

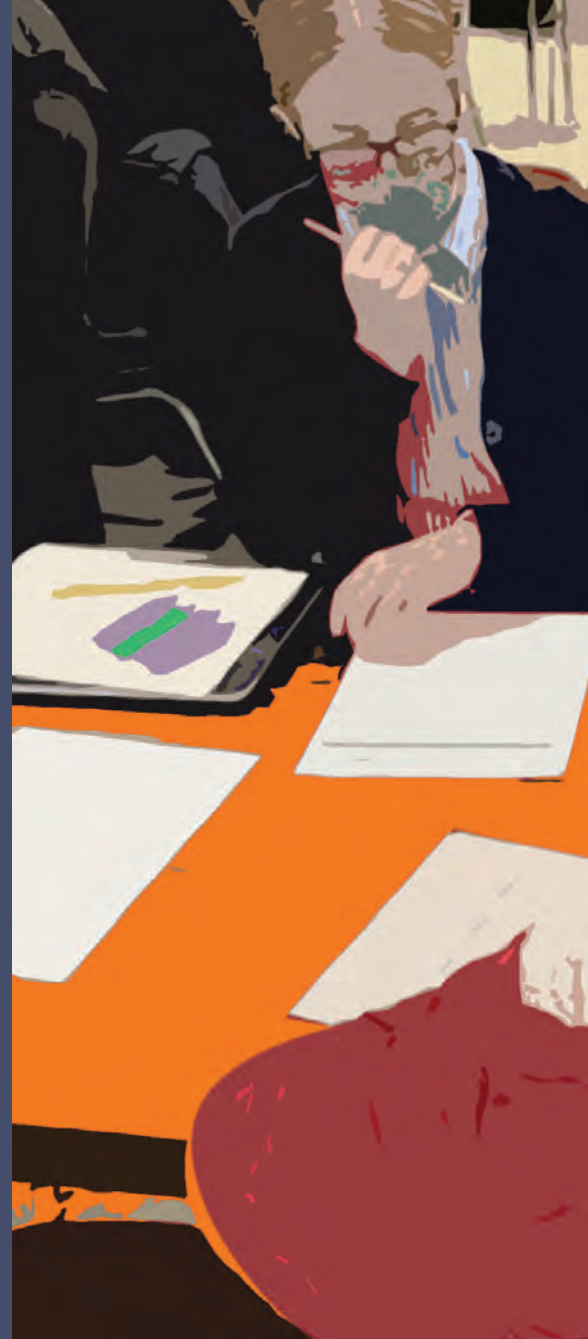
Helped Today; Gone Forward Tomorrow

MARQUETTE LAW STUDENTS PITCH IN AT A RURAL ARMY BASE TO HELP AFGHANS LAUNCH LIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

By Alan J. Borsuk

Reid Hazelton, a Marquette Law School student, sat for hours each day during most of a week, helping the people who sat on the other side of the table. He was struck by how much what they wanted in life was similar to what he and his brother wanted, how much the people were “just like us.”

But there were big differences. For example, the identification papers shown to him by two people—brothers themselves—were blood stained. That was a small if dramatic sign of the big issue: Those being helped were all people who had made it out of Afghanistan as civil order collapsed in what one compared to “a movie at the end of the world.” Hazelton was making a contribution with the skills available to him to help some of these people build new lives.



On a nearly colorless stretch of land in west central Wisconsin, in dozens of nearly colorless buildings, a city arose quickly in the late summer and fall of 2021, larger than any of the nearby cities, such as Tomah and Sparta. A few months later, at winter's end, the city was gone.

The nondescript features of the area's fall and winter landscape belied the vivid human stories in the city—stories both of past terror and tumult and of the present strains of launching new

lives in a country half a world away from Afghanistan, where the city's residents had lived before being transported to rural Wisconsin. Each story was part of a great international crisis.

Marquette Law School students played a part in helping residents of the short-lived city move forward.

Fort McCoy, a U.S. Army base about 100 miles northwest of Madison, Wis., was one of seven centers in the United States where people from Afghanistan were taken after the Afghan government collapsed and the Taliban took over



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From discussion with Noelle-Nadia Filali

in August 2021. In the fall, the area swelled to 13,000 people living at Fort McCoy. Name a need, and it was among the things having to be addressed for all of these people.

A threshold legal issue for each one of these individuals was to obtain permission to live in the United States on a long-term basis. They had been granted two-year emergency residency permits, with one year to start the often-prolonged process of receiving asylum or other permanent status in the United States.

That’s where the Marquette law students sought to help.

Wes Haslam, a second-year law student and Coast Guard veteran, said he hopes to work as a lawyer involved with immigration issues. He was eager to take part when he heard about the chance to do pro bono work at Fort McCoy.

It was eye-opening, he said. Americans aren’t used to hearing stories of murder, of houses being burned down, of people being forced to flee for their lives, loved ones left behind.



Working with two boys about 11 or 12, who came to the United States by themselves, “was gut wrenching.” And she helped a 19- or 20-year-old woman who had brought her 3-year-old brother with her. “There was just so much on her.”

From discussion with Aiyannah Simms

What if the people had to go back to Afghanistan? He said they told him “they’d die, they’d be killed.”

Were you helpful? “I hope so,” Haslam said. Would you do something like this again? “I’d do it again in a heartbeat. . . . This was not the type of event anyone is going to forget anytime soon.”

There are several routes that the people from Afghanistan can use to gain long-term residency in the United States. They were advised to try all of them—you don’t know which one might work. The paths are complex and require the involvement of lawyers.

Shannon Farrell, a former Wisconsin attorney, has served 19 years as a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State. As the State Department’s Continental United States Director for Operation Allies Welcome, Farrell coordinated legal efforts for Afghan “guests,” as they were called, at the various U.S. safe havens, including Fort McCoy.

Due to the relatively quick resettlement timeline from safe havens like Fort McCoy, guests would not be able to file their applications until they resettled to their permanent residences in local communities. Yet guests were encouraged to begin the initial paperwork while at Fort McCoy, to get a start on the process. Licensed attorneys were not needed for that work, but an affinity for legal processes was helpful. So law students were good candidates to participate.

And Marquette law students were good candidates to want to do so. In October, Farrell contacted Marquette Law School Dean Joseph D. Kearney, asking if there were students who would help the guests as pro bono volunteers. The dean had met Farrell through her father, Bill Farrell, L’68, whom he knew through Farrell’s late law partner in Port Washington, Ralph J. Huiras, L’41. Kearney turned to Angela Schultz, the Law School’s assistant dean for public service. Farrell also asked her good friend and former law colleague,

Amelia (Amy) McCarthy, L’94, to assist Marquette law students working on the project, by overseeing their work with Afghan guests, which McCarthy did for three weeks at Fort McCoy’s legal clinic.

In very short order but with a good deal of planning, 49 law students—approaching 10 percent of the total enrollment in the Law School—traveled to Fort McCoy, in December and January, to help.

The students were not paid, did not receive academic credit for the work, and were all there during the break between semesters, meaning they were not excused from any classes. They went in three groups, for up to a week at a time (and three of the students went two separate weeks), staying on the base or nearby. Some finished final exams in December one day and headed to Fort McCoy the next; some postponed travel home for the holidays to spend time in the fairly spartan and definitely wintry conditions of Fort McCoy.

Aiyannah Simms, a first-year law student from Nashville, Tenn., recalled that when she heard about the Fort McCoy project, she said, “This is an opportunity I can’t pass up.” She changed her plans for flying home for the Christmas season so she could be “part of this journey.”

“It was eye-opening,” she said. She felt welcomed into the families of people she met. They showed her family photos. One gave her an apple, about the only present that was available. “They were so grateful.”

She described working with two boys, about 11 or 12, who came to this country by themselves. “It was gut-wrenching,” she said. They were taken in by a family and were doing reasonably well. She also worked with a 19- or 20-year-old woman who had brought her 3-year-old brother with her. “There was just so much on her,” Simms said.

How was she feeling about the experience in retrospect? “I just want to go back. I think about it all the time.”

This was the principal duty for the law students: Generally working in pairs, the students met with people, either individually or two at a time. Often with the help of interpreters, the students worked for two hours or more with each person on filling out applications, for either asylum or another legal standing, that would allow them to stay in the United States. Although it was not yet possible to fill out the final version of the forms, these sessions would help capture details and would save time for both the Afghan people and the attorneys who would become involved when the people went to their new communities.

There were two main tasks. One consisted of answering four pages of very detailed questions about the applicant's prior life, including employment history, family history, and education. There were requirements such as listing every address at which the person ever had lived. Some of the people spoke English; many did not and could converse only through the interpreters. Some had important papers such as birth certificates or passports; many did not. A number had photographed important papers on smart phones before they fled, which was helpful.

Then came the section of the application requiring the Afghans—each of them individually—to describe why they had fled and why they believed they would be in danger if they returned to Afghanistan. The law students were told that the statements could be of any length but needed to present compelling cases, with particulars, for why the Afghans couldn't go back.

Write down every detail of what happened to you in Afghanistan that makes you want to never go back. Write down everything you remember, Malin Ehrsam, one of two Marquette law students on one side of a table, said to the young woman on the other side.

"I don't want to remember," the

woman said matter-of-factly in English.

For this, you have to remember, Ehrsam said. Then, when you are finished, you can forget.

Ehrsam wrote in a reflection afterward, "Filling out four pages of a form and conducting a brief interview may seem trivial, but based on our interactions with guests and the gratitude that they shared, we have definitely made an impact. . . . Just listening can be so powerful. Listening is so important."

On the first day that law students arrived at Fort McCoy, they received training from lawyers who were leading the work.

Farrell, the State Department official, spoke to the first group to arrive in December. She told the students that they might not think themselves to be making much difference for the people they met. She was emphatic that that would not be the case. More good would come than this, but even just listening was a big help, she said.

"Years from now, they will remember you," she said.

Noelle-Nadia Filali, a second-year law student, said that asking specific questions was challenging. After hearing some of the people's experiences, she would ask, "How do you know it was the Taliban?" Filali said, "It seemed like such a silly question. They were like, 'Of course it was the Taliban.'" Some had had family members killed in front of them, all of them had had guns pointed at them, Filali said. Taliban members had personal information about them.

One person who stood out to Filali was the translator who helped her. He had worked with Americans in Afghanistan, which made him a target of reprisals. He was threatened by the Taliban, his name was on Taliban lists, they knew the places he frequented. His parents were dead. He came to the United States with one sibling. He and Filali exchanged email addresses. She said she "absolutely" plans to stay in touch with him.



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Reid Hazelton



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Malin Ehram

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The students were told that the sessions might be emotional. Some of the law students said they did have conversations of that sort. But many of the Afghans were focused on moving forward and working on the processes intended to accomplish that. Some were pleased to get personal attention—much of what they had been through was impersonal.

“As a whole, every one of them handled this far better than I would,” said Hazelton, the student who found the newcomers to have similar hopes to his own. He said the people he met were not bitter or resentful—they generally were just glad to be here. Some were almost casual in describing what they experienced—what they had witnessed and how close they were to attacks—Hazelton said. The Afghans were appreciative of the help they were getting and seemed to regard themselves as lucky ones who had made it out of Afghanistan.

Hazelton said that listening to what the people had experienced gave him perspective on the problems faced by himself and people around him. “I’m not going to complain about anything for a very long time,” he said.

After the work at Fort McCoy was over, Schultz, the Law School’s assistant dean for public service, said she was struck by “just how many students came back and said, ‘What’s next? What can we do to be of more service to these people?’”

Returning to Fort McCoy is not an option since all the Afghan residents have been relocated. Schultz said that she is working on possibilities for interested students, such as internships with agencies that are serving people seeking citizenship.

Schultz said that for many of the students, it was “an eyes-wide-open

experience.” One part of that was “the immersion aspect” of being at Fort McCoy for several days, compared to pro bono work in Milwaukee that involved a few hours at a time and no residential component. Another was a matter of the people and their stories.

In the big picture, were the students helpful to the Afghan people? Were the Fort McCoy experiences ones that will motivate students to do more to help others and to use their legal skills for purposes such as this in the future?

“There’s no doubt in my mind,” Schultz said. The unconventional Afghan city in Wisconsin has come and gone, but its impact will live on, one imagines, for both its former residents and those who volunteered to help them that winter. ■



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Wes Haslam