

Good afternoon! For those of you who don't know me, my name is Azita Ahmadi. My parents, Aria and Ehsan Ahmadi, who I'm sure more of you will know, docked in Suffolk as refugees from Afghanistan just under 25 years ago. Aside from the particularly precious cargo my mum was carrying and my dad's medical degree, they arrived with little but the clothes on their backs to build a new life in this country.

Now, so many years later, my dad is a GP partner at Barack Lane with lots of letters after his name and probably a few more job titles that I'm not aware of. Together with my wonderful mum they have brought up two children in Ipswich, the first being me and then my younger brother Elias. I have recently graduated from Imperial College London and I am now a qualified doctor and he is about to start studying Chemistry at the University of Oxford. None of this would have been possible without the support of community, my parents' hard work, and many many strokes of luck.

Community is what made and continue to make Ipswich a home for my family. In Afghanistan, family is a very central part of life with often the entire extended family living communally under one roof. This way of living can often lift the burden from the mother when she has a baby or soon enough in my mum's case two children under 5. When my parents arrived in the UK, they had no family around them. My dad was working multiple jobs to support our family, one of them as an interpreter at Suffolk Refugee Support, while also studying for English exams so he could practice as a doctor at the UK. Without community during these times, my mum would have felt completely alone.

When I was born, my parents were given a council flat with help from social services which was quickly filled with donations – a lot of these came from a generous lady called Maureen who my mum speaks of fondly – and became my childhood home. Here we had 4 elderly neighbours, Sybil and Ted across the hall and Iris and Gerry in the flats downstairs. They soon became my bonus grandparents and they were there whenever my parents needed childcare – I spent many evenings making pretty pictures with Sybil's bingo pens. Sybil knitted an Ipswich town hat and scarf for my brother and I and taught me to never wear the colours green and yellow in combination. If she was with us today I'm sure she would be very glad to hear we have finally made it back into the premier league. Before my mum could speak very much English, it was Iris who nurtured my love for reading. She would sit with me for hours and talk about books and always asked what I was reading when we'd get home from school. I was a huge fan of her beautiful cursive handwriting in all of my birthday cards and so her son Barry gave me a set of his old calligraphy books that I meticulously copied from and still have at home today.

At the same time as us, a small community of Afghans had arrived in Ipswich. Most of them were men who had come on their own, some with families back home who they would invite over once they were settled here. My mum would make homecooked Afghan food for all of them and I made room for lots of bonus uncles in my family. In return, my bedroom walls were painted a different colour every couple of months, I had an assortment of taxi drivers to deliver me back and forth from school when my brother was a baby and my dad was working, and I still have a choice of taxi to take me home whenever I arrive at Ipswich station today.

I went to Handford Hall Primary School, which is where I learnt to speak English as we had only ever spoken Farsi at home. The staff at this school, from the teachers to the ladies in reception, especially Mrs Rogers, Mrs Wilkinson, Mrs Blake and Mr Trotter, always went above and beyond and encouraged me to strive for the best despite being under resourced. They provided so much support and patience for my parents who were completely new to the UK school system, and nobody even batted an eyelid when I would turn up to school in red and yellow summer dresses, despite the school colours being blue, because my mum didn't quite understand how school uniform worked.

This is the community that raised me and made Ipswich a home for me and my family. In an increasingly digital and individualistic world, I really want to encourage everyone to nurture and not lose sight of community and I want to thank Suffolk Refugee Support for continuing to integrate new refugees into our community.

Earlier I mentioned luck. We have been exceptionally lucky, and sadly the opportunities for social mobility are more often an exception in this country than something that is possible for all. For example, many of my dad's graduating class live in this country now but were never able to become doctors in the NHS. This could be for a number of reasons – for example, because they had to immediately start working to provide for their families back home so did not have the luxury of time to learn English nor the support to do so, as the system for foreign doctors is very difficult to navigate on your own. Many other highly qualified refugees have been unable to work in their respective fields in this country. An important thing to note is that although many refugees are educated and prepared to work and “give back” to the country they seek asylum in, this should not be a prerequisite nor does it make any refugee more deserving of asylum than another because of what they are able to offer to the country economically. When we accept and provide a safe haven for refugees, it is not a transaction but our social responsibility as human beings as well as under international refugee law. Every human being is valuable, whatever their occupation or their level of education, simple because they are human and we should always help people for no other reason than simply because they are in need of help.

Finally - It is difficult to stand here and celebrate 25 years of this initiative, knowing how this country treats refugees today. With the hostility towards the asylum seekers who were removed from the Novotel right on our doorstep, to the glorified detention centre not far from us in Essex, not to mention the possibility of shipping asylum seekers with negative decisions off to Rwanda, things are in many ways much worse than they were 25 years ago. It is community that will continue to make this town a home to whoever may need it, and I hope that in another 25 years there will be more opportunities for refugees than there are now. It is more important than ever to offer support wherever possible not only to Suffolk Refugee Support but within your own communities wherever you can.