

The art of meeting halfway

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Her thin, light-pink dress wavered in the frigid November air as Haidah Amirzadeh stepped onto the tarmac of the Saskatoon airport.

She was seven months pregnant with her first child, and had only the faintest notions of what her new life would bring.

It was 1989 and she had escaped Iran. Many of her family members were involved in politics and she knew she had to leave. The Canadian

government granted her status as a political refugee. After waiting for two years in Turkey, she could finally settle down.

She knew no English and knew no one in all of Canada, except her husband, who walked with her off the airplane.

When the government asked her where she would like to go in Canada, she had no preference. She wanted to leave it to fate.

The news came that she was going to Saskatoon and Amirzadeh was intrigued. The culture and spirituality

of the aboriginals piqued her interest. And since she came from a wheat-growing region of Iran, she thought it would be an easy adjustment. No problem.

The problem was, she didn't check what Saskatoon's weather was like. When she daydreamed about her future, she imagined

it would be hot, like where the wheat grows in Iran.

"I don't forget the shock that my body received the day I came. I felt I had been dropped in a deep freeze. That was a shocking year of my

life," said Amirzadeh, smiling, in her light-filled home office, 24 years later.

That year, the shock didn't stop at the weather. Six months after having a beautiful baby boy, Aatesh, she separated from her husband. They had different visions about what she would do in the future.

As the snow melted from the strange trees, she started her life as a single mom.

In Romania, when Eniko Reka Kincses gave birth to her daughter, Boglarka, those closest to Kincses begged her to give up her baby.

Boglarka's cerebral palsy was evident at a young age and the girl was considered burdensome.

It was 23 years ago that Kincses refused to send her baby away. In turn, her husband abandoned her and her parents disowned her.

She was a single mom, with a handicapped daughter and had to make her own way in the precarious economy of Romania.

By 2006, Kincses was compelled to take work that made it impossible for her to care for her daughter. She placed her daughter in a state home and although she visited her often, the separation was unbearable.

Two years later, she made the decision to come to Saskatoon, where her sister had lived since 1998. After she arrived with the Immigrant Nominee Program in 2009, she watched her daughter thrive.

Kincses started working in a care home but a year later the job ended. The Canadian government said she could stay and continue working but again, forces tried to tear her and her daughter apart.

The federal government deemed the girl "medically inadmissible," and did not want to support Boglarka's health care needs. The medical bills were around \$6,000 per year.

The first deportation order came in 2011. Kincses contacted her lawyer - Haidah Amirzadeh. They battled the order for years but Kincses's deportation was imminent. On the last weekend of January, 2013, they reluctantly prepared for her departure. She had to leave the country at 5 a.m. the following Wednesday.

Kincses and Amirzadeh scrambled to appeal. Amirzadeh scheduled a federal hearing and mustered up a letter of support from 200 people in Saskatoon. The case made the news and the

two were in the spotlight.

Amirzadeh pushed Saskatchewan's provincial government to send a letter to the federal officials. The two became more

hopeful on Monday.

Tuesday, minutes before the final appeal, Kincses and Amirzadeh were notified the hearing wouldn't be necessary. Kincses and her daughter could stay as temporary residents.

Kincses was elated and Amirzadeh hit a high in her career as an immigration lawyer.

"I never would have been able to do this without Haidah," said Kincses. She still lives in Saskatoon and hopes to start studying nursing at the university this January. "She's a goodhearted, strong woman and she came as a refugee. She knew."

"She's not like, 'you are a person who's going to pay me.' No, she tries to put herself in your shoes and understand, that way, your situation," said Kincses. She still meets with Amirzadeh from time to time to chat about their futures.

Much of the work Amirzadeh did in the complicated and emotional case was pro-bono. "On a professional level, success for me is achieving the goals I have set for myself. It's not about money. If I feel my work is meaningful and benefiting others, I feel quite content and happy," said Amirzadeh.

The story of how Amirzadeh became a successful lawyer and hero in the immigrant community boils down to a relentless pursuit of meaningful goals.

"I never gave myself a plan B and when you don't give yourself an alternative, you work hard because you don't have an option," she said in her

slight Persian accent.

After she gave birth to son Aatash, her focus was on raising him and making Saskatoon her home. In the beginning she stayed home and watched TV and read as much as possible to learn English.

She eventually enrolled in classes at the Open Door Society, where she slowly began to master her new language. Today, she serves as the president

of the organization's board of directors.

"The main thing is communication. I always tell my clients to learn English and make friends with people outside of your community. It's scary to take the steps to meet new people, but invite them to your house, go for coffee. We are actually all human beings," she said.

Amirzadeh's outgoing personality

facilitated her to build strong connections with friends. She knew she had to put herself out there. Now, she strongly believes that the intermingling of cultures is beneficial to society.

"I'd love to see people open up a bit and realize everyone comes from different backgrounds so that means what's acceptable for some people, isn't acceptable for other. It's the

mixing of ideas that really has made Canada what it is," she said.

"It's the art of meeting halfway." Two years after her arrival, Amirzadeh was confident enough in herself and her English to enrol at the University of Saskatchewan. She

paid her tuition by washing dishes, babysitting and delivering pizzas.

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She began by taking one class and eventually finished her degree in fine arts. She focused on photography and video.

"Her work is very passionate. It's conceptually and spiritually determined," said her husband, Grant McConnell, a painter and sculpture who taught art at the University of Saskatchewan at the same time Amirzadeh was enrolled. He did not teach her, he emphasized.

She considered getting a master's degree in fine arts, but wanted to do something where she could help others in a tangible and concrete way. She wanted to directly change lives.

People told her that law school was too difficult and even Canadians struggle to finish. This gave her all the more motivation, so she spent years studying laborious legal texts in her second language. Now, she

teaches immigration law classes at the university and has her own practice.

"I knew when I came to Canada that in order to succeed, I had to educate myself and find a field or position where people couldn't push me around. It is such a powerful position to be a lawyer. People respect you," she said.

Now, as one of the few immigration lawyers in the city, the futures of immigrants and refugees lives frequently hinge on Amirzadeh's hard work.

"It's a challenging area of law for sure. It's whether or not someone's going to be sent back to their country, whether someone will be reunited with their spouse or if someone will be detained in their countries," said Chris Veeman, another immigration lawyer in Saskatoon. Today, Amirzadeh is fighting to reunite

a Pakistani family.

Ashfaq Afridi lives in Saskatoon alone, after the government would not recognize the adoption of their son, Ajjab. His wife, Waheeda, refuses to leave one of the most dangerous regions of Pakistan without him.

The process is still underway, but again, Amirzadeh persuaded the provincial government to send an official letter of support to the federal government. She is hopeful the family will be reunited soon.

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Balancing her emotional and demanding career and her family life has been another of Amirzadeh's ambitious goals.

While fighting for the rights of families, she has expanded her own. While attending law school she had two more children. Afsohneh is 13

and Niiki is 12.

"Her work is hard on her, you know, as it should be. There are some lawyers that have a thick skin but she's altered by all these injustices, bigotry and antiquated laws," said her husband, McConnell.

"She's got a tough side, which is what's usually seen in the public, but she's also a very loving person," he said. "If you're

loving, it puts you in a better place, maybe you're more vulnerable but when you're negotiating all these human stories, it makes you more capable."

After working for other law firms, she decided to set up her own practice. Now, she is able to do most of her work from her home-office, while still meeting clients in her downtown office.

Although she often works from home, her morning ritual always consists of taking a shower, putting

on makeup and wearing nice clothes, as a way for her to feel prepared to take on whatever comes her way.

"A family needs a lot of attention and I want to make sure I am always there for them," she said.

Her happiest moments, she said, materialize when she makes them happy. As a family, they like to travel, ride horses, play table tennis - all the normal things, she said.

"My kids are such interesting products because they are Canadian but they still have strong ties to my culture. It's funny though when they try to change their immigrant mother. It's too late! It's like 'mom you're embarrassing us,'" she said.

Sometimes when friends of her children come over for dinner; her family asks her to modify what she cooks. She does not.

"Let them try it," she said, laughing.

Her stunning face belies the struggles she's been through. Her philosophy is not to dwell on the past and instead learn from

mistakes and move forward.

"You call a place home when you feel like you can be yourself and Canada is absolutely my home. There are times when you feel, maybe everyone does, that something is missing

because I wasn't born here," she said.

"But generally speaking, I'm very happy and I don't think a day goes by that I don't appreciate being here. I just don't know what I would have been if I went anywhere else."

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Haidah Amirzadeh, in her Saskatoon home, sits in front of her portrait, painted by a friend.

Bridges photo by Michelle Berg

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