

The Stand's Podcast: My South Side

Episode 3: "Reporter Debrief: Jeff Kramer on Syracuse's Humanitarian Parolees" Transcript

Slow instrumental music begins low. With cords that build in emotion and tension as the host introduces the podcast

Abby Fritz: I'm Abby Fritz, here with Jeff Kramer, the journalist whose story for The Stand "Humanitarian Parole" inspired the past few episodes on "My South Side." Today, we're doing a reporter debrief, speaking a little bit more about how the story was written, and how the people impacted by the status will continue to be affected in the coming months. Hi, Jeff, let's start with an introduction to who you are and what you do.

Music begins to fade out as Kramer introduces himself

Jeff Kramer: OK. My name is Jeff Kramer. I have been a journalist for my whole life and also written a few plays. I guess, semi-retired, but I was dragooned into volunteering for The South Side Stand, which uh, which I do now and then, and I find it quite rewarding and enjoyable when I do. So, I was a reporter. I was at the LA Times and The Boston Globe. And then a long time at the Orange County Register. And I made most, most of my bones as a humor columnist, actually, three different stops.

Fritz: Awesome. Well, I'll jump right into it. Do you remember when you heard that Afghanistan fell to the Taliban? Do you remember what was going on?

Kramer: I remember the several days — I had become friends with an Afghan here, Saboor Sakhizada, and I had been involved with him trying to get some of his family members out of Afghanistan long before Kabul fell. So, I was with him and I remember at one point, the most dramatic, it felt like being in a movie as we were sitting in, in my truck in the rain with him in the front seat. And I was helping him to write an exchange advocating for his brother, Habib, to some American military person, well placed that I don't know, never met. But we were in especially he was doing everything possible. At that point, it was frantically trying to get, get them out, eventually succeeded. But it did not look good at that time.

Fritz: Wow. I didn't know that that's how you knew Saboor. Because I — you also gave me some Saboor's contact. Which, he's been heard on the past two episodes of the podcast.

Kramer: Right. Saboor actually hired me as a volunteer at Interfaith Works, which is a refugee resettlement agency in town, and he assigned me to English teaching unit. This is sort of in the early days of the Trump administration.

Fritz: OK. So like 2016?

Kramer: Yep. So soon enough, about a year and a half later, two years later, we were running out of refugees, for obvious reasons. But Saboor and I remained friends, he was an administrator with, with that organization, and we became very good friends.

Fritz: That's great.

Kramer: So, personal stake in it.

Fritz: Totally. And Saboor is such an advocate to for all the people coming from Afghanistan and just for refugees and humanitarian parolees and people with S.I.V. status as well. So-

Kramer: Well, he's the whole the whole deal. You know, he's an advocate, he's an American, he's, in some extent, a victim, I would think he would not want to be called that, but he was forced to flee his own country. And, and so he's had a very interesting life for having very few years under his belt.

Fritz: Yeah. So then this, this personal stake that you kind of talked about, given your friendship with Saboor is that what prompted you to write the story?

Kramer: No, I don't know that it prompted. It just informed it. It might have prompted the assignment. I think the fact that I had worked with refugees and kind of had a bad habit of forming friendships with them, *low laugh indicating the joking nature of the comment* you know, and I found the immigrant experience — first of all, it resonates with my family, which fled, my father's family, my father fled Nazi Germany. So, I had a powerful kind of, I guess, sort of a symmetry with what was going on there. And I just find their energy, the vitality, their outlook, refreshing. And I found that it was something that I needed personally, at that time. So, I got involved in that, and I think I've sort of been associated with that.

Fritz: Yeah. Did you see a lot of other publications covering the story? Because I mean, I can speak from my experience, that when Afghanistan fell, pretty much after the fall, there wasn't much covering it as people came to the United States. What, what they were doing and what they were having to go through, you know, in the wake of all of that.

Kramer: It was a, it was a little spotty, you know, and it was a little chaotic. And, but they had to be going somewhere, right? Including about 400 at the time, into Syracuse. And it was a, you know, any anyone who has to uproot their homeland and come here is a difficult, it's a difficult challenge. Syracuse has its own challenges, even for those of us who were born in the United States. So, they get here, and they're dislocated, and they're incredibly sad. And a lot of them are fearful of what's happening to their friends and loved ones back home. And it just seemed to me that there was a deeper story to tell then numbers of people coming in and that's what I tried to do when I wrote that story.

Fritz: Absolutely, and I think that was definitely felt within your story. How do you think the Syracuse community has addressed this tragedy, first and foremost, with the fall? And then, how do you think they have kind of banded around helping the Afghan people that have come here? Do you think there's been facilities in place to do that or even just community members? Did you get that in your reporting?

Kramer: Well, I think that, for the most part, Syracuse is a politically tolerant place, and I think the path, there's sort of a well-worn path for refugees coming here. I think that they have been handled, I guess, to the best of our ability. I mean, this area is not flush with resources itself. I don't, you know, the resources have, have been coming. I mean, there's just never going to be enough. But the fact that many of them are now able to work is helpful. That was not the case initially. I don't know if that answers your question.

Fritz: No, I think it does. I think the question I've been trying to, to get at and kind of when I've been reporting, has been a resounding, a resounding consistency throughout all of the people I've interviewed is that Syracuse, even if it was maybe not financially, or specifically in, you know, tangible ways that there has been, a lot of people have really wanted to help. And have really worked towards it, whether that's people at Interfaith Works helping people apply for asylum, or just finding communities within Syracuse that are already here, because of populations that have been immigrating here for a long time, or that are refugees here. And so—

Kramer: I do think it has worked to their advantage, that these people are associated with helping the United States to a large degree.

Fritz: Definitely.

Kramer: But I think it's, it's a very traumatized population. They have not been sitting in refugee camps, you know, for five or 10 years. They're not, didn't necessarily come here with a sense of happiness and relief. Well, there was relief. But there was a sense of trauma. I mean, these are people that had relatively normal lives and then almost overnight, everything changed. And here they are in Syracuse, NY. So, it's different, you know, it's a different population and some of the other refugees we've seen.

Fritz: Definitely. That was another point I wanted to talk about, too, was kind of the, the suddenness of the fall. Or at least maybe that's just from me, I'm a young person and I haven't been as conscious of the conflict in Afghanistan until more recently and it did, to me feel like, kind of overnight it just fell. And I don't know if that's because of the information we were getting back from Afghanistan, that things were going well. And if maybe that was not necessarily the case. And we just hadn't received, you know, the actuality of what was going on out there or if it's more of like, a freak, you know, it felt the Taliban rose that that sort of thing. I don't—

Kramer: I don't even think the Taliban expected that it was gonna fall that quickly. But I

do think it was a tragedy that was in the making for a long time. I think there's a lot of blame to go around. Not, not just Trump and Biden, the Afghans themselves to an extent, the Afghan government itself, and the American military, I think, which created an enabling sort of a system. Where: "We'll take care of this, we can do it better than you," as opposed to really preparing a country to defend itself against a radical element. So, but you know, what, what are you going to do, you know? Once you start blaming everybody, the blame just gets diffused, you really have to just move on at this point. You know, it's a tragedy.

Fritz: It is a tragedy. And that kind of leads me, because I know that the quickness with which Afghanistan fell kind of required the U.S. government to, with the people in coming, who had helped the U.S. military to give them the status as humanitarian parolees. Do you remember when you first kind of heard that term?

Kramer: I heard it in the course of, it was probably my own ignorance, but I heard in the course of reporting my story. That they had this particular status, hadn't really come up in my experience before. And it made sense, you know, because these people didn't have documents and they didn't have, they didn't go through the vetting process, they were not on a track to get a green card. It was kind of an emergency short term situation. But it's, it's kind of added to their misery and stress and anxiety. The possibility, that even if it's a remote possibility, that they can be sent back there has to be terrifying. And you know, they know more than anybody, you know, how quickly events can happen. And how quickly things can change. So hopefully, that will get ironed out. I do think Afghans are getting expedited in the asylum process.

Fritz: Really?

Kramer: Which is unfair to others. But you know, it's just the backlog system right now.

Fritz: When did that come out that they're getting expedited?

Kramer: I have, I don't know if it's come out. I was talking to immigration lawyers and they had said that they're getting like, their claims are being adjudicated in about 45 days, which is quite speedy.

Fritz: Yeah, and asylum too, that's one thing that many of the professionals and lawyers that I've spoken to, they're like, you know, if the Act that's in Congress right now, or that's being drafted right now—

Kramer: The Afghan Resettlement?

Fritz: Yeah, the Afghan Adjustment Act.

Kramer: That's right.

Fritz: If that doesn't go through, the other options are usually asylum or, you know, if

they hadn't already started an S.I.V. which is a Special — I'm forgetting —

Kramer and Fritz: *Said at the same time* Special Immigration Visa.

Kramer: Yeah.

Fritz: Asylum is the option, and it's just a really long, traumatizing process. Because you have to recount so much that has gone on to you.

Kramer: Right.

Fritz: And it's so backlogged, you know, across the country and—

Kramer: And prove things that are, in some cases very difficult to prove, given how rapidly they had to get out of there.

Fritz: Mhm, and we had discussed too that, we mentioned the Act that's been drafted. I was really hoping and throughout my time working on the story that we would have a conclusion that the act would be passed and we'd be able to kind of see what, what came out about it. But clearly—

Kramer: You know, this country better than that.

Fritz: I'm 22. I don't I haven't had enough time. But I was I was hopeful, and I was wrongfully hopeful. And that it's not it's not done yet. It's not done drafting, even though it really to me seems like it should be a bipartisan issue. But yeah, I don't know. You don't seem surprised by this outcome?

Kramer: No, you know, unfortunately we live in a country where one side doesn't want to have the other side to have any success at all. Even if it's benefits everyone. I do think there's reasons to have some caution, you know, given the violent world that these people are coming out of and the possibility for, for mischief. So, I don't know that it's necessarily racist, or politics, to ask questions about, about this act. But I do think that everyone's eye should be toward passing it, you know, sooner than later. With, with sufficient precautions. And I have to believe that they know, to a large extent, which people are completely safe and reliable at this point and maybe some others are going to need a little extra attention. But if you trusted someone to work at a commissary on an American military base in Afghanistan, you should be able to trust him in Syracuse.

Fritz: Yeah. When I spoke with Zac Lois, I got a really pointed quote from him where he says that the, the American focus and attention span moves very quickly. And, you know, I'm not sure obviously, I'm not any sort of political researcher or anything like that. But it's, it seems to be that could be the reason why a lot of people haven't heard about the act more broadly, other than people being directly affected by it. And why, you know, it's not maybe a top priority right now, in the drafting process. I think there's a lot of other things going on in the world that have grabbed American attention.

Kramer: I think Zac is right. I think that's what Biden was relying on with this with this rapid pull out and he was correct, unfortunately. Afghanistan is unlucky, you know, they are unlucky because strategically, they just don't have much in the way of oil or, or other precious resources that would make a superpower want to come in and protect them necessarily long-term. Then they were unlucky with Ukraine, you know, which, as horrible as Afghanistan is and what's going on there now and our role in what's going on over there right now, it doesn't threaten a global nuclear war, you know, to the extent of what's going on in Ukraine. So that has captivated everybody's attention. And, you know, Ukraine, you know, their cities look more like our cities, they are basically Europeans. And that's what we're that's how the establishment in this country identifies itself.

Fritz: Yeah, I think there is definite racism and, you know, like you said, given the circumstances of Russia being involved with Ukraine, that have caused everyone to really focus their attention on, on that. Do you think that, do you see, now that President Biden has said that we're going to also be taking on Ukrainian refugees? Do you see a similar situation happening? I'm not sure if you can answer that question or not.

Kramer: What do you mean similar?

Fritz: Similar in, you know, in relation to what we've been talking about with humanitarian parole, do you think people are going to have to come here quickly?

Kramer: Well, I think it'd be easier for them in, in some regard. Even though you know, it is it is ironic. I mean, Ukrainians are not involved, or their families, in helping America fight before all this happened, right? So, and yet, I would imagine that if there was a Ukraine Resettlement Act that was pending, it would probably get less resistance would be, would be my guess.

Fritz: What was something surprising you learned while you were reporting on the story? Because I know, I've learned quite a lot just speaking to people.

Kramer: You know, I think what, what struck me was when I was sitting at a Pittsburgh Pirates game, when Saboor told me that his brother and his other family members had miraculously gotten out of Afghanistan. And about a month later, maybe less, I was shooting baskets with them in Liverpool at a park. And I was struck by Habib, just how American he was, in so many respects and so much of a regular guy. And I don't know why I was surprised by that, you know, I shouldn't have been surprised by it. But to be confronted with how similar we all are, when we're sort of fed this imagery of terrorism and difference and, you know, radical Islam and on and on and on. This whole apparatus that's set up to, to keep us from trusting each other and knowing each other, liking each other. I was just kind of humbled by that, you know, honestly.

Fritz: Yeah, and something I keep coming back to, too I think, throughout the story was that, you know, at the end of the day, like all the people that have come here are

deserving of a happy and safe life. And that's kind of the responsibility, I think, that a lot of, you know, the military people I've spoken with, and a lot of the people who are helping get people from Afghanistan here just resoundingly agree that everybody, everybody is deserving of a happy and safe life, you know.

Upbeat, inquisitive music begins to play low and slowly builds in the last sentence of Fritz's quote

Kramer: Right, exactly.

Music continues to increase in volume and energy

Fritz: Thank you for listening to The Stand's "My South Side." For more episodes, keep your eye on The Stand's website and Spotify. This has been a collaborative project with The Stand and WAER. A special thanks to Chris Bolt who assisted with recording and advised on content, as well as Ashley Kang for assisting with scripting and being a constant mentor on the project. Thanks for listening.

Music decreases in the end of the closing description and fades out entirely a few seconds after Fritz stops talking

Music by Lesfm and Coma-Media from Pixabay, in the order in which they are heard throughout the episode.