

Local Residents Help Afghani Refugees Resettle

By Sophie Braccini



Bobbie Preston

Photo Sophie Braccini

Sometimes people get passionately involved in a cause by choice, other times it is by chance. For Moraga resident Bobbie Preston, a recently retired radiologist, it was a bit of both.

For the past year and a half, Preston has helped Afghan refugees settle in the East Bay, and now she has connected with the nonprofit No One Left Behind (NOLB) that operates on a national level to support former Afghani translators.

It all started for Preston after viewing a request on the online network NextDoor from Sam Shapiro for furniture for Afghans supported by Jewish Family and Children Services – a nonprofit organization accredited by the U.S. government to provide resettlement services to refugees. Preston started helping, and when Shapiro had to step down, she took charge of collecting items. “The support of Moraga residents through NextDoor has been phenomenal,” says Preston. “Within a year and a half, we’ve been able to help 17 families resettling in Contra Costa or Alameda (counties). About 50 Moragans have helped with donations, but also with services [like] what Lisa Hsiao does: going once a week to tutor wives and kids in English, and driving them when needed.”

Of these families, about eight are supported by Jewish Family and Children Services; the other families have been referred to Preston through word of mouth. “We’ve also been helped by Twins By The Bay and Orinda resident Diana Honig,” adds Preston. “They have given us strollers and cribs.” She says she is in desperate need of three more cribs.

One of Preston’s friends met up with Amy Madsen, the newly recruited volunteer leader of the Bay Area Chapter of No One Left Behind. “That friend told me I had to meet Bobbie,” says Madsen.

Preston decided to work with

tribute to the family's income,” explains Madsen.

The two women have also initiated contact with the local Veterans of Foreign Wars. On the East Coast, where NOLB started, Zeller matches veterans’ families with Afghani families to mentor them for five years as they adapt to a completely different society. “Zeller says that the translators had their backs while they were there, and that now it is our turn to have their backs,” says Madsen. “These people have made a great contribution to the American people at great risk for themselves and their families,” says Preston. “This country made a promise to them to welcome them once their services were not needed anymore. It is important to fulfill that promise.

“These are people that are educated, speak multiple languages and have had a very hard life,” she says. “My friend Pacha works two jobs, and will soon start training to become a pharmacy assistant, as this was his original training in Afghanistan. They love the U.S. and want to be a part of it.”

For more information about NOLB, visit www.nooneleft.org.

Madsen as soon as they met. “No One Left Behind was created by Matt Zeller, a veteran who had served in Afghanistan and whose life was saved by his Afghani translator,” Preston explains. “During an ambush where he was injured, his translator took his rifle and killed the two Taliban who were moving in to kill him. Zeller was aware that it meant a death sentence for the translator, as for all the others who have been helping our troops in Afghanistan or Iraq and are considered traitors by the Taliban.” Once Zeller was back in the U.S. he campaigned to have his translator get a Special Immigrant Visa, something the country has promised to those natives who are helping U.S. troops. The translator got the visa, and the momentum for his support was such that Zeller collected \$30,000 to help him upon arrival. “When the translator arrived, he asked Zeller to use the money to help resettle other translators instead,” says Preston, “and together they started NOLB.”

Madsen used to work for the State Department in the Middle East and upon returning to the Bay Area, she engaged in different activities as she started raising a family. One of them was blogging about interesting nonprofits. “I talked to NOLB and told Matt Zeller that they should expand in the Bay Area,” remembers Madsen. “He asked me if I would spearhead that effort.”

Madsen and Preston will be at the Moraga Pear and Wine Festival on Saturday Sept. 26 to answer questions, disseminate information and recruit new volunteers. They will bring a list of what they need for NOLB families: more volunteers to assist the refugees as they rebuild a life for themselves, but also donations such as pressure cookers, large area rugs or sewing machines. “We would like to start sewing circles for the women as a mental health benefit, or even as a way for them to con-

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