

Mirwais _ Dave, interview at 6...arden (2024-03-08 16_09 GMT-7)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

family, colleagues, brother, told, call, Broomfield, Afghanistan, Medical Doctor, Public Health, Australia, happened, Taliban, law, airport, Heidi Henkel, Resettlement Task Force, Broomfield Community Foundation, City council, wife, years, welcoming, doctor, place, hospital, Governor Polis, forced, work, good, public health, diversity

00:00 David Allison

I only record the voice recording. So it is on Google Meet, but it's only the voice. So I don't use the video portion of Google Meet and then we just have the microphone to record.

00:14 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And who will have access to it later?

00:16 David Allison

So eventually it will be added, we'd like to, at least, given your permission, to add it to our Broomfield History Collections and Archives. So we have online, a number of, you can browse our objects, photographs, archives, and then our archives. We have oral histories that date back many, many years, you know, people that came to this area, you know, in the 1800s, that sort of thing. And so this is an example. I can click on.... here. So oral histories are kind of a way to get a sense for what people in the past. So this, this talks about how this individual, Lois Guyer, came to Broomfield and remembers a blizzard in March of 1955, trapped on a train for two nights; you know, it's just, you learn different things about people through this. And so what we'll do is after we record our interview, we will transcribe it. So we take the audio, and we then create the transcript of it. So a written version.

01:44 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And publish it somewhere?

01:46 David Allison

It will be on that same site that we have.

01:48 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And will I have a chance to look at it before it's published, or..?

01:51 David Allison

I will do it either way, whichever you'd like. I can send it to you. I'll make a note to be sure to send it to you before, if you'd like.

01:58 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah.

01:51 David Allison

Yeah, absolutely.

01:51 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Have a look.

01:51 David Allison

Make sure it looks good. Absolutely, I can do that.

02:13 David Allison

Very good. All right. So we can start and I'd love for you to start just by introducing yourself, just sharing your name and just a little bit more about yourself.

02:27 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. Thanks, David. So my name is Mirwais Baheej and I'm a medical doctor by training. I have done my medical degree, medical school in Afghanistan, and I was graduated in 2006 from there. And then I worked at the Ministry of Public Health as a public health expert. And after five years, I got a scholarship and I went to Australia. They had an Australian (government??) scholarship. So I attended that two years; I did the Master's in governance and public policy, of majoring still in public health. So I have 14 years of background in the field of public health, policy development, and also economic development in the fields of economic development, public policy, and also public health, in the government of Afghanistan.

And since working in the government was my passion, once I came here, I tried to apply for the jobs in the government, because I had experience in that field for over a decade. And then I got a position there. And currently, I'm working, since November 2022, as the Senior Policy Advisor on Long COVID, back in the field of public health, in the Office of Governor, working closely with Regional Governor Diana Primavera.

03:59 David Allison

Oh, very good. Very good.

04:00 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

I have been privileged to work at the Capitol.

04:02

Yeah, yeah. And the Lieutenant Governor is a Broomfield resident too.

04:09 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. Yes, she is.

04:12 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. So I'm from Afghanistan. I didn't say it originally from Afghanistan. I left there. And yeah, I recently came here.

04:23 David Allison

So tell me a little bit more about your family and kind of, yeah, just your maybe family background even, that sort of thing?

04:35 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. So I come from an educated family. My mom was a teacher at the school, elementary school, high school, initially, and then recently, elementary school until she retired a few years back. My Dad was a police officer. He was educated and he did his Bachelor's in Law and then he did a Master's overseas. He worked for almost (30? 40?) years in the police force until he retired at the grade of Lieutenant General. He was working as a high ranking official back in the Afghanistan police force. Yeah and so I have six brothers and a sister. So they are now scattered everywhere in this globe, from Australia to Europe, to here, and two of my brothers are still in Afghanistan.

05:52 David Allison

Are they really?

05:53 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah, and I'm here with my family, my wife and four kids. I have a daughter, she is 12 years old. I have a son, he is 11. And then another one, nine years old, and a little one, a year and a half. And we have lived in Broomfield since December 2021, late December 2021.

06:16 David Allison

Okay.

06:17 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah.

06:17 David Allison

Fantastic. So, just a little bit more. Sounds like working for the government would be in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.

06:28 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. So I was working in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan for my entire career. I started, as I said, in 2007 as a public health practitioner at the Ministry of Public Health in various positions. And then I continued there until I went for my master's degree to Australia. I came back, joined back to the Ministry of Public Health, leading the drug addiction treatment and prevention program, which was a big program, the entire country. So the work that I did there, I was able to get more resources from donors, including the USA ID, and the (ion?) program they have at the US Department of State, the State

Department. So you're able to expand the program and work for the entire, we started from a few provinces, and then expanded it to the entire country and 34 provinces. I worked there and then after that, I went, since I did my master's degree, So I went (rather?), so I did some economic areas, so economic and public policy policies. So then I joined the Ministry of Economy. So I was working there as Director General for planning and (results?) monitoring. We were doing development planning at a central level, and also for the provincial level and monitoring the development activities that finance either to government or to developmental partners, donors, and I was busy with all the development work and economic evaluation of small and bigger development projects.

And prior to coming here, the last two years, I was working as the executive director of the Afghanistan Revenue Department, which is akin to IRS here. So I was working there until August 2021, when there was a change of government. So the Taliban came and the government was overthrown. And we were forced to leave the country because of the situation there, because of the affiliation that I had with Australia, the affiliation that I had with U.S. forces, and with the United States government, because in my last positions, I coordinated with the U.S. Army, particularly doing those tax issues. He has the, for the entire (Eisav?) forces, the international security forces for Afghanistan, and for the regional support who were helping Afghanistan. So the supplies that they had, they should be tax exempt. I assume there was a working group at the higher level. I was partnering with the General from the army of the U.S. So we were working together on that. I was leading it from the Ministry of Finance from the Afghanistan side, and from the U.S. side, there was a General, and we were working on customs, on tax and border issues there, partnering with them.

So after the changes that happened, and I remember that day. It was Sunday morning, that I just got up, got my shower, getting dressed and ready. And I just, you know, received a call from my driver saying that, "I'm ready, you're a little late". And I was about to leave to go to work. It was some 45 minutes, one hour drive every day to work. But I had a driver, we were going. So I saw that I received a call from one of my colleagues that there is an email, you have to respond to it, it was going overseas. So it will be late for them so we'll get it on now. And it was in the morning, around 8am in the morning, and I said, "Oh, yeah, I will." And I started to say, right, I remember it in the kitchen, where we have the dining table. I put my laptop there, I opened it, and I started trying to respond to that email. It took some time, it took almost an hour. And then I saw something urgent, so I started to respond to that one. And by the time I was working here, so it was an hour, an hour and a half. And suddenly, I got a call from my sister, who is in (Australia?). She called me, crying.

11:29 David Allison

Oh no.

11:31 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

"What is up?" I said, "What is up? You tell me." "Are you in office?" I said "No, I'm at home." She said, "Please don't go. Taliban has come." She said, you know, it's big chaos in the city. So I heard the news. I'm watching the news. Where are all the others? I call to (??). (S) He's okay. But other brothers who are there, what is going on? So, "please don't go", she kept crying. I said, "Just don't worry. I'm at home and safe. Nothing is here. I have my personal aide here." I had a bodyguard, I had one because of that position that I was working.

12:05 David Allison

Yes, yes.

12:06 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

So dealing with taxpayers and you know, with bigger things in a situation like Afghanistan, it's not easy. It's a big deal. So I told that I have my people down, they're home. So they are there. And then I asked my driver to come back and he came and says it's different and I'm hearing different news. So we better stay in and don't go. I said no, we're going because colleagues are in the office. They're waiting for us. I had a meeting set, because it was a weekly meeting for the entire team. I have to do normal things. And then my staff came and told me, "You better stay for half an hour and see what's going on, then we'll go home, we'll go to the office." And I said okay. So when I was trying to call, phones were not working because it was all crowded because everyone wanted to contact and it was (a D?). And then what happened, I received a call from one of my colleagues. It got disconnected, and again disconnected, from one of the directors; he was telling me, "Where are you?" I told him, "I'm on my way; I'm coming to you." "Please don't come, we were waiting for you, and now if you allow me, I will tell all the colleagues to go because someone has already left and we are near where there is a big presence."

13:36 David Allison

Yes, yes.

13:37 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

That the Taliban is killing, they have opened the doors, so it's chaos. People are led out. People, those who were coming to work or somewhere, they have just... get back so there is, you know, traffic; you may not be able to come. Is it okay for me to tell colleagues to go for their safety? I said, Yeah, go ahead. And this is the protocol, tell them. And they say that we the directors will wait for you until you come. And then when I got down I see it was different. And my colleague, my driver told me, please go upstairs, change your suit. Wear some local clothes as normal ordinary people would have, because you were suited. We didn't people to know. Yeah, so there will be a problem then. And then I came back to change clothes. By the time I was coming back, my driver and my staff felt that I'm insisting to go to the office. They just got a car and then they just left, for my safety.

14:46 David Allison

Wow

14:47 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yes, he called me and told me that, "Hey, I just am going to the Ministry in order to put this car in a safe place because it is an armored heavy car. So I don't want to give responsibility for this, neither do you want that. So I want to just take it to the Ministry where it's a safe place so that you know, it is there. And I knew that you were insisting to go. So I had no chance, I had no other thing, I just left. So I urge you to stay at home. Don't open the door to anyone." And that was my safety. What happened to this country? And it was overnight. Yeah, suddenly a collapse overnight that you cannot imagine. You cannot feel it unless you're in that situation, you know.

15:43 David Allison

Everything changed

15:44 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Last day of it, I worked until 10 pm in the office. I sent something to the Ministry, and sent something to the presidential palace. I had a meeting later today at the palace. What happened? Suddenly, it's a collapse of government. Yes, my brother in law, who was a medical doctor, a pulmonologist working for the tuberculosis program, he was near us. He called me saying that I was in my work, and I'm back to home; stay where you are. Or leave your home, come to my home, because someone may know that you're here, your place, and then leave your house with your kids, just come to our house. And I did that; I went to their house. And so you didn't know, the phones were not working. The only thing we did by any means, to just make sure for the family members that we are safe, we are somewhere. And then I started to receive messages from our international partners, colleagues, including colleagues from the U.S. who are partners saying we heard this, this is really, try to be safe. Leave your house, be somewhere, we are trying to take you out, if you want.

17:07 David Allison

Yes.

17:08 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And then I received the same from Australia that I received from U.S. colleagues. And then I started to say, Yeah, this is not a place, this is really dangerous. So I left the house from that moment. I didn't go, I just sent my wife with my brother in law to go and pick up some stuff for me, so that I'm safe. And I stayed one night there. And then I even changed there. I went far away, miles, at one of my aunt's house. I stayed a few days there. I even did not use my phone because it will be tracked.

17:41 David Allison

Oh yes.

17:42 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

I used one of their phones, talking to my wife and my family saying that I'm safe, I'm here, but I don't want to come. After a few days, I just, you know, came and saw them. And then my brother in law told me that we better go, because we have received messages and emails from our U.S. allies to just leave the country and come to the airport. We'll take you.

So what we did was, it was morning of 26th of August, where I was attending a funeral of one of my colleagues who were murdered by Taliban, a colleague from the Ministry of Economy, he went to their village and they thought that he was a big government guy, but why, he was not; he was just a development worker. He was an engineer. So anyways, he was murdered, and I was attending his funeral back in Kabul, when my brother in law called me and said, "Where are you? I'm coming from office to my home. You also come there, we have to discuss something very important." I said, Okay. By the time I was coming, it took me an hour and he was calling me twice. "Where are you? Come quickly." So I came. And when I got to the house, he asked his wife to be there. His mother, which is my mother in law, and told them that within one hour, you guys need to get ready, get one backpack each of you, we're just leaving. We're just leaving.

19:22 David Allison

Wow.

19:23 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And his wife, I remember, was crying. "What can I do in one hour? I have to leave the house that I've built for years and years. And how can I get only one backpack?" He said, "if you want to be alive, this is the only option you have." And within an hour we were to be ready.

19:45 David Allison

Wow.

19:46 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

So we took our staff (?) in three cars. One of my colleagues, two of my cousin's, we went in three cars, we rushed to the airport because he said that it's the 26th and the last day will be 27th, because for the next three days, because the U.S allies and international security forces were there until 31st of August, that's the final day. So they needed three, four days for themselves to evacuate. So tomorrow, which is 27th of August, this will be the last day of evacuating civilians. So we need to go. We rushed in; we went to that crowd. And when I saw there were 1000s of people, and we with kids, I had my three kids, a seven year old, a nine year old and a 10 year old.

20:37 David Allison

Wow, wow.

20:38 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

He had six of his kids. So his youngest was three, four years old, with my mother in law, who is really sick. And we got a wheelchair to help her, so when bystanders see the wheelchair, they would help her. So we went there and there is no, the doors are closed, there is a (sea gate?) that you have to pass the (CH?), it's this much, two feet on the water. But it is some, some six feet high, you have to go inside, and then go to that side, which is, which are the international security forces, then you can enter through that (sewage?). This was the option that we had. And by the time, my brother in law went because he received messages that you guys need to come to the airport. And he just went and showed that document that we are here, they just told us to come. Because they saw a valid document with our names and everything and they asked us to come.

So we started to go there and pass the sewage, so people helped us with my mother in law, to take her with her wheelchair, took her to that side. So as if you were here, there was the (CH?); enter, and then it's maybe around 12, 15 foot wet.

22:08 David Allison

Okay, yes.

22:09 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And then you go to the other side as if like here, you see, you go the other side, this is the U.S. and the international forces, you enter the airport, then you go. So by the time we took all the kids, everyone was there, we were taking now the backpacks to that side, helped by the people

22:34 David Allison

Yes.

22:35 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And going through I entered the (CBH?); my wife was at the time in that (CVH?) and the kids were to the side of the Americans, including my brother in law, two cousins. So they were up there, asking to get the help with backpacks, helping getting kids and also getting these. And when I entered the (CH?) I had my backpack and another backpack on my hand. So when I was going, that suddenly, I heard something bad. And that was the moment that this blast happened. A suicide bomber. It was some 10 foot far from us, 10,12 foot, not much in this crowd of people. And this was the moment that I, that I went like this, I thought I died. But then I told myself, there was the wall of the sewage. I got there, those who just, you know, fell to the ground. So other people, they just died, nothing. So and after a moment, I saw my sister in law, asking me, come up, Doctor, Doctor is severely injured. So I tried to get up out of the sewage, I tried, first my muscles didn't work in the situation. A cousin of mine was there. He got up, he was younger than me. He got up, he took my hand, I got up there. And then the first thing I thought at that moment, given that big blast, I was not thinking that any of the family members will be alive.

24:18 David Allison

Right. Right.

24:19 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And when I get up, I saw that, oh, they were alive, all alive here. But I saw my brother in law, just in that side, you know, like he was, you know, felled. And there was a shot here in his head. And I saw that. So I'm a doctor, I know. He was nearly expired, gone. And his wife was crying, telling me to do something to help him, to save him. I felt that we lost him. And then my cousin shouted at me, saying to look at these two, I saw two of my cousins, they were right away, they all died. They weren't in that, in that (sewage?). They were there. And I was surrounded by all those U.S. brave soldiers, who 13 of them were, you know, killed in that area. So they made that wall (of meat?), including my two cousins, my brother in law, and the soldiers, and my family were in the back of them. So they got all the shrapnel, everything, which saved the other members of family to be still alive.

25:36 David Allison

Still here. Yeah.

25:38 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. So I saw them, it was a moment that unless you were there, you cannot.....

25:49 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Sorry.... It's really difficult to lose a member of your family, three members, in front of their kids and the other kids who are injured. SAnd to whoever I was talking to, they were saying that I'm injured and you're good, son. You're good. You're good in order to get them, get more out. So I heard from one of the army guys saying "Do you want to help these kids?" I say, yeah. And he said, help me. So he got

something open, that sort of door (with the pins?). And then he said, help me. So we took the kids one after another and took them inside and the ambulances came and took them.

So I see one of my nieces, she was eight, nine years old. The soldier told me and that her bag, so all that and things, "Is there anyone to go with her?" And I said, Yeah, was another niece older, so I got her to go with her. And I saw her hand was like this, she had, you know, her hand injured and a lot of things. So what we did, we tried to take everybody in. And then I asked the soldiers to take my brother-in-law inside, and then they said that, he's out if he's alive, we should take him; otherwise, you don't have the choice to go, they'll shoot you. By the time they were telling me, so at that time, you don't know what to do. They were telling me to go inside. And when there was a time they said, Yeah, go. And instead of going much inside the airport, I was going out to help bring my brother in law back. And I heard just hit in the head shot, there was a shot near my head. And God saved me.

27:56 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

So because I didn't know on that situation. I was trying to help and I didn't know that they are ordering me to go to this side, why I'm going the opposite, moving this way. So I tried, but they told me that there are UK soldiers as well outside, so if he's alive, they will take him. But I told him that they do not have doctors, they may not have the hospital, they may. "Just don't worry about them, worry about yourself, just stay here, don't do anything." And they told me to be like this, my hands clear, everything, because they were thinking that there will be another, more of these, and there was some shooting because they were shooting in order to be saved themselves. Because at that stage, you have this local clothes and you have things and no one knows who or what you have. You're not different than someone who does this because it's all (??) everywhere.

You know, it's a cloudy situation, you never know. But thanks God, we are safe. So I was inside; my wife went with one of her nieces and nephew. They didn't come inside. They tried to help his brother, my brother in law, because he was breathing still...

29:15 David Allison

Yeah.

29:16 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

..and they were trying to take him to a hospital inside the city and after a few minutes, I receive a call from my wife telling me that, "we are taking him to the emergency hospital." And few of his friends were surgeons there and "call them and tell them that we are bringing him to help greatly so that he is alive." I said how I was seeing he was nearly dead. How is he breathing? But anyways, I stayed there. And then they took him and by the time it was a little settled. I told the forces that I'm going out. They say that people try to come in, your family members are all in, how you want to go out. I just lost two of my cousins. I lost my other cousin, who is my brother-in-law; he is severely injured. So I just want to go to the hospital to help him. That is it. And I went and by the time I was... so there was no transportation, nothing. I went and I was walking and I receive a call from a friend of him, saying that he's dead. He's dead. So we lost two, and this was the third, with six of his kids with me, going for a better life, fleeing death, going for a better life, but they lost their father. Their very father. (They are very member?) of the family.

So yeah, my wife told me, called me, that she had some shrapnel here, but since they will all have casualties, they are not taking her inside. They put some beds outside the hospital, in the yard of the

hospital. So she says, "I need, give me a serum?, in order to be near to my brother." Why she doesn't know that he's no longer alive. She just told me that." I just told them to be near him in the hospital otherwise they're taking me out." They just saw these places, the dressing and things. So not that severe; I don't need operation. So they're putting me, triaging somewhere else. I just got a serum IV to be near. And I said, Yeah, that is good. But I knew what was going on and you poor girl her done, Robert, your brother was happening. So that was the tragedy that happened.

And we got separated from the family, like from my nine year old, 10 year old daughter, nine year old daughter, from my two boys, but we came and after a few hours, I had a call. My son, he knew my number, he called me from the police, that they were there. So only my two sons out of this 14 members of the family, they were not injured. They were taken to the UNICEF, children's place inside the airport. And then they called and they said, "Are you his father?" I said yeah. And then they told me that we told them that, "we know your father, he's a doctor, we are also doctors," in order for them to have a peace of mind. They are with us. They are inside the airport, they are in a safe place. They are not injured. They are separate from the other members of the family. So I thought that adults should be in hospital, military hospital inside the airport. And then they say that once situations are good, maybe it will take two, three days. They will stay with us. There are people who are under 18. They will be here, we have a staff, we have woman, we have colleagues take care of them. You just don't worry. So they will be here and then. Yeah, so that was that, was the story that happened, a tragic story.

But the moment I saw that, I convinced myself that you are the man now, you need to be strong for this for the big family.

33:33 David Allison

Yes.

33:34 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And then after that. So we were there. They were here and they were airlifted to Qatar and then to the United States. My daughter, my nine year old daughter, woke up from coma after two weeks.

33:50 David Allison

Wow.

33:51 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Having five major surgeries in Qatar, in Germany, and the Walter Reed Medical Center. Same did to my niece. She had a colostomy for over a year and a half, last year. She got rid of that. So they're good. Thanks God. They are good. Now they are alive now. Everything is good. They received the right medical care and attention and everything. Thanks for the U.S. Army military and hospitals and health care setting that really helped them. They were for three and half months in Walter Reed Medical Center. And then after two months, we got back from Kabul to Qatar. We stayed a month in Qatar and then we came and we were two weeks in New Jersey, in U.S. army camp and then we joined here, we joined them after four months. I didn't see my little kid for four months. The one that was injured in parts. But, thanks God, that she is good. Other family members aren't good. They're still alive. Although they still need some, some care, continuation of care, and this was the journey that we came here, and we started a life. So once we were here, we thought that, hey, this is the life. And we were forced to

leave our country, the place that we were born, the place that we, we grow up, grew up, the place that we left, family, friends, surroundings, everything, were there.

35:32 David Allison

People you love, places you love

35:35 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

People you love, places you love, friends, family, surroundings, everything familiar to you, but we were forced; you were forced to leave in order to be alive. And what happened in the middle of that? We came here. But once we are here, we said, hey, we need to live our life. This is what happened. This is our past. But we need to live and we need to be strong. So I was telling my nieces, nephews, my kids, let's be strong. We are here, we have to start a new life. Life is, you cannot stop life, you have to **go to the stream?** So let's mainstream, let's be in this life. And we started that. And the reason why we chose Broomfield, why we chose Colorado, to come here. My sister in law lives here, lives here for 20 years.

36:30 David Allison

Really? Okay.

35:32 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. She lives here for 20 years. She married someone here. They came to Colorado and they are living, her husband is living for 30 years now. And she is living since 2011. The irony is that she came on 9/11. The very day she arrived in New York airport from Afghanistan on the day of 9/11.

36:59 David Allison

Oh my goodness

37:00 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And since then, she's living in Broomfield. So I had few official visits to the United States to New York, U.N. Headquarters. Anytime I was coming, I was coming here to visit family members and I've been here before, coming to live here four times before; since 2014, I have come here. I love this place. It is just like country, surroundings, the nature...

37:31 David Allison

The climate

37:32 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

The climate, the landscape. It is just the mountains, we have the same, you have the same snow, we have the same dry weather and elevation. We are a little bit higher than here, in Kabul, where we lived. But it's quite familiar to the place and the good is that there are a few families. So there are families of my brother-in-law, my sister in law's husband, so he has his brother, his sister and their families. So we have a family now here, living together, friends and the other Afghan families that are there.

38:13 David Allison

Yeah. Wonderful. Wonderful. Firstly, thank you for sharing that story. It's, it's hard to imagine how difficult that must be.

38:21 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

It is, really. Because the thing is that even, unless you were in that position, you cannot feel it, even you cannot imagine, what was the moment what we have been through the family, from elder to the youngest; what they have been through, what they've seen, and it doesn't go till the end of your life. It is in the back of your mind. Because it is not the way that as if you go from here to Florida, you traveled 1000s of miles, or someone is going from Europe to the United States, from the United States to Australia, somewhere else. It is not about traveling 10s of 1000s of miles. It is about differences, cultural differences and all. And apart from that, it is not that you are going yourself; you are being forced to leave, this is not your choice. It is not your choice. You have to leave your country, you have to leave your friends, family. Like I had to leave my mom, my dad, my brothers, my whole extended family because family is different than you know. Our settings, history and culture, it is not only your wife and kids. It's your mom, your dad, your aunt, your uncle, your brothers, your sisters. We depend on you and you depend on them. It's your family to friends interconnections.

39:51 David Allison

Yes.

39:52 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

If you live somewhere for 40 years, and then you're leaving it, and then by force. It's not your choice. And on the top of it, what makes it worse, that in this journey, you're coming and seeing a scene that is not describable, you cannot explain it, you cannot describe it. And what losses that you have, you've lost three members of the family, right in front of you, who were seeking, you know, to be alive. They left there in order to be safe, for a better life for their children, in order for the children to be safe. You know?

40:31 David Allison

Yeah.

40:32 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And then what happens? So this makes it really, really different than other, you know, instances and examples. And it's really, you cannot feel it. You cannot imagine even, you cannot imagine if you're not on that position. But the good is that once you're here, the first day that I came here, so we were faced with a welcoming community. This is the good part that I love. My sister-in-law, all her friends, my brother-in-law, his friends, all knew about what happened to their family. So for the last four months, they knew. So by the time we came here, they were all ready. We faced a bunch of welcoming people coming with flowers, coming and meeting us, visiting us. Like I remember, it was the second day that we arrived here and I was in my mother in law's house that they gave to her and my late brother-in-law's children, so I was with them. I stayed there for almost four months until I got the apartment with the help of City Council and colleagues, in this Academy Place Apartments here. So

when we came here, friends and families came to the airport, they welcomed us, we came home, and tomorrow? after that, I remember that Heidi Henkel...

41:59 David Allison

Yes

42:00 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

She is on the City Council and she founded that Broomfield Resettlement Task Force, because of a colleague of her husband, so she knew. And she was a friend of my sister in law. So she came, she knew about her sister that is coming here. So she came, she talked with me and discussed. And she was, she told me, you know, she embarrassed me and said that you will now be safe. Don't worry, everything will be good. And when we discussed and she knew that my wife was six, seven months pregnant at that time and she didn't seek care. She was not able to see a doctor for the entire period because of what happened, because we were almost two months on the way and two months back in Afghanistan, we were hiding here and there, we could not go anywhere until we just got a call that, "Tomorrow is your flight and just you go this place and people will take you. Tell nobody." I even did not tell members of my family that I'm leaving, which is so sad.

43:09 David Allison

How do you say that to somebody?

43:11 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

I was not able to say goodbye to them because of security, because I didn't want them to know that I'm leaving. It's not easy. Anyways, so I will not forget it till the end of my life, that once she knew, she said, Yeah, I will try, because we were to apply for our benefits, to get Medicaid first, to be seen by a doctor. But she said that, we'll help you to get this straight so that your wife needs to be seen by a doctor earlier. She's seven months pregnant and we don't know what happened to her, and what happened to the baby and there is no ultrasound, nothing, she's not been seen by a doctor in the last four or five months. And so she went and it was around 9, 9:30 In the evening that she did send me a message telling me, "Hey, Dr. Baheej, I put antenatal vitamins for your wife". I went outside the door and I saw that antenatal vitamins for my wife, to get one every day. I have kept that bottle up until now.

44:28 David Allison

You have it still?

44:29 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah, yeah, because this is the moment that I won't forget. It's how welcoming friends are here. By the time she knew that my wife is pregnant, she's gone to Walgreens and brings this medicine to her. "Until you're seen by a doctor, start this, take plenty of water." Another friend who was, you know, helping my child, my daughter, took her to the Girl Scouts, her mother was a midwife. She brought her mother to our house to talk to my wife. Women have had these for years. "And there have been women that haven't seen a doctor for the entire pregnancy, you will be good. Don't worry about it. So just take plenty of water, that is it."

So from the church, to the mosque, to the resettlement agency, to the Broomfield Community Foundation, to City Council, particularly Heidi, so she coordinated and helped so that people were there. Because on the first days, there were more than 10 appointments each week.

45:46 David Allison

Wow, just to make sure....

45:47 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Each member of the family, and there was a big family; five in my family, and there was nine members of my brother-in-law's family. So at least, I said, more than 10 appointments every week. And there were the colleagues and groups that were standing, you know, waiting for us. The one was taking my kids to school, and were taking them to the, to the appointments until we got settled, until we did everything. So we were very lucky to have a very welcoming environment, welcoming people. They helped us a lot. They were with us. They not only supported us on those very initial days, financially, but but mostly their mental support.

46:38 David Allison

Yes.

46:39 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

The support that they gave us, they stood beside us, they helped us. And what happened was that we were so much enabled, and got morale and help by our community, by friends, that I discussed now, that in three months' time, I was able to sit with Governor Polis and do an interview with him for a position that required him to do the interview.

47:11 David Allison

Wow.

47:12 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

So I applied for a position. I had four rounds of interviews. And the last round was with the Governor and his team and his cabinet, two of his cabinet members, and one of the cabinet, director of government agency. I said there were three people who were, you know, shortlisted for the last interview, and I was one of them. I had the privilege to sit with Governor Polis and interviewed with him. And he had questions and, you know, discussed with him. And then he told me that, "I enjoyed the interview with you. And even if you didn't get this position, we will try to have you here because the courage that you have, because of what you have from education to work background and everything." And this was why I kept applying for positions and state agencies in different county level, state level. And finally, I got selected to one of the positions and I started work at the office of Gov. And this talks to our resiliency as well...

48:33 David Allison

Absolutely

48:34 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

... as I see how resilient you are. And my kids and my brother-in-law's kids, my nieces and nephews, they're really doing great. There's having good grades at school. They're doing really great. So I see how resilient they are. They're doing great. They're attending school, my daughter, now she's a seventh grader, 12 years old, with my niece. She's great, they are all, it's the third year of them attending the Girl Scouts; they have, oh yes the cookies was last week. So and my daughter was the first year my daughter was able to... they had a ceremony of recognizing 10 women from Colorado, the leaders, and she was able to be the master of ceremony. She was talking with all those women who are the leaders, asking them about their **mantra?**, asking about what do they think of their 10 years old self? Yes, she was 10 years old that and she was talking in front of a crowd of 1000 people in Denver. So this is how kids catch up.

49:55 David Allison

Yes.

49:56 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And now when she talks, you don't you don't feel that she's not native, because I have this. You know, but for her, and for my kids, they're just talking as if they're native and when someone asks her and when people were asking her like last year and the year before, her name is **shut off.? Charlotte**, where did you learn English? she said, "In the hospital. I was three months in the hospital. I learned it from nurses, nurses and the care team. She keeps talking to her nurse and caregiver at Walter Reed, sometimes she calls her and she...

50:32 David Allison

Oh really, wow

50:33 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

... she's built that connection with the nurse that helped her because she's stayed for almost three months.

50:40 David Allison

A long time. Yeah.

50:42 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

She has five major surgeries. A part of her liver was taken out.

50:51 David Allison

Wow. Wow.

50:52 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah.

50:53 David Allison

You said shrapnel.

50:55 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah, it's here, and the last shrapnel that we took from her was last August. She had four in her back, who were near the spine and thank God, they were superficial and we took them out. She's good now. Other members of family are good now. And yeah, so this welcoming environment, welcoming people in this neighborhood, they really helped us a lot to integrate. And I feel so integrated now that I am, you know, I'm starting to add value to the community. And this is what you would, I would, call it meaningful integration. By the time that you start, you integrate, by the time you start to give back what you have, and do something for the community, this is what the real meaning of a....

52:04 David Allison

...you're a part of the community

52:06 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yes, a part of a community. And I had the privilege to welcome a friend of mine who was a deputy minister back home and he was coming to the United States. When he was in Qatar here the SIV?. He told me, "I'm coming here, should I come?" I told him if you want Colorado and here in Denver, I can help you. And I co-sponsored him.

52:24 David Allison

Oh, fantastic. That's wonderful.

52:26 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah, he came here and he lived and now he is, you know, sort of integrated. He lives in Broomfield, wonderful colleagues and Heidi and colleagues there are hands, supporting him. His kids are going to school, his wife just started as assistant teacher and he is searching for jobs. And the moment that I went to the airport to bring this family and the help that I could, you know, gave him to the extent whatever I had, you know, that was giving me an internal satisfaction that I have been through a lot. And I learned the things I learned in two years from applying for benefits and getting this, what is here in Broomfield and Denver. I could transfer that to him within a month.

53:25 David Allison

Yes.

53:26 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And this was what I could do to him and I was really, you know, happy, pleased that I can do this. And this is the beauty of this. And then I feel strong now. And the moment, that was a moment of transformation, with the thing that happened to us. I said that you are the guy now. You have to stand for your family and for your brother-in-law's family. You have to, because you are the, you know, the eldest now. You have to work with them, show the way to the kids; they have come here and it has cost them. It has costed their family, it has costed their country and it has costed their father.

54:13 David Allison

Yes

54:14 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

And they need to know this. And they need to try their best to make a good life for themselves and for their family, for their mother, for their grandmother, for all the members of the family and to honor that and to be productive and helpful members of the community, Broomfield community, Denver community and to the entire United States, because we have been grateful to what this country did to us generally.

54:50 David Allison

Wonderful. Thank you so much. I want to make sure, is there anything that we either didn't talk about, or any, maybe, hopes for the future that you have, that you want to share before we finish?

55:06 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Ah, sorry I got emotional. I don't know how much I was able to cover with my broken English.

55:15 David Allison

No, I appreciate it. It was, your story is beautiful, touching and difficult, painful.

55:22 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah, yes, yes. And this was why I told you that my wife wouldn't be able to...

55:29 David Allison

Yes

55:30 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

...to hear it back. Yes. What happened to her is really...

55:32 David Allison

Oh, yes, her brother.

55:34 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Yeah. Anyways. I believe in diversity. **And I love that?** I believe in diversity, I believe in collaboration, adding value to where you live, because you get a lot. And as I said, the moment you start to give back, this is the real, the real aim of life.

55:59 David Allison

Absolutely.

56:00 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

So for Broomfield, what I'm seeing here is that we need to work on that side. So in order to encourage more diversity here, as you see, for example, in Boulder, and Denver Metro area, although we are part of the metro area. But if you take a specific case itself, for example, Boulder, the case itself, for example, Denver City, so if we can work on infrastructure and make it, you know, conducive for other cultures, other **leaves?** Like if you see in Thornton, there are a lot of Muslim community, there's a mosque I'm going today, was the Friday I went there, there's one up in Boulder. There's a mosque there to worship and **certainties?** So having such places here and you know, having the infrastructure, like

the other cities, that is welcoming, diversity is welcoming other people from the other parts of the world from different backgrounds, different nationalities, cultures, that would make it beautiful. And in the United States, beauty is about its diversity. I've been to other places like Australia, I've been to Europe, a lot of time I've lived in Australia, two times. So somewhere, you don't see the diversity. And you know, diversity is good...

57:41 David Allison

There's strength there

56:00 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

.. there is **industry?**, and people are bringing their values, they're bringing, you know, good inputs, they're bringing knowledge they're bringing...

57:51 David Allison

Expertise. I'm think about all the things that you've done in your career

57:55 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

....skills and a lot of things and if you take it this way, that's really helping communities. And this is something that I'm, you know, trying to work with, with the City and County of Broomfield, to see what we can do on our end, from a refugee and immigrant perspective; because we will link to the communities that are there, and what we can do to make this environment conducive for other people to be here, so that we use their expertise here and have the beauty of this diversity here. So this is what I'm usually thinking, you know, visioning for the future.

58:50 David Allison

Yes, absolutely.

58:53 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Other than that, it's a nice city, nice place; like other places, they are so crowded, because it's good that Broomfield has some open space. This is what I really love. And yeah, the weather, everything. The mountains ,just go half an hour, you are to the mountains, while people have to drive hours and hours. to see the nature. So we just drive for half an hour, you're in very nature.

59:19 David Allison

Absolutely, right there.

59:22 David Allison

Well, thank you so much, Dr. Mirwais Baheej. I really appreciate your time today. And thank you so much. Yeah.

59:30 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Thank you. Thanks for your time. And yeah, hearing all this.

59:35 David Allison

I really appreciate it and your point about building diversity and the strength that comes from that is just so well taken. And you're right, it is a beautiful thing when we can cultivate that in the community. Thank you.

59:48 Dr. Mirwais Baheej

Thank you.