Navigating Refugee Resettlement - Kelsey Herndon and the Spero Project

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Guest: Kelsey; Herndon

Resources: The Spero Project

David Lowry: 0:29
And hello, everyone. Welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. I'm your host, David Lowry, and with me today is my good friend, Don Drew.

Don Drew: 0:37
Hello everybody Good to be with you today.

David Lowry: 0:40
Don, we've got a great guest, and I'm really excited, but I want to remind everybody to listen, like, tell people about our show, download it, and anything you can do to promote the show, we'd like to have you do it for us. Also, we want to remind you that if you have a story about some difficulty you've overcome and found peace in the process, we want to know about it. So, let Don and I know. Write us at Peaceful Life Radio. Visit our website. And we'll get in touch with you. Don, tell us about our guest today.

Don Drew: 1:08
David, our guest is Kelsey Herndon. I've known Kelsey, gosh, for almost 20 years now, I think. And he does some really interesting work with refugees here in the Oklahoma City area. He's known as a community navigator and team lead for an organization called Spero. He's going to tell you more about that in a minute. So, let me introduce you to Kelsey. And Kelsey, start off telling us about yourself and your work in general.

Kelsey Hearndon: 1:32
Well, thank you so much for having me. I love you guys and appreciate the work you do. I'm working for the Spero Project, and it is a amazing organization of incredibly diverse people from all over the world that started over 15 years ago here in Oklahoma City. A small grassroots for many years. Then just a couple years ago, just started receiving more grants to step into spaces where they saw a clear need with new neighbors in the Oklahoma City area. Our goal, our purpose at Spero is to help Oklahoma City become a more welcoming space and to assist neighbors to partner, advocate, and work with new neighbors, refugees, from all over the world here in Oklahoma City.

David Lowry: 2:18
A lot of people are probably surprised to learn there's quite a few refugees here in Oklahoma City.

Kelsey Hearndon: 2:23
Yes, thousands.

David Lowry: 2:24
Normally when you think of the refugee situation, people think of the major cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, places like that. But you might be surprised there are a lot of cities in the United States that have refugees.

Kelsey Hearndon: 2:37
Yeah, so here in Oklahoma City honored to have so many new neighbors from all over the world. About three years ago, well over a thousand came in from Afghanistan. Those are the neighbors I primarily work with at the Spero Project.

Don Drew: 2:51
Tell us more about these refugees.

Kelsey Hearndon: 2:54
Most of them were working alongside the U. S. military and CIA and other organizations in Afghanistan. And when the government fell there, the Taliban took over again, they were not safe in their home country. And not because they wanted to flee, they had to flee for their lives and take as many from their families as they could. But many families were separated in that process. And we have the honor and privilege of walking alongside with them through all the difficult challenges they face in the U. S.

Don Drew: 3:30
I captured this definition of a refugee from the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees. And I understand it is still the working definition we use here in the United States. It says a refugee is a person who, owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to, or owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. Does that sound like the refugees you're working with?

Kelsey Hearndon: 4:05

Yes, and no. A lot of the Afghans I work with were in a very unique situation and able to come into the U. S. through a special immigrant visa and then obtain their green cards. It depends on the refugee. They're in a lot of different places in the status of seeking asylum or obtaining documentation, things like that. But the U. S. government did allow through a special Afghan parolee assistance program many new neighbors from Afghanistan.

Don Drew: 4:32
Tell us what a refugee's life is like when they come here to the U. S.

Kelsey Hearndon: 4:36
For our Afghan neighbors here in Oklahoma City, it was a great challenge. There were so many that came in at the same time. They stayed in a hotel for about three or four months before they were able to be placed into apartments. But for most neighbors now, they have 90 days of a resettlement and placement program that allows them extensive services that help them find housing, apartments, assist with many different things. We help them get refugee cash assistance for a while to help pay for rent and other necessary items that doesn't last very long and it's not a lot of money. But it does help them. And then we also assist them in getting a job as soon as possible, help them write a resume. We send that out. We have a large team of people who help them find employment. We have an education team that assists with ELL and English language learning and other resources like that. We have a schools team and a mentoring program for the youth. So, many, many services that we offer. But in those first 90 days, they're really focused with our RNP team. Then they come to my team where we assist them with everything from Medicaid, Sooner Care, food stamps, ongoing medical needs. We offer them services in almost every area of life. But our goal, of course, always is self efficacy, helping them find the resources they need to learn and grow and advocate for themselves as we advocate for them.

Don Drew: 6:05
Can you address any of the stress issues that you see from your experience with your neighbors?

Kelsey Hearndon: 6:11
Yes, there's so many. I think the main stress is those things I just listed. Navigating health insurance, Medicaid. Navigating finding a job. Navigating the medical healthcare system. There are so many things here from car insurance getting a driver's license, all these things that are very complex for anyone, and especially for someone coming from such a different culture and different context. Most of my Afghan neighbors tell me over and over again, life was so simple for us in Afghanistan and here it is so complicated

David Lowry: 6:46
A year ago, I got to spend 90 days in Vienna. It was a wonderful thing for me, but one of the things that struck fear into my heart was within three days of being there, I had to report to a government agency and register that I was living in Vienna, fill out a form written in German, and this form had words I didn't understand and the person speaking to me doesn't say anything in English. I remember spending a good part of the day feeling exhausted from that 15 minute interview. I can only imagine what it must be like to come to America, get a driver's license, buy insurance, sign a lease agreement. All those things.

Kelsey Hearndon: 7:28
Yes, when you really sit down and look at the paperwork or try to navigate the website and work through the systems we have, you're waiting on hold with someone for two or three hours just to fix a little thing in the Medicaid or you're waiting at the DHS office literally for two or three hours to speak to someone to help them navigate how to submit their pay stubs and work through that process. So there is a constant challenge for them. And you layer on top of that, the trauma they have gone through, the challenges they have faced in quickly having to pack up or not being able to pack up anything and jump on the plane and come over or the trauma of war and violence. I have many neighbors who have scars all over their body not to mention the emotional trauma and wounds. So I'm amazed every day. I just came from assisting a neighbor at a clinic and the ways in which they are so thankful, competent and smart, courageous, and resilient. They go on and on and fight for their families for a better life. But it is incredible the trauma they've been through.

Don Drew: 8:34
Would it be fair to say that some of these individuals are professionals in their own right, they were doctors or lawyers or teachers, and they left all their credentialing behind, even if they had a PhD university professor, they would no longer be qualified to teach anything here.

Kelsey Hearndon: 8:50
Yesterday I was helping a neighbor try to get her veterinarian credentials translated and evaluated here. Those processes are long and expensive and sometimes don't work out. They leave behind so much more than we can imagine.

David Lowry: 9:02
America has a great appreciation for its men and women of the armed forces and their service to America, as well we should. But sometimes we forget that many of the

immigrants coming into our nation also helped us. They put their lives on the line and could have been killed at any moment in their home country for assisting or helping in any way.

Don Drew: 9:23
How are the children faring? You mentioned education, helping them get into the schools and so on. What does that process look like in terms of complexity, difficulty, frustration, all that?

Kelsey Hearndon: 9:34
Many of the children are doing really well. Some of the older children, especially teenagers, imagine leaving your home and everything at the age of 12 or 13 or 14 and plopped into a high school where you don't know the language and faced with many challenges. It's a great challenge and the Afghan neighbors I work with here, they do have each other. They have community and they do take care of each other. And then there are also, challenges that come within that community. Different ethnicities within the Afghan nation and all those are difficult to navigate in a new space, not being in your own culture and being able to rely on the history, heritage, the foundations of a culture and how it operates. I just don't think we can hardly begin to comprehend what it means to leave all of that and be in such a different context and culture with new rules, guidelines and systems in place that often are almost designed to keep you down.

Don Drew: 10:28
You mentioned Spero works with other partners. What are these other partners and how did they add to the work that you're doing at Spero?

Kelsey Hearndon: 10:35
Spero works alongside many different organizations from Catholic Charities to other resettlement organizations. Of course, working with all of the social systems in place, working closely with DHS, Sooner Care, and other spaces. Then we have many churches, community organizations, temples, mosques, others that, that partner with us in providing resources or a host family or something like that. Oklahoma City, in many ways, has shown up and in tremendous ways. I really do thank the people of Oklahoma City for what they've done, especially the last three years with the Afghan neighbors but with many others as well and being a welcoming space. Yes, we have a lot to learn. And many ways we need to improve as a city and community. But many people have showed up and made a difference.

Don Drew: 11:25

Is it fair to say there are organizations like yours in many major cities around the U. S.?

Kelsey Hearndon: 11:29
Yes. Yes. You know, Catholic Charities is probably the largest one throughout the country. But Spero Project works underneath World Church Service. I think there are 12 organizations throughout the U. S. that that are licensed to provide refugee services, support services, RSS, it's called.

David Lowry: 11:46
So you have people coming into the country. They don't have language skills. How do you help them build a new way of life where they can have some sustainability of their own.

Kelsey Hearndon: 11:56
You have to really listen to them. This is one of the most beautiful things, I think, about the Spero Project. It models this over and over again, that we are here to listen to what your needs are to what you want. We're not here to make decisions for you, to do all of these things for you. We can provide guidance and support, but we are constantly saying, what do you think? What do you need? That's the foundation we honor and respect. Their humanity and dignity and rights and every way that we can. We don't do things for them, right? We join with them. We advocate for them. We partner with them. But hopefully in all of those processes, we're taking the time to listen and to say, What do you want? What do you need? How can we help you? But it's, you know, we offer the English, English language classes. We offer new culture, welcome classes, orientation classes. So all of that is where it starts. In those first 90 days, they are required to participate in new orientation welcome classes that help them through many of those first steps into the process and understanding what to do next.

David Lowry: 13:02
There's this thing called the ethic of care. And one of the things they stress in the ethic of care is that one should not assume what another person needs in order to be successful. And I heard you very carefully explain we try to listen rather than prescribe. So, you hear somebody and you have to read between the lines sometimes because it's hard for you to understand too I would suspect.

Kelsey Hearndon: 13:26
Absolutely. I think this is the greatest challenge we face day to day. As community navigators, as someone called case managers, case workers, it is taking the time, making the time, because it feels like there's no time, right? It's making the time to say, tell me more. What do you want in this process? How do you want to see this go. And then being

able to say, Well, that's not possible, but let's look at it from this angle. What do you think about these options or whatever the case may be. We have to continuously say, tell me more and really try to lay out the possibilities, the options, the ways in which to navigate these systems. One example I think of is with social security. There are many challenges in that regard. Like I talked about, many of the men I work with have a lot of physical challenges due to the war and the trauma they faced. And so I go to the social security office with them and there's this question of, okay, if you make more than this amount of money, you can't receive this, right? But if you make less, so what do you think is best for you? How do you want to navigate this? And we will partner with you in that process.

Don Drew: 14:38
Kelsey, can you share with us an example of a family that you would describe as having a successful transition, at least at this point?

Kelsey Hearndon: 14:45
There's so many. I think that even those families who have come to us with little to no education, which is quite a lot, the ways in which they help their children get out and learn and grow and go to school. And jump into work situations that are very challenging, and even though they're not using maybe their expertise and experience from the past, but they're saying, I know this is what I have to do today to take care of my family and to provide for them. And while someone looking in from the outside may not see this as great success, it is tremendous success. Just paying their rent and getting a driver's license and taking English classes and learning English. I work with quite a few neighbors that are not literate in their own language, but they have learned quite a bit of English. They're practicing, they're trying, they're giving it their best. They're engaging every day. I would consider that a great success.

Don Drew: 15:37
Have you found the community open to offering job opportunities to them?

Kelsey Hearndon: 15:41
Yes, but it is a constant challenge for our employment team to find enough jobs for everyone that needs one. It is very difficult. So any employers out there,

David Lowry: 15:53
Yes,

Kelsey Hearndon: 15:53
Please let us know.

Don Drew: 15:55
I'm thinking about how difficult it must be for a child to show up at school, and know, no English. And they're supposed to be learning right away. It's not a long term solution.

Kelsey Hearndon: 16:06
Many new neighbors here speak many languages, right? And that's advantageous to them. They come in and are able to learn and use English much quicker than many of us would be able to if we stepped into a different country. But there are great challenge. There are young men here who don't read or write in their own language. They're great challenges that the we at Spero are committed to be with them for many years to come whether or not we have federal funding or not, we are committed to partnering with them and advocating for them and welcoming them continuously in whatever way we can.

David Lowry: 16:39
So, this is a program about peace and building personal peace in our life and sometimes through very trying situations such as being a refugee or being a person who is working with a family with extensive challenges like you do every single day. What have you learned about finding peace in these difficult situations?

Kelsey Hearndon: 17:00
Well, Spero, the word Spero in Latin means hope. We talk continuously about the fact that we must hold on tightly to hope and share that. Not in a unrealistic manipulative way, but in a way that is as honest as possible to say that you are welcome here. And we believe we have hope that we can together, find greater peace, greater stability in our lives. When you walk into the office, you'll see this quote on the wall. I want to read it to you real quick. It's from Joan D. Chidester, and it says, Hospitality means we take people into the space that is our lives, and our minds, and our hearts, and our work, and our efforts. Hospitality is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step towards dismantling the barriers of the world. Beautiful quote from Joan Chittister that I think about every day. Because it's an ongoing challenge to truly welcome, to practice hospitality, the love of, the embrace of stranger, of the other, in a way that we come out of ourselves. I think what that means is, we are able to see more clearly the world around us, the needs around us and not just be focused on ourselves. We do have to take care of ourselves, right? We constantly talk about that at Spero. We talk about how we must take time off. We must take time to rest. We must go to therapy. We must do what we need to do, right? To take care of ourselves in order to help others or assist others. But I think this idea of hospitality coming out of ourselves is very much related to the idea of peace or wholeness. That's not just internal individual, right? It's communal. And true peace is communal. It is connecting with others. It is understanding more clearly the challenges our neighbors face and the

struggles that they are in so that we can truly be compassionate, truly suffer with or walk alongside others.

Don Drew: 19:10
Kelsey, a lot of our national narrative right now is about what immigrants and folks like refugees take from us. What do they give us?

Kelsey Hearndon: 19:20
Yeah that's such a great question. They give us so much and we are not near as good, as strong, as beautiful without them. Right? This country is founded on immigrants. We are all, if we're not Native American, , we are immigrants or slaves. But that diversity of culture, of understanding, of language, all of it, we are not as good we are not as strong without that. And you can look at statistics all day long. For weeks and weeks, you can see the statistics of the number of immigrants that have brought so much to this country and therefore the world, whether it's in science, academics, no matter what it is, you can see over and over and over again, the great value, not just financial success, but success of all sorts that diversity brings us, that immigrants bring us.

David Lowry: 20:20
Do you find our immigrants are facing, racism, or negativity from people, or misunderstandings from people who don't know much about their situation?

Kelsey Hearndon: 20:30
Absolutely. That happens every day. And the resilience of our neighbors through that is really incredible to me. I see some of my coworkers even facing that. It's disheartening. It brings me great, great sadness to see that. Unfortunately, the last 10, 15 years, we've seen an increase in this. But it's always been there, right? And the fear of the other, the stranger, that will always be something all of us have to face. We have to be willing to say, yes, I have some fears or some prejudice here that I need to overcome. Let's all be honest about that in our own lives. And then hopefully through honest, generative conversation we can help each other overcome that. But it's not about being judgmental against this group or that group in regards to they're racist and we're not. No, we all struggle with racism to some degree. And we have to be willing to be honest with ourselves and then with each other through listening and through welcoming. And I think that's the first step for many people is to say, hi, my name is, introduce yourself, get to know someone who's from somewhere else.

Don Drew: 21:38

If we want to find peace, we have to deal with that fear, and the way to deal with that fear is to, frankly, to take action and to reach out.

David Lowry: 21:46
A person told me 40 years ago, and I still remember it. One of the ways that we could begin to work through this process you've talked about, he said, smile. He says, when you smile at somebody you open the door. And I guess if I were to pass along something that would help make the world better, it would be when you meet somebody that looks different from you, begin with a smile. And you said, hello, my name is David or Kelsey or Don. and take a moment to get to know someone. The other thing is, I found when I've had differences with other people the moment I got to know the person, I discovered that all that goes away.

Don Drew: 22:29
It falls away. Yeah, absolutely. But it requires a first step.

David Lowry: 22:32
It requires a first step.

Kelsey Hearndon: 22:33
I will say beyond that, many of us struggle to take the next step or two or three past that. It is hard to get to know your neighbor who is different than you, who doesn't speak your language as well or differently, and you don't understand them. They have a strong accent, whatever it might be. Yes, that's a challenge. But then there are steps beyond that. To seek to understand the policies in place and in this country, that continue to oppress them, that continue to keep them down.

David Lowry: 23:02
It's called systemic violence and systemic violence isn't necessarily intentional. It's just part of the system. And for heaven's sake, I remember when I started with social security. I was on pins and needles for about 60 days just getting my own stuff done and I think I had about five hours of waiting in the local social security office. It's just crazy, even for a person who has a fairly good understanding of what's going on and I can only imagine what it must be like when you have to deal with every single day trying to help someone over a minor form or where is this in the process or have you heard anything or what's needed next and so on.

Kelsey Hearndon: 23:45

Yeah, we need people to get involved, especially in that grassroots connecting with new neighbors and assisting them in whatever way they can. But then take the next step to learn why these systems are in place, why this systemic violence exists or even just to say, maybe not so much, why just, what can we do about it?

David Lowry: 24:03
What can we do about it?

Kelsey Hearndon: 24:04
How can we change these policies and advocate in the public sphere in a way that really brings about change for all of our neighbors, because we are stronger with them and we are weaker without them.

David Lowry: 24:18
The immigrants are not our enemies.

Kelsey Hearndon: 24:19
Correct.

Don Drew: 24:20
Kelsey, thank you very much for the work you're doing. I just think it's such a wonderful thing. And thank you to the Spero Project.

David Lowry: 24:28
Yes, we are so grateful to them.

Don Drew: 24:30
Again, not all of our listeners are from Oklahoma City, but there will be organizations like that. And I think Kelsey said Catholic Charities, which is pretty well known throughout the United States in all the major cities, will have access. If you want to help in some way, you can reach out and volunteer. Thank you very much for being with us today. This has been a great honor having you here with us,

Kelsey Hearndon: 24:52
Thank you for the good work you're doing through this podcast. We appreciate you.