(00:00) **Hana Widerman:** This is Hana Widerman interviewing Safeena Niazi on July 2, 2020. This interview is taking place via Zoom. Hana Widerman is in Homewood, Illinois, and Safeena Niazi is in Lowell, Massachusetts. Can you tell me about where you're from?

(00:17) **Safeena Niazi:** I'm from Afghanistan.

(00:23) **Hana Widerman:** Can you talk a little bit about your family and any early childhood memories that have stayed with you?

(00:36) **Safeena Niazi:** Can you repeat like what kind of...?

(00:38) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah, I guess could you tell me a bit about your family and how you grew up?

(00:47) **Safeena Niazi:** We are seven sister and one brother.

(00:49) **Hana Widerman:** Oh wow.

(00:50) **Safeena Niazi:** And I... yeah we are a big family. I'm the first child of my parents, and I live in Afghanistan. I grew up in Helman province is Lashkargah city, and I had a very good memory from my life like my childhood. My parents are very nice. They are always supporting education, especially my father. My father is an engineer. Although my mother is not educated, but she always supported education. One of the thing which I can tell you, in Afghanistan it is little bit harder to, especially in 2004, to send your children to work, but my mother was the one who was telling my father, if you meet someone in your office, you can take your daughters to the office. So that's when I started my work in 2004 with my father, that was my mother's choice. So we are... I mean that's always remind me. Whenever I talk, I think about my profession. This thought is just coming into my mind.

(01:59) **Hana Widerman:** I think that's really amazing. So she really supported you.

(02:04) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, she always supported...my parents actually, always supported education. And also if needed, they support the work.

(02:17) **Hana Widerman:** So you started working in 2004. Was that when you finished your education or?

(02:22) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, actually that time I was in school. I didn't finish. In 2004, my father needed some admin assistant in their work. And they were supporting to be having female because that was almost, like in 2003 that was the end of Taliban regime or beginning of new
regime. So they were preferring to have some female to work in the office, and it was very hard to find someone to work there. And everyone was looking very bad to send their daughters to the work because 10 or 12 or 15 years of the war, and now sending their daughter is very hard. So my father needed someone like they needed in the office... they had several projects, so they need to have someone in that to work as an admin assistant. They needed two people, so my mother was... one day he came. We had dinner or lunch. I don't remember. He was talking about that, like you need someone in the office to work as an admin assistant, and they will be working like filing, time sheet, these kind of things, doing copies. So my mother said your daughter can do that. You can introduce them to her, and he was like okay, I will talk to the office. And then I had pre-interview in my home. When my father talked to his supervisor, his supervisor came to our house, talking to me and my sister. Because my sister was lower than 18. She was 16 or 15, something like that. That's why she was not selected. I was over 18 or 18, so that's why they selected me. And then the third interview take place in the office. I still I remember they said okay the 15th of December you will be starting work with us, and then now few days, you have free chance, so can enjoy, and after that you will start work with you

(04:18) **Hana Widerman:** Wow. So you started there in 2004 as an admin assistant, and can you tell me how kind of your work progressed throughout your time?

(04:28) **Safeena Niazi:** It was amazing. And always I had one idea in my mind. Females cannot work in the higher positions. One of my supervisor, he came in 2005, and he was always telling me no, the females can do any work you want. And I was not accepting. It was not coming in my mind. Because of the culture or because the environment I don't know. But it was not coming in my mind. And then in 2007 I think, it just came in my mind no, females can do anything. And that was the time when I had the opportunity. They had one position called office manager, and then that time, they asked me Safeena can you do this work? I was a quiet person. I was not talking to anyone, and then I say yeah I can do that. When I came to that position, I was in [INDECIPHERABLE] and probationary period. And I was quiet. I was not talking to anyone, so everyone was just like it's a big position, I don't know like over 200 people in that department. Office manager was kind of HR person, so everyone was very thinking can I do this job. Even I was thinking, can I do this job? And I remember one day we had a staff meeting, and in the office, their team had some question for the chief of our team, and I responded as an HR person, as an HR responsible, and from that day I feel I can do that job. They had some hard question asking, and I responded to that question. And from that time, the chief of our team, the director of operations, she was my supervisor, she was say nom she can do it. She's quiet, but she knows where to response and where to be quiet. So from that time, and then I moved to Kabul from 2008 I worked there as a retail office manager. And from there, my career started as a supervision position until I was coming to the United States in 2017 with different structure. Like my last job I was not supervising anyone directly, but I was working to home office, our salaries, and our reporting everyone was from here, from Washington DC. But the projects I was responsible for, all the projects, HR departments, I was reviewing the policies, I was making the policies. If there was some cases like structure in human resources, I was doing that, creating the HR human resources system for Afghanistan and the [INDECIPHERABLE]. So that was, each day it was improving, and I was working on different... the only thing is like it came to my mind I can do it. Before I was thinking I cannot do it, and I was just doing my work. But after that,
when it came to my mind no, female can do this work, and I started, and then each day, there was new challenge. Each day there was new progress, and I was feeling happy until like in 2014, if you ask me for personal life, I didn't have anything. And then in 2014 when I got engaged, and after that I got engaged, and in few months I got married, and then in few months I had my child. So it was a kind of like... then I started having a personal life as well. So that's one of the thing like when you go to one side, then you enjoy one side, and then you move to another side. So I can say Chemonics is my first family. I grow up there. I got engaged. I got married. I had two children there, so it's kind of like... life is...

(08:21) **Hana Widerman:** Can you tell me more about how that was like for you? Like getting married, and you were having that different life before, and did you keep working after you got married or?

(08:32) **Safeena Niazi:** I was working actually. My in-laws, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law and my sister-in-laws like close families, they knew that I'm working. But other side, they didn't know. They were kind of like... during that time I was doing my Bachelor. I started my Bachelor in 2013, and then I finished it in 2016, so I was kind of... in the morning around five, I was going to university. From university I was going to work, and from work when I was coming back. So that was one of the thing when someone like family member, relatives were coming to our home to my in-laws home. They were asking ok where is Safeena? They were saying Safeena is in the university because they didn't know. And even if I'm at home and someone is like what's coming. Then I was taking my unwell leave, I was telling them like I cannot come to office today cuz taking like a day or two, I was taking off. They were trying to not tell anyone I'm working. My parents they are supporting that. If anyone asks them, they say Safeena is working. But my in-law's family, it was hard for them to explain that. I'm the only daughter-in-law who is educated. My husband has a master degree in business, and I have I'm working, and I have my bachelor. But other sister-in-law, they doesn't have the education. And my brother-in-laws also, the three brother-in-laws, they are educated just high school, and the last one, the younger one, he's now doing his bachelor in business administration so kind of like that. But the daughter's side, they are all educated. Like my two sister-in-laws, my husband's brother, my husband's sisters, two are educated, and they are teachers.

(10:36) **Hana Widerman:** I see.

(10:37) **Safeena Niazi:** And their children are also doing their bachelor. They are continue their educations. Like two of my husband's daughter's two niece, they are doing their doctor degree taking. This is last year, so kind of they have a different structure, some educated, some non-educated, kind of like that. So it's amazing like we spend... even when I was coming to the United State, everyone was thinking like what's going on when they knew that we are leaving after two days or three days. We went to the ticket to bring the tickets, and then my husband's uncle and aunt came from the village, and they were kind of surprised. Everyone was asking me you know Safeena who is taking you from... you are taking my nephew from Afghanistan or my nephew is taking you from here. I say I am a female, how is this possible that I can take him from here [laughs]. Then because they are not educated so they were saying oh my god, it's fine. So that's the kind of structure you don't know because the people who are not educated,
especially they are very old age, it's little bit hard for them to accept outside because they don't know what's the outside world. They knows like female should work only as a teacher or a doctor. They shouldn't be working as other jobs. So for reaching is teacher and reaching as a doctor, you are having a lot of... you are causing a lot of steps, but they don't know those steps, how hard you are... you having pressure, hard you are doing to reach to those levels. Everything is very important, so that was kind of like...

(12:35) **Hana Widerman:** I see. Can you tell me more about your decision to come to the US and kind of things that were involved or any complications?

(12:47) **Safeena Niazi:** We didn't have any complications. When I was working, I was in [INDECIPHERABLE] programs that I was planning to come here, and there was some leadership programs that was part of that. If we kind of working through different ways, so I could come here and see our Washington DC office in Chemonics Washington DC. That was one of my dream to go there. They were always saying you can see the White House from the building of the Chemonics office. So I would say oh my God I want to go there.

(13:22) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(13:23) **Safeena Niazi:** And then this opportunity, the SIV opportunity, we had it from 2008 or something like that. From that because I was working in HR, so people was asking to give them their HR employment certification letter. So from 2008, I think I knew about that, but I didn't have that... I don't know how I can say... I didn't have that... not encouragement, but that to take this decision that should I apply for program or not. Until in 2005 when my son born, then my husband asked me do you know about this program. I say yeah I know about this program for long time. Then he said, do you want to apply for that program? I said yeah we need... do you know what documents need for that, and I say yeah I know this, information needed for... And he says what do you want, do you want to apply for this program? Do you want to if we accept, approve everything, to go over there? I say yeah we can think about that. We can prepare the documents, and if it's accepted, it's a good thing, not only for us. It's also good for our children also. That time I had one son. And then we made kind of like sit together, we made the documents, we combine everything, we try talk with one of my supervisors. She provided me the recommendation letter. We collected the documents, and then I don't remember it was September or October 2015, I applied for this program. Actually there was thing, I didn't tell anyone that I applied for this program. My father was the first one to apply for this program. I was the second one who applied for this program, and my brother-in-law was third one who applied for this program. My father was telling, my brother-in-law was also telling. I was not telling because I didn't know like it will happen or not because his family was not more than like okay, we'll be allowed to go. So and when my parents knew when they had... when my parents was coming here, they were preparing, they got their visa in 2017, June or July. I think it was June. And then we had our interview. Then I was telling my father, actually he told my father like this is the situation. We applied, and we reached to interview section, and this is our plan, and my father was very happy, and he was always telling me, my father was always telling me, Safeena apply for this program, so I say okay I will talk to him. But I couldn't say like okay if I say that I applied, and we don't go then it will be kind of... it will be not good. So my father when they are
coming here, and he will be happy, and then we don't go, so it will be a hard thing for my parents and everyone. And then the good thing is they came in December... they came in August 2017. We came in December 2017.

(16:31) **Hana Widerman:** Oh! So very close.

(16:34) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, very close. So it was good. It was like even my parents was telling me, the hardest things they spend it because they didn't know many people here, and when we came here, they had a car. My brother had a job, so they knew the area. They were familiar with the things. They were familiar with the shopping malls. They were familiar with the park, market basket with a Walmart, with everything they knew. So they said like where I was saying, I need this thing, they say okay, I will bring it to you. Even like I was coming from... when we were coming from Afghanistan, I was telling I have many things like I cannot bring a lot of diapers with myself, so can you make some kind of like to keep in the house when I come, maybe I will bring little bit or also like a formula for my kid. And they give us like okay, I will search for that. When I came, they had diapers and formulas for my kids, so it was amazing. They knew most of almost everything, and when they came here, it was harder for them. They say okay, we need... in our country we have bread in the morning, in the afternoon. In lunch and dinner, we have a specific bread. For few days they didn't have this bread because they didn't know what to do and how to cook, but when I came, they already told me, you know what Safeena, you do that. You can do like that. Even my mother she's making yogurt from milk at home.

(18:12) **Hana Widerman:** Oh wow.

(18:13) **Safeena Niazi:** And I learned from them, I learned from them, and I can make it here. So it was... when I was a child I was hearing from people, if you go to United States, you will miss your food from there. But when I came here, I don't feel that.

(18:27) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(18:28) **Safeena Niazi:** Like everything is... you can find everything here.

(18:31) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah

(18:32) **Safeena Niazi:** The only thing is you need to be little bit familiar, and someone should tell you. Then you will have everything here.

(18:39) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah, you need to be a bit crafty like my mom is from Japan, and she came here, and she also learns how to make certain things from Japan by looking around at different supermarkets or being kind of clever with it so... so when you came here, they'd already been here for about half a year, was that very helpful for you like you said, and do you live near each other or?

(19:09) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, we are... first when I came, I stay with my parents for a few months. I was pregnant, I don't remember seven months or eight months, something like that.
Hana Widerman: Oh wow.

Safeena Niazi: Yeah, so that's why I couldn't go... I couldn't select other states. I selected this one, and when my father was also say, if you come to Massachusetts, it's known as an education state.

Hana Widerman: Yeah.

Safeena Niazi: Yeah. They have very good universities, and you can study. You can complete your master here as well, and so it's very good. He like this state very much. And then when I came here, I stayed with my parents for few months until actually International Institute found us a house. We were coming through IOM, and then they introduce us to International Institute of New England, and we were coming to them. They selected a house for us. That time my brother didn't have a house, so he said like it's hard for us because my sister is pregnant, something happened. We don't know, we are new here, so it's hard for us. And they said we will find something, some house close to our house, and then they didn't accept that house. So when we came, we stayed with my parents until we found another house. It's close, like a five minute by walking.

Hana Widerman: Oh, okay.

Safeena Niazi: Like you can see, you can see me with my kid. Every time and every morning or every evening, I'm just going by walking with my children to my parent's home, staying there for an hour or two, and then we are going back to home. So it's very easy, it's for the last two years, we are staying in this house. It's five minutes away from my parent's home.

Hana Widerman: That's very nice. From what you've told me it seems like... can you tell me about your relationship with your husband and your family? It seems pretty equal.

Safeena Niazi: It's very... one of the example I can tell you like my husband, he does the laundry. It's amazing for me.

Hana Widerman: Yeah.

Safeena Niazi: He's taking care of the kids every... almost like every evening, he's taking the children in the car and going outside. So this is very helpful for me.

Hana Widerman: Yeah.

Safeena Niazi: It's like... I just separate the clothes for laundry. I separate them, and then in the morning when I wake up, he's already taken them out. He does the laundry and come back. And my parents are very actually supporting. I'm working part time from December... from January 2018, and that's all because of my parents. They are supporting me. Whenever I have my job just for one or two or maybe more hours, I'm taking all kids to my parent's home, and they
are taking care of them, and then I finish my work, and I come back. So it's very helpful. They are very supportive. My sisters, my brother, my parents, everyone are very kind. Right now my children are taking nap, but my sister is with them. She took them to get them nap. I'm in my parent's home now because if I'm there, I cannot respond to any of the question, they are running and talking.

(22:24) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah. What has it been like during the period of corona, and how has that affected your life?

(22:31) **Safeena Niazi:** To be honest at the beginning it was very hard, especially with the kids. My two children are going to the Head Start, and my son who is going to the Head Start, so he has eyes issue, so he's going to the public school as well. So suddenly someone is telling them okay you cannot go to the school, so it was very hard. Like you cannot tell them what's going on. Especially like the beginning few days, I couldn't take them to my parent's home. I didn't want to take any risks because you don't know about what's going on.

(23:03) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(23:04) **Safeena Niazi:** So it was around a month or 15 days we couldn't take them. Sometimes it was like my husband was taking them, putting them in the car and walk to the street, and kind of like that, and bringing home oh I want to go out from there. And there is one program, it's called Parent Positive Solution Training. It's for the parents with the kids. I already this training once, and then my supervisor was conducting that training again, and I was thinking like okay she's moving to another work, so I was thinking okay she's leaving so let's take this training again as a refresher. And I don't know next time who will be conducting this training. She's expert on this training, and she has experience for all kind of like, she's parent of like step... no she's taking the children, staying with them, she's taking care of them, then if someone find, then they are going away. I don't know, I don't remember exactly, it's not coming in my mind right now, what type of parent is that. But she has her children, she has adopted children, so she has experience with different kind of thing. She's working with public school, she's a social worker, so I took this training again. So in the first training, it was through Zoom. In the first training, I was feeling like okay I'm not the only one, and it gave me the information like everyone was complaining. You know this happening, this happening. And it gave me the information like okay you are not the only one who is in this current situation. And also gave me the ideas like how you can behave with your kids. I cannot take a nap with my kids in the afternoon because if they are not sleeping, they are not let me to sleep. But during that training, one day my son came in, he asked me mama do you want to sleep? I say okay I'm not sleeping, I just put my head on the pillow because I knew that he will not leave me to sleep. Okay you sleep, he was telling me okay you sleep, I will go to another room, I will watch my TV, and then when you wake up I will, then I will ask for you to give me something to sleep. I say do you want to eat now? He say no, I'm okay now. And he went, and he was watching the TV, and I said okay surprise, it's something from this training that I was getting, and I was practicing with my kids, kind of like that. And nowadays we are practicing writing 1, 2, 3. My sons can write till like 3, and my daughter she's practicing A, B, C writing. So we have different activities for them kind of also we got one back from their school like the Head Start, and we are making... we made Mother's Day card, Father's
Day card. Our two sisters graduated this year from high school, so we prepared graduation card for them. And they are busy with different things, so now sometimes we get like oh what's going on, but we are [INDECIPHERABLE]. Even my son is telling me mommy, are you upset? It's okay, take a long breathe. And also we are taking the play groups through Zoom. They are enjoying that very much. So with different activities, we have time to involve each other. So now they understand as well okay, it's a sickness, it's a virus, someone will be getting sick so it's good we don't go... even if they are coming to my parent's home, and my two years daughter she's touching the wall or something, then the other children say oh don't touch, don't touch! Germs will come to your hands! Don't touch! And then they take her hand and then walk through. The beginning it was harder, but now everything you see it's moving on a regular. Now it's fine everything.

(27:24) **Hana Widerman:** That's good. I was wondering if growing up your family was religious at all or during your resettlement in the US if that changed if you were or? Kind of your opinions on religion and faith.

(27:42) **Safeena Niazi:** Through my husband's families, they are kind of focusing on those things very much. Still I have like you can see, I wear long things because I don't want to give any pressure to my husband and his family. My sisters they only wear scarf. They wear [INDECIPHERABLE]. They wear kind of like short jackets, and they don't wear long things. They only wear scarf, and my father told them, it's up to you. Whatever you want I will not tell them like you do this, you do that. You know what is good for you, and what is bad for you. So that's my sister's choice to wearing the scarf and wearing what they wear. That's their choice. So but I will wear long thing, and I wear scarf because I don't want to giving him any... of course if I'm at home with my husband and my children, I don't wear the scarf. And even when we are talking in the home in Afghanistan with my in-laws, and they have their [INDECIPHERABLE] talking to the kids, and my husband, as they bring to me, I have a scarf somewhere, I just wear it. It's respect. It's respect for the mother-in-law and father-in-law, and everyone even like if in Afghanistan, you wear them. But even if I don't wear this one scarf and my father come to my home, I don't wear it. So it's kind of like that. In one side it's little bit and another side they don't care.

(29:18) **Hana Widerman:** I see. So then with kind of your children, are you more free with the way you talk about tradition?

(29:27) **Safeena Niazi:** [INDECIPHERABLE] we didn't talk a lot about tradition. My husband talk little bit about that. For example, one of the thing was, we have two Eids. My husband usually go in Eids to his parents in Afghanistan, I stayed here. Since I came here, I didn't go back. So my mother was saying like knowing traditional for the kids, it's good. So what's are doing, we're doing the Eid. That's explaining somehow during Eid, we wear clothes that's are related to our culture. We teach them like okay, that's our culture. We have Eid, so we will be wearing that. Okay, you ask for... kids usually in Afghanistan ask for money during Eid, when they have Eid. So they say okay, give me some money for Eid. So that's kind of like we practice to them. But we didn't practice the other things right now with them. Like even I was telling them, this afternoon I was talking to my sister. My three years old daughter, she will be four in
October. She was telling me she wants a birthday cake with 4 colors like red, blue, pink, and... I don't remember the 4th one... the pink! And that should be with the floaties, which you put in the water, and you go with. That should be with the floaties. And I don't know, you should find it, I'm just telling you in October, I want this cake. And then she was telling me what she wants as a gift. She wants a helmet. She wants to put it there something like don't touch her, and there is something like to go... to move with the... put your...

(31:24) **Hana Widerman:** Skateboard or?

(31:25) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, yeah. You put your foot down and then you move like walk on that one. She knows the name. She's always telling me the name, I completely forget. So she's like right now, she's telling me what she wants in her own words. It's amazing thing for me like she's expressing her feelings. She's telling me what she wants. My son, she's little bit shy. She doesn't know what she wants. She's not telling me anything, but I'm kind of like practicing with him. Okay, what do you want for your birthday? Your birthday's coming in August, do you want something? And my daughter's the first time, she is telling me what she wants in October. And then she says I'm thinking. I say okay think, and then let me know. So those are the things we are practicing. Last night my daughter was talking to someone just taking the phone, oh party! You're not coming, it's not good! Why not? Because you know what, I made a special cake for you, and you are not coming. So I was thinking I wanted to record her, but my other daughter take the phone, like she say no I want the phone, so I could not record her. But she was talking like... in English she was talking!

(32:30) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(32:31) **Safeena Niazi:** That was amazing for me. I was feeling very proud like see that's our... since we came here, our children are learning. In Afghanistan, we were paying money to learn English. Here, they are learning by themself.

(32:48) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(32:49) **Safeena Niazi:** They are learning their vocabularies more [INDECIPHERABLE]. They have very good vocabulary learning skills. Even they are saying some things to me, and I don't know. I need to look for that like what is definition, and that's I can learn.

(33:04) **Hana Widerman:** Both learn at the same time.

(33:06) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, and another good thing is regarding the feelings. I never had understanding the feelings in Afghanistan, but I learn it here. We are talking about feelings a lot.

(33:16) **Hana Widerman:** Can you tell me more about the process of learning how to express feelings?

(33:20) **Safeena Niazi:** That was happening... actually I think October or November last year, when I got the Parent Positive Solution training first time. I learned there. They say okay, we
need from the parents to teach their children to talk about their feelings because when they go to the schools, then that's one of the thing they are talking about. Okay, you have a [INDECIPHERABLE]. You go there, and you are not happy, you go there, keep yourself for a few minute quiet, and after that, when you feel okay, then you come to talk to everyone. Even I was... when I was getting angry on something, then my children oh mommy, you are angry! Ok, go behind the couch and sit there for a few minutes, and take a long breathe, and you will be okay. So that was the thing, we have a conversation. Even right now they are doing the same thing. Each day we are... nowadays we are doing one thing, okay we have a calendar. If you are angry, then you have like [blows]... so I use my finger whenever they are angry. Okay, you are angry, it's ok. Just blow the candle, so I don't want to... okay, it's your happy birthday, blow the candle. And they are crying, and it's kind of, they blow the candle, and then I hide little bit my finger. And one side, I say oh it's not blowed yet, and then they do it again, and I kind of do it like that. And say okay, do it three or four time, then it will be okay. So kind of like that we are practicing on daily basis. And if they are angry or if they want something, and they say okay, you didn't get it, it's okay. Even my little one, my son was crying. The two years old one, she was saying you know mommy, brother is angry. He's crying, he's angry. I say what should he do? He should go and sit under... kind of like going to sit behind the couch. I say okay. She was my... daughter was angry, and she was sitting. She was crying, and I say okay, you are angry. She say no. Well this happened? Everything she goes no, and then she went under the dining table. She sat there for a few minutes, and she came back, I'm okay. So kind of like that we are practicing different ways. So she knows if she gets angry what she should do. She should go under the table or going under... behind the couch to keep herself calm. So kind of like that we are practicing.

(35:54) **Hana Widerman:** I see. Can you tell me about what it's like working at the Institute of New England, and how you got involved with that work?

(36:03) **Safeena Niazi:** In December when I came. In January they offered me the interpreter job. It's part time, and when I came here, I was thinking I cannot get the job in any way because I was pregnant, seven of six month pregnant. And I knew that I will be having a C section because with my other two children I had the C section as well, so I was thinking I cannot get any job. And then when I get the offer from my case manager. She said that they would like to talk to you, we have a interpreter job part time if you would like to do that. I was like in that day, I was very happy. Day by day, before that, day by day, I was feeling stressed. I don't know I will... because I was working for 14 or 15 years. And then I leave the job, I came here. So it was... actually I was feeling very bad. Okay, I don't have a job. I will not have an income, although I have an income from my husband. But it will be not be like that. You cannot spend it on what you want.

(37:13) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(37:14) **Safeena Niazi:** So I was feeling like day by day I was going to the stress. And I was feeling that, and then when I heard that, I was very happy. I went there, and they talked to me, and they say they have an interpreter job for me, and I accepted. I was very happy. And then I talked to them about my pregnancy. They said that's fine. And always the schedule was according my availability. During that period, my mother got the eye surgery. My mother get
knee surgery. I kind of like... for everything that was according. Even they were very flexible. If I'm not able to go there, they were calling me, I was doing the interpretation over the phone. So they are very supporting, and I didn't feel that it's a work. Always I feel like it's my home. With the case manager, with other colleagues, everyone is like... because first I came as a client. I knew them as a client like everyone. That's education manager, that's recruitment manager, that's case manager, that's director of that program. So everyone had a different kind of structure, and then changing it to worker, it's like feel like whenever I have any issues, whenever I have any personal thing, I can tell them easy. Even I cannot, even in one minute, it's not coming in my mind, okay if I tell them, so what. And also they are very friendly, and they listen. Even one of our... he was office manager, and one day I told him, you are so supportive. Whenever I need anything, you provide from different way. If it's not your responsibility, you provide it. And always it's remind me my previous work. Like in Afghanistan we had colleagues saying if you need something and you are not responsible for that, they will helping you. And then when you finished the work, sometimes they were saying okay that's this person's responsibility, but I did it it's okay. Sometimes they even they will not telling you that it's not their responsibility, that's other person. They were doing, and they were putting on your [INDECIPHERABLE], or telling you, giving you the information, and that's it. So I told them they are very friendly, and they have whatever you need, whatever you do, they always help you. Yeah, it's give me a lot of... I learn many things from them. Also I work as interpreter, then I move to community liaison. And also during that period, first I was doing interpretation for cultural orientation trainings. Now I'm conducting that training. Each day is giving me refresher. Each day I learn many things. So it's helped me a lot. If I say this job made my life in the US, it would not be hard to say that. It's amazing. Yeah, they are very supportive, and they are helping on different base. That's one of the things, through that program, through International Institute of New England, I was introduced to CTI to enter my children to early intervention program, to enter my children to the early intervention program. Early intervention program, I was introduced to CTI, so now my two children are in head start, and I'm planning to enter my third one. In September, she will be two year and nine months, so she can go there as well. So through that program, I was able to go to the play groups. I was able to go to and to involve my kids with a different like to go to the library. Now my children and I have library cards. So anytime we can go there and grab the books. I took them several times to the library to for the story time, for the playtime, for the song time. So I learn all those things from a different ways from them. Also in December, I start work with public school. I work with them as a part time home visitor, and though that... that was... through them I was kind of went to the play groups and different kind of activities I was involved. So my supervisor was responsible for the play groups and also early education with the kids. She knew me, she sent me the e-mail, and I accepted the offer. And during this period, it's part time or you can still work from home, I work for the public school. I did the home visits through Zoom or through Facebook messenger, and it gave me... it didn't stop my income. I made some of... you can go to the Lowell Public School's website. In the Youtube you can see some of the read-a-louds I did for Pashto language. They did in the English language, and then I did some of the books in our language. And we have families in Pashto, so we upload in the website, and then send the links to them to read them. Through this period, I was involved, not only I was with my kids, I was also involved with home visits as well, calling them twice a week, making videos, staff meetings kind of like that I was involved as well like from a some different one, so I had income. So day before yesterday on 13th of June, everything was ended until
September. So in September hopefully we will have again, it will start. So I actually work part time with different organization, International Institute, Lowell Public School, Early Intervention.

(43:29) **Hana Widerman:** Wow.

(43:29) **Safeena Niazi:** So yeah. With the Early Intervention and International Institute, whenever they need me for interpretation, I see my schedule, I tell them. And public school was regular, 10 hours, 12 hours per week, so kind of like that.

(43:49) **Hana Widerman:** I see. Can you tell me how you felt when you received... I think it was called Community... oh Change in the Community Award?

(44:00) **Safeena Niazi:** It was amazing. To be honest I couldn't believe first when I received the letter. I was thinking someone is making joke. And then when I see... because it was just a year when I came to the United State, so that's why I couldn't believe on myself. First I was really annoyed someone is making joke, and then when I saw the [INDECIPHERABLE] signature, say no it's right. First I showed that to my father. I called my father, and I showed that to him. And then I take the picture, I send it to my supervisor who is working in Washington DC with Chemonics International. I send it to him, and then I send it to IINE and say thank you so much, I know this all is because of you. And she was reply. She said it's because you are doing very very kind of hard job, and she was writing very good things. So that was... and then I feel completely differently, and that was in my life in the United State, that was my first thing I feel proud of. The big thing.

(45:11) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(45:11) **Safeena Niazi:** And I say to be honest that time, during that period, I was not feeling good. I was little bit having stress, and kind of like they said don't pay attention on anything, just keep what you want. And when I was coming here actually, one of our supervisor who came here from Iraq on SIV program who was telling me Safeena, when you to United State, the only thing is keep your plan. What you want to do. Then everything will be okay. But if you don't keep your plan, and don't follow it, then you will get stressed, and there will be a lot of issues and everything. So I say okay. So that's remind me another thing like okay pay attention on what you want, don't pay attention on other things. And slowly, slowly, slowly, slowly I just keep back on track. I get my driving license. I've never drive in my country before. Almost after one year and practicing and practicing with my father, I started driving practice with my husband because he didn't have a one year license, so he couldn't take me to the road. So I started with one of volunteer working with IINE, and she was coming to my mother because I have two disable sister, so my mother couldn't go to English classes outside, so she was coming once a week to our home. She was teaching my mother, so through her I was one hour, two hour, I was driving with her. And then my father, whenever he was going to take my sisters or come back, bring them back from office or work something like that, so I would drive with different people, with different speed and different style. And then I took some classes. I don't remember like 15 or 16 hour classes with professional driving teachers, and then I had my driving test. So now I
have my driving license. That was another achievement in my life. So each day, I get new things. I have a to-do list for my kids, and also I have a to-do list for myself, what I do. My next plan is start my master degree. I'm working for that, start my master degree from like since I'm here. But I'm looking at different ways, kind of to see how I can start. So I have a to-do list, what need to be done here with my kids and myself, so hopefully I will complete this, then I will have new accomplishment, less to be... to make it. So, it's very nice, having all the things. Sometimes, mind is going this way and that way, but you focus on what you want to do.

(48:11) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah, I think that's really important.

(48:13) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah.

(48:14) **Hana Widerman:** You mentioned Washington a few times. I guess since you came in 2017 and now 2020 is coming with another election, how have you felt about the political climate, and also being in Massachusetts is... how do you feel about everything going on?

(48:36) **Safeena Niazi:** The only thing is like, that's one of the thing. The only thing is I don't know what will happen like who will win. Last time, everyone was thinking something different will happen, but it didn't happen. So this time, we... I mean right now I cannot say what will happen. It will go to the current one or the previous one. The only thing is whenever it's coming in my mind, I say okay right now, the only thing is just keep in mind, whatever will happen, it will happen. But when I get my... when I get the citizenship and am able to vote, that time I will be thinking okay, to whom you want to vote. Right now, it's a little bit harder to think what will be happening because during this last four year, we were thinking a lot of things will be happen. Fortunately or unfortunately, didn't happen, those things which were supposed to be happening. So hopefully the next... I have a hope that the next I mean selection or election, or the person who is coming or will come, may have a good things to continue for the next four years. So, and that's the only hope I have, so I don't know. What will be going on, what will happen. The good thing happen or the bad thing will happen. But I have a hope, whatever happen, it will be good.

(50:05) **Hana Widerman:** Do you have other kind of events or topics that you wanted to cover? I just wanted to make sure.

(50:13) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, it's not coming in my mind right now.

(50:18) **Hana Widerman:** Let me see. I guess what does home and community mean to you? And has that changed since you've come here?

(50:32) **Safeena Niazi:** I mean it's... right now it's amazing what you feel about home and community. It's help you a lot. For example, I didn't know about the parent child class program, the program which work with the public school. When my supervisor send me the e-mail, she said we have a program that twice a week you will be going to someone's house. You will be reading or taking a toy that will be free. You will take a new toy or new book and treat or play with the kids, and then you will be leaving to them. And I didn't know about that program before. And that was make me very happy. I say okay, it will be a great if I will have one family from Afghan community to included. I was sure that if someone knows about this program, the other
people, the other children will also, from the community will enter here as well. So that was one of the thing I feel when they told me about this program. Just in my mind, our community was came. My two children, they are in Head Start. They help me a lot with a different thing, and I know that if your kids are learning, it's not only for them... it's not only for them right now, but it will be good for them for the future as well. One of our family friend was telling me if your children's vocabularies better, they will be successful in their future. So try to have how much vocabulary they knows. In my language and also in English. If you have a dual language, that will... their mind will be brighter. Their mind will be sharp. So that's kind of thinking on different way. So that was one of the thing which came in my mind. We have some programs in Lowell, it's like community program, but Afghan community is not in that part. I talked to my husband last time when we had that program, so I say like-- he was head of our community-- so I said okay, we have these kind of program. So at least try. If you know these things, bring one of them, talk to them to make one shop, sell food or kind of show our clothes or kind of like... so we will have to involve them in this area. In Lowell, we have 15 or 16 families, but they are not that much involved. So that was one of the thing. How much they are involved, not only they will increase their knowledge, they will increase their children knowledge. They will learn, their children will learn. I know some family from our community. They completed their 5 years, but they don't know how to apply for the citizenship because their English is not that much good. So if they are involved with different activities to learn with their children, to practice them. So they will have... in five years, they can learn a lot of things. Right now, my parents are completing three years in August, and my mother she knows little bit English, so we are trying... she's not educated, so that's why she's little bit harder to learn things. And also her age is old, 50 or something like that. So but we are trying with her, to involve her with different learning things. She's talking with my kids to learn thing. So those are the things, how much you involve with community and also in home or kind of like that. With different ways, you will learn, you will improve. Maybe you don't pay attention to something and then you notice it, and you improve it. So the good thing is we have three families from our community this year, and I'm hoping we will have some more in the future. So now they even during this period that we stayed at home, they got some books, new books, and also they got some toys. So the children can play with that. So that was also kind of giving the support to them. So I'm trying as a community member and as a person from Afghanistan, trying to have contact them with different ways. If I cannot contact them directly, I am telling the person who I know okay, can you tell them... if you go somewhere in our community, can you tell them these, these, these things. We are trying out the different ways to involve them with the community. Females have a different idea, male have a different idea. So kind of like that sometime. You get a good response, sometimes you get a bad response. But we are positive, and I hope if we cannot involve all together today, but hopefully we can do it in the future, maybe a year or maybe a next year. I hope for that.

(56:06) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah. That's really amazing work you're doing.

(56:09) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah, actually from International Institute we got one grant for the English language. First we had, I don't remember how many, three or four. And then we increased. One or two left because they moved back to Afghanistan for education for two or three months. And then they came back, our grant ended, so they couldn't join. More people were interested to join. So that was one of the good thing, I was feeling good. We didn't get the
grant, but the people, the female were very interested to get that... to learn the English language. Also they were getting support for the childcare. So we had two hours training once a week, and they were very supported. They bring their children here in that class. And one hour was with kids and their mothers, but people were... we had a group who was taking care of the kids. And then another hour, early intervention was coming in, taking some kids who are feeling comfortable to go there, kind of like play with them. So that was very nice training. We had a very good support on that. And then, some of the groups member... when we didn't get the grant, some of the group members were trying to make possible at least we end that program in this year, to continue it for more months. And then this COVID -19 situation happen, and we couldn't go, and everything stopped.

(57:57) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah, that's difficult. I think those are most of my questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to add or anything you'd wish you'd known when you had come to the US or? Just anything you wanted to add.

(58:24) **Safeena Niazi:** The thing which I want to add is here people are very supportive. You just need to ask.

(58:31) **Hana Widerman:** Difficult sometimes.

(58:33) **Safeena Niazi:** Yeah. For example, understanding the culture. We have one family friend who was introduced through International Institute. My mother's instructor, she was helping us. I remember whenever I was telling them okay Martha, can you have a lunch with us? She was laughing, and she was saying you know what Safeena, I will have a lunch with you when I don't have this job. So, and she was very professional, and then there was a day when we were not client, when our time period was ended, and my mother couldn't... they couldn't teach the class and all those things. So she was the one that helped almost with everything. She was helping me with Thanksgiving day. She show us the culture, and she invited us there. And she had... she asked my father where I can find Halal turkey. My father helped to her, and then she cook it there, and she show us everything. Like stuffing, I learned from there. And then, New Year, Halloween, and still I receive a costume for my children from her. She bring a bag.

(1:00:02) **Hana Widerman:** Yeah.

(1:00:02) **Safeena Niazi:** And telling me okay select for your children. I select the costume for my children. They like it, I keep them. And the rest of the bag, she takes it back. So with my driving class, she is helping a lot on everything, even like... again I forget it, the eggs they have events

(1:00:28) **Hana Widerman:** Oh, Easter?

(1:00:29) **Safeena Niazi:** Easter!

(1:00:30) **Hana Widerman:** Egg hunting.
Safeena Niazi: Yeah, that was amazing. She invited my children, and my sister's children. We had like...we went to her house. It's around 45 minutes from here, from Lowell. We went there, and then we spent a time, and they collect the eggs. My children and my sister's children enjoy the time very much. So that's was like each understanding of the culture, she helped with us. Even like she show us the food, how you can process, how you can cook. She taught me salmon fish, how you can cook it in the oven. Her son-in-law cook it for us, when one time we went to their home. And then I ask like how you can cook it, and then she show us how we can cook it. And then she went with me to the market basket to buy that salmon, and then we cook together. And she was telling me like... she's amazing. So that's why I will say, if you know anything... if you don't know anything, ask for that. And if you ask, there are everyone ready for help. She's not the only one. She's like... now she's a family member to us. And whenever I had any question, I ask anyone. They are ready to help. And it's very amazing to be here and learn things to achieve your goals. When I was in Afghanistan, whenever I was going anywhere, someone was with me. It's not because... it's a culture, and also I was not that much okay to go alone somewhere. But now, I can drive anywhere, I can walk anywhere. From International Institute to my home, I walk alone. I drive everywhere. So that's very relaxing. It's not the only one thing that you can explain about. Everything. With your food, your culture food, you can find it here. No one is telling you why you are wearing scarf, why you wearing a long things, why you are not wearing...whatever you feel comfortable, that's good. And when I was in Afghanistan, one of my supervisor was telling me, you know Safeena, good thing about the United State, it's not telling you like you are from this country, you are from that country. And there are some people who are from other country, they came to our country. We are saying that's my Indian brother or that's my... from this brother. To having that citizenship, and you are from that country. At that time, I didn't feel it. It was a story. I learned it, I hear it. But when I came here, it's true. So you have... you may find one or two people who are little bit harder, maybe they have a bad day or they may have a kind of something issue with themself or with other things. You may get something. I had one experience myself when I came here. But maybe that person was having a bad day. But the good thing is you can see many people already, almost everyone is ready for you to help, if you ask them if you need a help. So that's amazing, and also if someone knows you need help, they always ready to help you. Like the other day in the CTI, in the home learning program, my two year old daughter is in home learning program. So she said their manager of that program posted with a picture and a parent of the week with my picture and my children picture, like she's achieving all those things, she's usually making these goals for her, she's trying to learn things, she's trying to complete her goals. So that's also... she appreciated that, and she wrote that it's internally feel good, and I try to complete the things more, like okay I should achieve those, those, those things. They appreciate things, what you do. It's not related to them, it's related to you, but they appreciate it. So those are the things, like I'm very happy to be here, and I'm trying, and I will try my best to make things less as I doing for my kids and myself, and hopefully we will achieve many of them. And I know that it's the education, from education, and other side, it's good for my kids. And it's good for myself as well. My English is improved, I'm trying to learn things, and I'm trying to complete my master and hopefully maybe in the next ten years, fifteen years, I will get my PhD.

Hana Widerman: Wow.
Safeena Niazi: So those are my plan, yeah. Right now, my plan is to get my Master, so in the future, we will see. Hopefully I will get my PhD. Then, I don't know what to say. Maybe I will have new goals.

Hana Widerman: By then.

Safeena Niazi: Yeah. So if someone have any question, try to ask. Here, people are to help. And if you don't know, you getting stressed, turn the ways like what's going on, what is the thing that hurts you. So if you know that, then you try to solve that, everything is kind of be relaxing, and then you can move forward. And if you are moving as a turtle, they are saying if you are moving, and it's a turtle, it's a good thing that stop in one place. So.

Hana Widerman: You mentioned being able to do things alone in the US. Could you just tell me a bit more about your independence, and how that has evolved and helped you achieve your goals maybe?

Safeena Niazi: The first thing is my driving lesson. My driving lessons... before whenever I wanted to go any shopping or things, I was asking someone to bring me this or I want to go to that market to bring things. So they were telling me... I was telling them okay, bring me that. But now, if I want something, I take my children in the car, and then I go the market, and then I buy things. Not in this period because

Hana Widerman: Yeah.

Safeena Niazi: This time I don't feel comfortable to take my children to the market. It's hard for me, although my husband still bring them. I know when he comes like oh you took it again, you took them again! So but he's feeling comfortable. It's his opinion, I don't want to say anything about that. But now, if I want something, I take my children in the car, and then I go the market, and then I buy things. Not in this period because

Hana Widerman: That's a lot of seats.

Safeena Niazi: Yeah, so whatever fit in my car, we are going. Even if there is any need to go outside, kind of like someone was asking me Safeena, did you drive in the highway? I say yeah, I drive several time in the highway. It's amazing to drive 80, 85, kind of like that. And my husband, at the beginning he was telling me Safeena is not moving from five! And he was like give a gas, give a gas! I say it's a small thing in a park, how I can give us a gas? And he says no, you should give a gas. So those are the things. Whatever you want, you can drive. When I send my driving license information to my supervisor at my previous job, and he was telling me you know what Safeena, now you are an American woman, and you should feel proud that to having the license, and you can drive now. And whatever you want, you can do it. So it's amazing thing.
(1:09:07) **Safeena Niazi**: To drive by yourself and whenever you need anything, if you know... if you are working, you can do by yourself. Before I was asking my father to drop me to work or if my father was not there, I was taking Lyft or Uber. That was little bit harder. Sometime even for [INDECIPHERABLE]. Sometime it was getting late. And now you can manage by yourself, whatever you do what you want. You just take your car, you finish your work, you come back. So it's very good, it feels...

(1:09:40) **Hana Widerman**: On your own schedule.

(1:09:42) **Safeena Niazi**: Yeah.

(1:09:44) **Hana Widerman**: You're motivating me. I still haven't gotten my driver's license so [laughs].

(1:09:48) **Safeena Niazi**: It's amazing. During the training actually, they were saying if you don't feel comfortable to drive the car because it's a hard, then try to drive how much is possible. And that's one of the thing. It took me around eleven month to get my license. During the period of permit and the license, it took me around eleven month or ten month. I was trying to drive, drive, drive.

(1:10:16) **Hana Widerman**: Yeah.

(1:10:17) **Safeena Niazi**: I never drive before so. But it's amazing. It's amazing whatever you want, you can do it by yourself, your work or study. Even if you have any program, it's late, you can do it by yourself. Or it's early, you can do it by yourself.

(1:10:35) **Hana Widerman**: You mentioned before... if you're comfortable talking about it, can you tell me about that one bad experience you had in the US. I think you mentioned it a little earlier.

(1:10:47) **Safeena Niazi**: Oh, yeah. Actually one day I went to one of the market basket, and I don't know. Someone was in front of me when I was paying that. Someone was just like saying words, using bad words. He even couldn't understand what she was doing, and the cashier was looking to me and looking to her and looking to me and looking to her. And I just keep quiet, and I was looking to her like that. I don't understand anything you are saying. I don't understand the language. And she was telling me, and she was using bad words. I say why you are looking to me like that? And then she, what happened. And I say, maybe she had a bad day. That was the only bad experience, but I think she had a bad day, she was like maybe something happened with her, I don't know. And then that time I was feeling little bit internally like okay, we came in this country, and we had a bad life or bad situations, many situation in our countries. Even I remember, in the year which I was coming here in 2017 -- our office was close to the airport-- like 56 or 58 rockets went through the area which we were leaving. One day all day, we were staying in the safe room. And even I was.... there was some female who had a grandchildren was crying, and they were saying we don't know if you go back to our home safe. We were
We were planning to send them, the staff, by like one car. They were moving, and after few minutes, like ten, then we were sending another car. But in the media, they were saying ten or eight, something like that. So that time I was also feeling internally very... I don't know what will happen. But when I was saying to other people, I was being strong because I was the head of that department, I shouldn't show my cry to them. It's kind of like oh come on, it's will be okay. [INDECIPHERABLE] It's okay, it's Afghanistan. These things happen. But internally, I was like I don't know what will happen.

Hana Widerman: Yeah.

Safeena Niazi: It's like when we were everything is okay, you can go back to your seats. And when we were [INDECIPHERABLE] sitting there, just for five or ten minutes, BROOM, another one, run to the safe room. So this happen, so that came in my mind. In situation, these kind of places, these kind of things happen with us, and we were happy to come here. And then say oh it's okay. There are some people. Even like you can find someone crazy in your home. One person crazy in your home, and he's or she's allowed to do anything. So just like let her do, say whatever she wants to say. And then I think I talked to one of the person in the International Institute as well, and they said it's okay, it happens. And when there is a lot of good things, you shouldn't pay attention on one small thing. So that's why I keep see the things that's going on, good things. So yeah.

Hana Widerman: I think those are all my questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Safeena Niazi: I don't have anything yeah. I think today I talk a lot.

Hana Widerman: No, but it was amazing. Thank you so much for talking with me. It was amazing to talk to you.

Safeena Niazi: Thank you so much. It was amazing to talk to you and know you as well, like by face you... we send e-mails to each other.

Hana Widerman: Yeah!

Safeena Niazi: But we don't...

Hana Widerman: Yeah, I didn't have any image or had neverheard your voice before so.

Safeena Niazi: Yeah. So it was amazing. Thank you so much for the invitation, and thank you so much. It remind me like a few years back, background from my work and my families and all the things. So when you talk to someone regarding those things, it also give you a reminder like okay, you need to move a little bit faster or you need to move to pay attention on a good things, so kind of like that. So thank you so much. It's also remind me this one hour or one and a half hour, it's also thinking about myself, so thank you so much for that as well. It's
much appreciated. That I didn't know that I can talk about during that interview. Before I was nervous like I don't know what to say.

(1:15:22) **Hana Widerman**: Yeah. [laughs]

(1:15:23) **Safeena Niazi**: But now when I talk, so I.. even like it is a reminder, it's... I feel good. Thank you so much.

(1:15:35) **Hana Widerman**: Thank you. And after this, I will send you a recording of our conversation and a transcript once I type it up so.

(1:15:43) **Safeena Niazi**: Okay. Yeah, thank you so much.

(1:15:44) **Hana Widerman**: Thank you!

(1:15:45) **Safeena Niazi**: Thank you.