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NEWS

Grondahl: Afghan refugee flourishing on path to success

Masseh Ullah Yousofzai fled Afghanistan after the chaotic withdrawal of the U.S. military and found family, work at Pioneer bank and a life in the Capital Region

Paul Grondahl

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4 of 6 Masseh Ullah Yousofzai, 20, an Afghan refugee, was hired recently as a teller at the Pioneer bank branch in Wynantskill. Paul Grondahl / Special to the Times Union

Masseh Ullah Yousofzai is a 20-year-old Afghan refugee forced to flee his homeland after the Taliban regained control in the summer of 2021 and threatened his family.

He is wasting no time in creating his version of the American dream.

Just two months after arriving in the Capital Region following eight months at a refugee camp in the United Arab Emirates, Yousofzai is employed as a bank teller and hopes to complete a bachelor's degree in business administration at the University at Albany.

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"It was a struggle at first learning a different culture," Yousofzai admitted. "They are lovely people working here and they have helped me. It's more like a family."

Receiving the call of a job offer by Pioneer — relayed by his brother because he did not yet own a cellphone — thrilled Yousofzai.

"I am so grateful to have this job," he said. "My big brother had faith in me and always supported me. He's more like a father figure."

He considers his older brother, Omaid Yousofzai, an IT engineer who lives in Mechanicville with his family, an inspiration. He has lived in the Capital Region for 16 years.

Yousofzai is proficient in English and is a quick study at work. He is comfortable waiting on customers inside the bank and at the drive-thru window.

"He's been a great asset to our branch," said Rebecca Curtis, manager of the Wynantskill branch of Pioneer, a banking and financial services company. "He's a people person. Customers love him."

Yousofzai landed the job, in part, because he worked at a bank in Kabul. He arrived for his interview in a suit and tie and was well-prepared.

"He presented very well in the interview and we knew he would be a good fit," said Curtis, a 20-year veteran of the bank. "Masseh is very polite, but he can also be funny. He's building relationships with our customers because he is sincere."

"I was part of the interview process and realized he'd fit our culture here at Pioneer," said Rekha Singh, who oversees multiple Pioneer branches. "He's doing very well."

Yousofzai applied to Pioneer over other local banks because of his research.

"I Googled the reviews of bank employees and found they are happier at Pioneer compared to other banks," he said.

Finding happiness has been elusive as Yousofzai navigated the turmoil after the U.S. military pulled out from Afghanistan after 20 years.

The youngest of four siblings, he enjoyed a comfortable middle-class life in Kabul and was about to begin his senior year at Ghalib University. He majored in business administration, volunteered with campus organizations that assisted poor children, and worked part-time in a bank.

Because a brother and family members served as translators for U.S. Marines and his father was a government official, they were targeted by a resurgent Taliban.

Fearing their safety, Yousofzai and family members fled Kabul after the U.S. military's chaotic withdrawal in August 2021. The void was filled by a repressive Taliban regime's shockingly swift takeover and return to power, free of resistance.

The Taliban were emboldened to settle old scores against those who supported the U.S. occupation and opposed their leadership.

"They were hunting for us. We were in danger. They wanted to kill us," Yousofzai said.

After going into hiding in a distant province in Afghanistan, Yousofzai and his father and sister and sister's family managed to board a flight out of Afghanistan.

"We left everything behind," he said, including their home, their belongings, as well as relatives, friends and a brother who relocated far from Kabul.

Yousofzai spent eight months in a refugee camp in Abu Dhabi, the capital of United Arab Emirates. Conditions were decent.

When he arrived in Albany with family members April 11, 2021, he quickly fulfilled a long-held wish by stopping at a McDonald's restaurant.

"I wanted a Big Mac," he said. "It was so good."

Enamored by advertisements of fast-food chains on American TV shows he watched, he quickly sampled Taco Bell, KFC and Subway.

"It's not as good as the Afghan food my mother makes, but I had to try them all," he said.

His mother had earlier relocated to the Capital Region. She works as a clerk at a Salvation Army store. His father suffers from a heart condition and is unable to work. The son lives with his parents and drives his mother to and from work in a Toyota car his brother gave him. His sister lives in Albany and is raising four children.

Pioneer offers additional support services for refugees like Yousofzai. That includes no-cost counseling to deal with stress and anxiety resulting from their dislocation. There are also generous leave policies for a visit to the person's homeland to visit or bring back a relative.

Entry-level teller pay is \$17 an hour, with built-in salary increases and shares of Pioneer stock for employees after one year of employment.

Pioneer has found success in a tight labor market by hiring refugees from Afghanistan, Ukraine and other countries who possess a strong work ethic and willingness to learn.

"We meet them where they are and help them to be successful," said Susan Hollister, Pioneer's chief human resources officer. "It's a job with a paycheck, but we want it to be so much more."

For Yousofzai, the job gave him a strong foothold in a new land.

"I feel good about my work and about myself," he said. He hopes to attend UAlbany part-time while working at Pioneer in order to finish the business degree that was disrupted. His long-term goal is to earn a Ph.D. in economics and return to Afghanistan.

"It was painful for me to leave my country," he said. "I want to go back after the Taliban leave to grow the economy and help Afghanistan succeed."

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