted. After a couple of months, I got approved, an approval letter, which means you're not going to get the visa right away, so you have to do other stuff. There are a lot of steps before you get the visa. That happened in 2011 when I applied, and by 2012, I got an approval letter, everything. Then the other stuff, it went faster. Of course, you have to send all your civil documents to the Nebraska NBC National Center, whatever it is, along with all this stuff. Whatever they ask, we send it through email.

We got to the point where now it's interview. I passed the interview at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul with my wife. My wife was pregnant at that time [but] when we got the visa, she had already delivered the baby. She already delivered the baby, and there is no document for the kid. Now we are thinking, *Oh, we might have to leave the kids with the grandparents and then come*

back. Are you going to come back? Again, safety was involved. I sent an email back to the embassy and said, “Look, you guys see the situation. You guys saw the medical test, and she was pregnant. Now we do have our kids, without an interview, without any documents.” Of course, they already knew my wife from the medical test, blood check, everything. They already knew she was pregnant. They called us to the embassy. The next day, we went there, and they give us a stamp for the visa for my daughter. We were lucky that we got the visa. It was good.

We came here. Actually, I was the one that came first.

You came to the U.S. first.

I came to the U.S. first because I have nobody, pretty much, in the United States from my family, even not close friends. From that village that I grew up, even talking that we want to go to the United States, it is impossible. The economy of the people, they are connected to zero point, [by] which I mean [the] bad situation of economy, lack of economy, no jobs. People are often farmers. They have animals. They took them to the mountain, all their stuff. Of course, obviously, you don’t have any connection from that village if you grew up. Your parents, your grandparents, everybody grew up in that village, so of course, you don’t have nobody in the United States. It’s far away. Your relatives, cousins, whatever, they’re not connected to...the state, or somebody that comes here to do business, whatever.

I [said to my wife], “You know what? I will go. If I spend a day in the street, it’s okay. If I’m homeless for months, it’s okay. I will go first, and then I will start my life. You stay here with my parents and with my kid. Once I find my way, once I find shelter, then you can come.” With a young woman and a small kid, you cannot spend a cold or hot day in the street. It’s going to be hard. As a man, you sacrifice. It’s not okay, but unfortunately, in this country [there are] homeless [people] all over, everywhere, which is sad. But yes.

I bought a ticket and came to the Los Angeles airport. The reason I choose California is because recently I was working with a battalion that was deployed to Afghanistan, and they were from Fresno, California. Also, I have a connection with other soldiers from different states, and they were telling me, “Don’t go to California.” We were sharing words, everything; we were talking with soldiers like a brother, close friends. They were telling me, “Don’t go to California.” I said, “Why?” They said, “It’s expensive.” I said, “Eh, I don’t know. It’s okay. It should be fine.” They said, “No. Listen, it’s expensive.” I didn’t realize it until I [came]. I came with almost three thousand dollars... like two thousand seven hundred U.S. dollars. It’s a lot of money in Afghanistan. I had some saved, and I split my money with my parents. I said, “Take this money. I’ll keep the rest. I’ll go there. If I work, I’ll help you guys.” I was thinking \$2,700 was going to last for six months. But when I got to California, when I [came] here, I found out right away that money doesn’t last for a month or two. If you don’t have a job, you need food, you need a room, you need everything to pay the bills. That money was not enough.

I came to the wrong location. What I mean by that, I came to the Los Angeles airport. But my captain—or lieutenant, later on he was captain—this guy was living in Monterey County, which is south of San Francisco. To drive from Los Angeles airport to Monterey County is five or six hours. I had no clue. I thought maybe there are taxis. But when I’m saying taxis, I mean small buses. You [ride] along with other people. They have shuttle buses from one point to another point. I thought maybe they do have from Los Angeles to that area, and I can jump buses and go all the way there, which was not the case. Then I went to the taxi drivers and asked them, “Hey, how much do you want to charge for from here to this address?” He told me seven or eight hundred dollars. I was like, *ooh!* My ticket from Afghanistan all the way to the United States,

that cost almost a thousand dollars. Now, from one town to another, it's going to cost that much money. If I spend that much money, what am I going to do?

I borrowed a phone from a person that was walking by. I said, "Can I make a phone call?" He said, "Yes, sure."

I called my lieutenant. His name was Brian Gorman. I called Brian Gorman and said, "Hey man, Hey LT, I am here." He said, "Wait a minute. Are you Hamed?" I said, "Yes."

He said, "Wait a minute. This is a United States' phone number. Where are you?" I said, "I'm here in California."

He said, "What part of California?" I said, "I am at the Los Angeles airport." And he was cursing, teasing me. He was laughing.

He said, "Man, you are stupid. Why didn't you call me or text me before you left Afghanistan? You should have come to at least the right airport." Of course, it was the middle of the night. It was ten or eleven o'clock at night. He told me, "Listen, go ask one of the security or police officers around the airport, what is the closest hotel next to you?" I said, "Okay, I will do that." Then he said, "Tomorrow, I will talk to you. You can call me from the phone inside the room."

I asked the security guards, "Where is the closest...?"

They showed me. I think it was one of the basic hotels. Of course, I was trying to find cheaper ones. I didn't know which one is cheap and which one is expensive. Obviously, after the second or third one, I got one room. I stayed there. I called from that phone. [Brian] was working. At the same time when he came back from Afghanistan, he's a police officer. He is a sergeant of one of the police stations. He called me and said, "Listen, where are you now?" I said, "I am in this place blah, blah, blah."

He came with his wife, and they picked me up. It was a brotherhood thing. Now they pick me up, and he said, "Listen, you took care of me in Afghanistan for one year, and I will take care of you for the rest of your life in the United States. You are my brother. I'll take care of you."

I came and stayed with them for a couple of days, for a week or two, almost three weeks. His dad has real estate, and right away his dad got the room for me, one of the rental houses that he had. Of course, if you don't have no background of a renting situation or income or whatever, nobody is going to rent a house or a room for you, an apartment. He told me, "Don't worry about those things. I will take care of it for you." Of course, they got the room, and then I moved in, and then I called my wife. I bought a ticket, and she came with my daughter after that.

At the beginning, even though I did have an American family that helped me, it was hard. It was hard. It was not easy. I cannot imagine without their help what I was going to go through. It is hard to adjust yourself from zero to a hundred. I'm talking about a hundred economy-wise. If you don't have income, if you don't have no jobs, how are you going to pay the bills? How are you going to pay the rent? How are you going to pay for a car and those things? Of course, I was good because I was driving in Afghanistan, and so I was able to drive. I already knew that. They helped me out to take me from point A to point B, himself, his wife, his mom, his dad. Everybody is like a family. They are like my mom and dad at this point. Of course, still to this day, I do have a connection with them.

One day, after weeks or so, my lieutenant told me, "Hey, Hamed, why don't you come here at lunch, and I'm going to introduce you to a person." We went to the restaurant, and he introduced me with his godfather. His godfather had run one of the local unions in California, the [UNITE HERE] Local 483 in Monterey County. He is one of the leaders in there, and he runs the local. We call him Lenny, but his name is Leonard. We meet him. He was trying to find a job

[for me]. [Brian] said. “Look my interpreter came from Afghanistan, and he’s looking for a job. Try to get him a better job, a union job in there. Let’s see if we can find something.” Of course, the next couple of days, he called me. Lenny told me, “Hey, I’m going to bring all your paperwork. I talked with one of the CEOs of the company, and they needed a good work person. You’re going to work for them.”

I went there and dropped my paperwork. The next day, the company called me, the human resource lady. I met with the CEO of the company, which I guess had never happened. Of course, [normally, if] you’re going to get a job...you talk with the manager of the department or the general manager of the department or something. But obviously, Lenny had made a connection...made a connection with [the CEO], and he talked with them. He said, “[Hamed]’s a good person. He’s going to work hard. He’s from Afghanistan. He grew up with a hardworking family, so he’s going to do well.” Then I talked with him. Right away, the next day, he told me, “You’re going to get the job, so work with them.”

I worked in that company for almost four and a half, almost five years. I was working day and night in California because life was hard. I mean by saying that, everything is expensive there. Everything is expensive, especially if you have family, especially if you have kids. Also, if you have one income, of course, it’s not going to be enough. Even with two incomes, it’s not going to be enough unless you make a lot of money. I was thinking, *[I’ve been here] long enough to know the situation. You’re not going to get nowhere in this kind of situation. You work and you pay. You work, you pay.*

I was talking with my friends, with other interpreters that come later on after me, too. We are in contact. *Oh, I’m living in this state, this city. Oh, I’m living in this city.* Back and forth. Of course, everywhere you go, there is struggle in things. There are good things, bad things. For me,

man, California is a great place to live and a great state. It's all kinds of diversity. But again, it gets back to the economy situation. It was hard. I was thinking if I move, *where should I move?* Maybe I'm going to be racist; I can't go to the middle of the country if my wife wants a job or something. *Again, is it safe for me? Is it not safe for me?* All kinds of situations. When you do something, a lot of questions come to your head, like, *what are you going to do? What about this? What about that?*

I came up with the idea that I'm going to move to Vegas. I told my wife. She said, "Wait. Are you out of your mind? I hear a lot of bad things about Las Vegas." I said, "No, it's not always the case. We can go and check it out there."

I came here one time, and my friends, interpreters...they were living here, too. They showed me the town. They showed me the city. They showed me downtown, everywhere, here, there, wherever. I was like, *wow!* What surprised me is there is our community, a big Afghan community, Pakistani community, Indian community, mosques, there are six or seven mosques around the city—Vegas and Henderson—where we pray when we practice our religion. I said, *Oh, in this town there are people like me.* When I saw that, I had to stick with my idea.

Sure enough, after a couple of months, I said, "We're going to move." Without finding a job, without settling down anything, we moved here. Before that, like I was telling you, since I do have this job in California, it was enough income to live there or whatever. I said, "I'm going to purchase something. If I don't purchase something in Las Vegas, what's the point of moving from here to there?" When that happened, I was [thinking], *What about income in Las Vegas? If you don't work in Las Vegas, you're not going to get the house.*" But the real estate, just with me, I could live with friends, and so your family is living here and there. They know the real estate guys. They know how to talk with each other. I got a townhouse here.

I purchased a townhouse, and we moved in July 2018. It was hot. What I mean by that, it was *really* hot. It was really hot even compared with my country, in Afghanistan. We don't get that much hot. Yes, it gets hot here or there and during August or July, but for a couple of weeks, this kind of heat, but humid a little bit. Yes, but not as much as dry heat all the way, like three months like this. We adjusted.

We moved in. I was looking for a job. I was looking for jobs in bigger casinos here and there. Of course, I called Lenny, "What's the name of the union locals here? I want to apply for a job." If they are hiring, the casinos are hiring people and they're going to contact unions [and say], "Hey, we need this kind of position blah, blah, blah, all this stuff. We need some people. If you guys train enough people, if you certify some more people, send them over." [Lenny said], "They're going to interview [you], they're going to see the situation, and they're going to hire."

I come over and turned in my resume, my application. The lady that saw that said, "Okay, what do you want to do in the casinos?" I said, "It doesn't matter...security...this, and that." [She said,] "No, we don't do security stuff." [Someone at] Calvin Klein saw my application and read all this stuff. He said, "Why is this kid not going to come here to work with us? I want to see if he's able to be working here, if he's going to be eligible. We're going to give him a job for now to see how he's going to do," [but] I have no clue what's happening here.

The next day, I received a call, and [a union rep] said, "Why didn't you come to the union?" I went there. I thought I was going to get hired [to go] inside of casino. He said, "Look, there is a job."

Here is the thing. Back to California, I was going to college. Even though I was working two jobs, I was going to college. I was studying computer science. I was studying programming. I studied Java. I studied C++. I studied Python. It's all coding, software programming. Of course,

I was really good with Microsoft Office, which is Excel, PowerPoint, and those things, not really good, but I was doing one-plus-one-[equals]-two, easy stuff, and I was doing it well.

Then I started working with organizers. They told me to come here and work with them. I wanted to see what they're going to do. Sure enough, I proved myself. I started working at the [Culinary] Union, Local 226, and until today, they kind of stash me in there with them. It's been five years almost, yes.

Were you working with Culinary in California as well?

I was working one of the hotels called Pebble Beach. It's a golf course.

It's beautiful.

It's a beautiful place. It is one of the most expensive hotels in the area, and it is famous for the rest of the country, I guess. It is famous. If it's not going to be number one, it could be number five. It's one of the top places. Of course, we do have a lot of our union members in there. What was going on, the minute I was applying for the job, they didn't have any position available in there. I was working with the accounting department, so I was not part of [the union], which was sad. I didn't have the union benefits, but still I was in close contact with the union locals. Lately, I was moving them to be a union place. We were talking with our friends, just moving them. "You know what? We don't have enough wages. It's expensive. We don't have good insurance. We don't have pension. We don't have benefits. All that good stuff." Towards the end, we were moving around the people, but [unionization] did not happen, which is unfortunate. I moved, so I was not a member basically, in other words. But it was a union property. It was a union hotel.

What made you look at Las Vegas? There are other places that have union jobs, and there are other places that have diversity. Why Las Vegas?

There were a few things about Las Vegas. One thing, it was hot. That was not the reason I [came]. But besides this, what you mentioned about diversity, again, I don't want to be racist, but it is important. [Imagine] if you are the only personal income for your family and you have other families behind you. What I mean by that [is] I make money not only for my family [but] my three or four families back home, which is my brother's family, my sisters' families, and my dad, everybody—whether they're single or married—I have to back them up. You can[not] go and put yourself in risk somewhere that they don't like you and you cannot find a job or whatever. Another thing is that obviously you drive from California [from] our little town—on Highway 15—and [then] you see all these Vegas casinos. The first thing that comes in your head is, *okay, [I] can find a job here*. Besides that, the cost of living was cheaper even in 2017. I came here one time for a couple of days to visit the town, end of '17, I was like, *Wow, this place!* Even when I was looking for apartments, one room or two bedrooms, it was cheaper. That made me [think], *okay!*

The only concern was everybody talks a different way about Las Vegas. Is there a mosque? Is there a normal life to live besides partying, crazy things, like in downtown and all these big tower buildings on the Strip. There were questions. The first time I came here, I was like, *I don't know*. But the second time when I came here, I saw there are clean places. There are all these normal people living here. There are schools. There are kids. They're raising up their families.

What happened is one day I went to the mosque. Usually on Fridays for Muslim people, Friday is special praying. I came on Thursday, and the next day was Friday. I went to the mosque, saying *hi, bye*, pretending like you're from this town. Of course, nobody is going to stop you from going inside the mosque whether you're members or not, and so nobody is going to

stop you. I talked with the people, especially with the Afghan community, the Afghan people. I said, “How long have you been living here? What about your kids?” I was asking all these naïve questions. Then, I explained my situation. They said, “Listen, man, if you move in this town, there is nothing wrong. If you want to move in this town and you’re concerned about your kids, like how are they going to do, there is nothing wrong with that. You’re safe. You’re good. People like us are living all day long, and you can practice your religion and find a job. Of course, there is different diversity. Of course, there are grocery stores from our Middle East groceries, like from Asian groceries. You can find everything. Whatever you want, we have [it] here.” I was like, *Okay, the cost of living is better*. I found out from friends and families that I don’t know that I meet on the same day. It was good. That was the reason I moved in.

It was kind of like rolling [the] dice. Sometimes they sit in a good way and sometimes [they don’t]. But thank God, it worked. Thank God, I got hired at the union. I didn’t have no experience of union back in my country. As you know, Asian countries, Middle East countries, we don’t have union places in there because it’s run by the government, different ways. Of course, people don’t have a voice. *Union?* I was like, *okay*. I already know the meaning of the word “union”, but we never worked before. In California, I had some experience because I was connected with a union family. I was connected with the people that run the union place. Of course, it was great. But thank God, I got a job, I got the benefits, and now my kids go to school.

What part of town do you live in, maybe cross streets?

I live close to 215 and Cheyenne by the mountain.

Is there an Afghan community around there?

Actually, there is a mosque in Rancho and Jones. The name of the mosque is Ibrahim Mosque or Masjid Ibrahim. Every Friday, we go to the mosque. What it is, if you’re from Afghanistan, if

you're from Pakistan, if you're from Philippines, if you're from Bangladesh, if you're from China, if you're from those neighborhood Muslim countries, all come over there and we pray together. We introduce each other. We say *hi, bye*. Of course, we share some food from home that we bring to each other. I talk with the men... brothers, friends, families. My wife talks with other ladies in the ladies' room. The kids play with each other. Basically, that was the reason I got connected with them. But there are two or three families that live close to me, but other families are living even further, a couple of miles, four or five miles away, six miles away. If you're half as close, the distance doesn't make any difference. Always [we] meet each other at the park. I am in contact with them closely, yes.

You've been here for about five years.

Almost, yes.

How have you seen Las Vegas change in that time?

Big time. Big time.

Tell us how.

This town, even before 2018, I came here in 2017 one time for a visit. They were talking about the football team they're going to move in. There was other stuff, too. I'm not sure what it involves. That was not right [then], and they were talking. The rumor was that they signed a contract and they're going to move. This town is like that.

When I come in 2017 in this town, I was thinking, *Man, if this business doesn't run, probably they're going to close the door, and the next day these people are going to wake up, and there [will be] nothing in this town.* That's what you think. There is no economy besides these casinos. There is no income besides these casinos, [and]because of these, big hotels. Since then, until now, I see big changes. What I mean by that [is] the business is running a different

way. Now, they brought a football team. A lot of people got jobs here. They signed a contract. It's not only you're a food server, but you're working in a different industry with football in a stadium. They brought the hockey team, different jobs, different businesses, different things. [But] again, back to the sports. Besides that, different sports, different things are coming. Formula One. Now it's coming up, too. A lot of cities in America, they don't have it. Especially in Vegas, there was no such thing. They signed the contract. They are saying they're going to bring them over. They signed the contract for next five, six years, whatever. It's going to happen this year.

Besides that, the town, the people, the residents, it's growing. A couple of months ago, I drove somewhere further by Red Rock Mountain [National Conservation Area], and that area was empty land three, four years ago, and now it's all houses [that] were built. [Also], they're building up bigger casinos, like Resorts World. There are other things, like they're building up a round thing, Sphere. [Ed. Note: Sphere at The Venetian Resort is an entertainment venue scheduled to open in late 2023.] They are building up different things. In downtown, they built up last year or the year before Circa [Resort and Casino]. Casinos are coming up. This town is establishing a real town and different businesses, different industries. Google was not [previously] here. Amazon was not here. Different businesses...are moving to town, especially from California.

But there is one thing concerning for the residents: Rent and cost of living. It's going up. The good thing is that we have [a] union, and they are keeping up with the economy. [The union is] keeping up with the economy. If not, the workers stay behind; the worker cannot catch up with the economy. That's the good thing about [unions]. One of the best victories—it was a test, and it was a victory for us [was the Las Vegas] Convention Center. It was great. Again, I cannot

talk on behalf of the union. I am just working here. But that was a big victory for us. It's great so far. This town is growing in a good way, and I hope it stays like that. I hope it stays in the union. We are protected, too, from technology, staying away from how much the economy grows up. We're going to grow the economy along with them because it's union jobs.

There's another concerning thing besides all this: water. Water is concerning for everybody. This is a global crisis. Global warming, global lack of water everywhere, that's something especially in our town [where] we are not connected straight with the mountain or something. We get water somewhere, and it is risky, but God is with us.

How do you see Las Vegas compared to where you lived in California, as the people, the people that you live near, as being water conscious?

Everywhere you go, you meet good people, and you meet other people. Of course, again, everything starts from your mouth, from your tongue, from your heart, from your brain. If you're a good person, the rest of the world is good. If you talk with people good, they are good back to you. Compare here with California, it is similar, a lot of things [are] similar... a lot of people are similar. I don't know, maybe because it's different diversity. People [in Las Vegas] are labor workers. That could be it. In California, you meet a lot of rich people, businesspeople [but] there is a lot of people that are labor working people, people that work in the labor businesses, hotel rooms, hospitality industry. That's another thing that's like the same thing, like California.

Are you still in contact with other interpreters who are still in Afghanistan?

Yes.

Without being particular.

It is heartbreaking... [the] stories from those people they left behind, yes. I do help—sometimes—my friends that used to be interpreters. They're left behind. They worked with the

United States Army more than eight years, more than ten years, more than five years, and those people they left behind, and they couldn't make it. [In some cases, it was a] direct supervisor, [who] didn't respond back to give them a letter, which is part of the requirement, part of the procedure, the program—you're supposed to get a letter from your direct supervisor, and then from that you get approved.

That letter starts the process.

That letter is part of the process at the beginning, the very first. My brother is a good example. He is from my family. He is my brother. I am not talking [just] because he is my brother, but I am talking reality. My brother couldn't make it because his direct supervisor didn't give him a letter. He couldn't find him. He emailed him, like, a thousand times, and he never responded back. I found, too, from different websites and Google, you can find people to contact and whatever, it could be right, it could be wrong, but I was hustling to find him and say *hi* and introduce myself. I told him, "He is my brother. I am here. Please give him a letter." That person said, "I work, and my business is over, and I am not responsible anymore."

I know it's not good, but the thing is there are a lot of people left behind. Sixty or seventy thousand families of people they left behind there. They worked directly with the U.S. Army, and they got left behind. Of course, I don't have contact with all of them, but I do have contact with a few, like the one I worked with, the one that I know closely. Their background is clean, good people [who] worked with United States, very honest, but somehow...it's not the soldiers' fault. It's not the Army's fault, but the whole system is not right. The whole system is not in a good way because if somebody helped you, [they] should be part of the procedure. For the United States, if you don't follow this, what is our standard? People there are struggling. They're

hiding from one town to another town, hiding from Taliban, from all kinds of militia groups.

Yes, it is sad.

Are there groups here that are actively working to get some of the interpreters out?

They are. They are. They are, but not really. What I mean by that [is] it's run by the government. SIV program is run by the National Visa Center, which is part of the immigration, it's part of the government. [Ed. Note: The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, enacted on December 29, 2022, authorized 4,000 additional SIVs; and consolidated oversight of the program under the State Department, which had previously shared oversight with the U.S. Citizen and Information Services (USCIS).] They are working. Obviously, if they don't ask too much questions—asking questions, nothing wrong with that. If [a translator receives] an interview and [the government checks] the background, that's it. A clear background is when they talk with a company they worked for. [But] they never talk. They never do anything. It is not urgent for them. They are saying that everybody is waiting. My brother, he [has waited] almost two years. Guess what? He cannot work in [Afghanistan]. Everything is run by the Taliban. If you go over there, they do biometric, like fingerprint, eye scan, everything to check to make sure who you are, what group you belong to. They do have access to the biometric system from the previous government. That was the same biometric for our—which is the United States—biometric. They know who you are, where you've been working, all your stories, right there, which is sad. You cannot go apply for a passport. They know who you are. Those people that are left behind, it is sad, it is crazy. Of course, you cannot find a job, a standard, decent job. You cannot apply for a passport. It is hard. They are hiding from one town to another town, just hiding here and there, or passing their days. My family...they are lucky because I am here, and I can help them every month with two or three hundred dollars—or every other month—whatever I could save from this salary. I just give

it to them. But what about those people? None of their family members are like me; they couldn't make it here. It is sad, but it's okay. What can you do?

Your friends that brought you into interpreting, are they here?

Yes. My POC, point-of-contact person... he was running the convoy. We were going on a long-haul mission for days and days from one province to another province. In Afghanistan, we call states provinces. From one district to another district takes hours and days with a long convoy. He was the commander of the convoy. Of course, I worked with other units, but the one he was living in California. Of course, I'm in contact with him very closely, like a family. He is a good person. His family, they are good people. His parents still live in California. His kids and with his wife, he moved to Montana. They purchased some kind of business or commercial land, so they are living there, good people, very good people, clean people.

Your high school friends that became interpreters as well?

He is one of them that couldn't make it. He couldn't make it to the United States. That person, it always hurts my heart. He was the person that had contact inside of the base, and he called me and said, "Look, they are hiring interpreters." He came to me, visiting me in the hospital, and the next day he came and picked me up.

Is he the one that drove the motorbike?

He's the one. He worked with them. Right now, his life is kooky; with the kids, with his wife, there is no life. Of course, he was single back then, and then later on he got married, all this stuff. Yes, it is part of the life. We don't know what's going to happen next.

Is there something you wanted to talk about that we haven't talked about?

No, I guess we covered everything. At the end of the day, we have to be a good person. We have to respect everybody. Enjoy life. It is short. Spend your extra hours, extra time for good things,

either for your kids, for your family, for community, for school, for cleaning the roads. Do something better. Try to be helpful. Study. I don't know what else I should say.

That's lovely. Thank you so much.

Thank you so much.

[End of recorded interview]