



A Better Life?

I Want To Stay Here, Just Not Forever

Mohammed Ahsanul is an international student at the University of Wyoming. Once he finishes his Ph.D., he expects to return home to Dhaka, Bangladesh—but not before his family reunites with him for the first time since the pandemic began.

Producer Naina Rao joins Mohammed and his family for a trip to see America as she examines the ways a better life in the U.S. doesn't always mean a permanent stay.

Mia Warren: This is *A Better Life?*, from Feet in 2 Worlds. On this podcast, we're exploring the impact of Covid on immigrants in the U.S.

I'm Mia Warren.

In the first year of the pandemic, the number of international students who enrolled in U.S. schools for the first time dropped by 72 percent compared to the previous year. And students from other countries who were already here, some of them couldn't go home. And that meant they had to make some tough choices.

The thing about being an international student is that you're not technically an immigrant. But people treat you like you are. And a lot of international students think about staying in America, even if that wasn't their original plan.

My mom knows what this is like. She came to the U.S. from Korea in the '70s to study biochemistry, and although she thought she'd go back to Korea, she ended up staying here for more than 40 years.

Like my mom, Mohammed Ahsanul came to America to attend graduate school. But when the pandemic hit, he couldn't go back to his home in Bangladesh, and his family couldn't come to visit him. He was stuck.

Then last spring, when the pandemic was easing for some, things changed for Mohammed. But he still had to confront the question that immigrants have always faced: where do I belong?

Producer Naina Rao has Mohammed's story. Here's Naina in Laramie, Wyoming.

Naina Rao: Covid-19 disrupted many people's plans. But for Mohammed Ahsanul, it actually made him decide to stick with his plans, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Mohammed Ahsanul: We were kind of captivated in our apartment. We couldn't really go out.

Naina: Mohammed is an international student who studied for his Ph.D. at the University of Wyoming. He's from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Initially, he and his wife, Tropa, had plans to go back home in the summer of 2020, right after he finished his master's degree from the University of Reno, Nevada.

Mohammed: In my country, people really envy of (sic) people who are already in the United States, or who have already visited the United States. So, it's kind of a dream place for everyone, you know?

Naina: But Mohammed is envious of them being back home because they get to be with their families. Unlike so many immigrants who love their families too, Mohammed thinks it's not worth leaving them for a career abroad.

Mohammed: To me, a happy life is to spend your life with your family. You may or may not have more money to enjoy it. It's better if you have more money though! But, even if you don't have enough money, if you have your family surrounded by you, it's the most beautiful way to enjoy your life.

Naina: His plan had always been to go back home after he was done with his education. But to get there he faced a series of tests that he never expected. In Bangladesh, Mohammed says a degree from a U.S. university goes a long way.

Mohammed: I was planning to get exposed to the - probably the best education system in the world. So I thought if I have a degree here, this will give me a better exposure, it will make me a better student first, and then it will help me grow confidence as a teacher as well.

Naina: When Covid-19 started spreading in the winter of 2020, restrictions and lockdowns made it difficult to travel back to Dhaka. Mohammed and Tropa eventually canceled their homecoming trip.

Mohammed: It was tough. We are away from home. We couldn't see each other. It's completely out of the world.

Naina: On top of that, the plan was for Mohammed's family to be with him at his graduation. They were gonna make a vacation out of it. It'd be the first time his family would see America.

Mohammed: But then the pandemic happened. They couldn't really come.

Naina: Mohammed's plans had fallen through and he was stuck in a foreign country.

But he decided to make the best out of the situation. He applied to multiple Ph.D. programs and got accepted by the University of Wyoming in Laramie.

Mohammed: And now I am here for my Ph.D. in applied maths.

Naina: Mohammed began studying in Laramie in the fall of 2020, right when the coronavirus was at a peak. Around this time, his family decided to give their trip to the United States another try. Their hope was that the pandemic would subside by the spring, and they'd be

able to visit Mohammed just in time for Eid, which marks the end of Ramadan in the spring.

Mohammed: So that was the actual plan. So that they can come here, celebrate the Eid, and once my semester ends, we can roam around the United States.

Naina: April 2021 arrived, and his family was set to leave for their big trip. But just days before their departure...

News Clip: (News report on travel limitation in Bangladesh) "Its latest move to combat the surge of Covid-19 infections Bangladesh has banned all international and domestic flights for a period of a week."

Naina: The Covid-19 crisis worsened in Bangladesh, and a nationwide lockdown was declared. Their plans were disrupted again.

Mohammed: So then I rescheduled the flight to May 4th.

Naina: But then the lockdown was extended to May 5th.

News Clip: (News report on Covid vaccines in Dhaka) "Now Dhaka is relying on India to pull through and deliver doses. Until then, health officials have put the country on lockdown."

Mohammed: I was really disappointed because it was the same case last year as well. I reserved a ticket, and it got canceled. So they couldn't come.

Naina: It wasn't just this latest lockdown that frustrated Mohammed.

Mohammed: I was really hoping that things get better in my country because not only my parents, you know, my friends, my other relatives are there. I want them to be safe. So I was disappointed, but I was really hoping that things get better.

Naina: While Bangladesh's death count from Covid-19 kept increasing at the time, vaccinations were starting to roll out for the majority of the population in the United States.

It's such a stark contrast when you compare the two nations. The vaccinations in America gave many people a sense of hope. For Muslim-Americans, this meant they could reunite with families to observe Ramadan together.

But for Mohammed, reuniting wasn't so easy.

Even after Mohammed's family managed to successfully book their trip, the airline rescheduled their flight three more times. Finally, after all the postponements and delays, they were on their way to America to see Mohammed.

Clip: (Speaker announcement at an airport) "For your safety and the safety of others, you must wear a face mask while at the airport."

Naina: May 5th, 2021. Denver International Airport. Mohammed and his wife Tropa drive two and a half hours to pick up his family. It's the first time they've seen them since 2019, right before the pandemic started.

Mohammed is excited, but also pretty anxious.

Mohammed: I couldn't sleep even for a second. So it's not- not really because they're coming. Since this is a risky journey. If something happens to the plane, they're gone.

Naina: Mohammed spots his family and starts walking towards them.

Mohammed hugs his brother tightly. Then embraces his mother for a long time. It's an emotional reunion.

Naina: Hello!

Naina: It's Thursday, May 13, 2021. Eight days after Mohammed's family reunion at the airport. He invited me over to lunch at his apartment in Laramie.

Naina: Oh my god, I didn't bring anything.

Mohammed: No, no, you're fine! Absolutely fine.

Naina: The family is now celebrating Eid-al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan. They have just returned from morning prayers from the Islamic center in town.

Out of Laramie's total population of 32,700, fewer than a hundred are Muslims. That's not quite enough for a mosque, but enough to have formed an Islamic center.

Mohammed: It was full. We had two different prayer times. We went for the first one, at 7:30.

Naina: We all gather around in a circle, sitting down, eating the Bengali dishes Tropa cooked. She made six dishes: appetizers, entrees, desserts.

Mohammed: That's eggplant by the way if you...

Naina: His mom and brother are sitting across from me, and they look incredibly exhausted. I ask Mohammed if they are still jet-lagged. He doesn't think so.

Mohammed: Maybe it will take a week or so to get used to the new routine. But the good thing is we don't have too much time to get adjusted, because we are flying on Saturday.

I have booked a ticket from Denver to L.A. Then from Denver to Buffalo.

Naina: They've just arrived barely a week ago, and they're already preparing to leave for their trip across America. Their route takes them from Laramie to Detroit, with a few stops in between.

They hit the beach in Los Angeles.

Then, they flew to the East Coast for a long layover in Orlando, Florida.

And then Niagara Falls in New York.

I called Mohammed to see how the trip was going.

Naina: How was it?

Mohammed: It was really tiring. It was really hectic because we had to travel, you know, for 11 days at a stretch.

Naina: Instead of the 15-day itinerary, which they originally planned. Because Covid delayed their departure so many times, their travel plans got compressed, forcing them to rush through this trip.

Naina: What did your family think?

Mohammed: They're really tired. They didn't imagine how big this country could be. When they traveled so much, then they understood, "Oh my God," it's actually bigger than they expected.

Naina: But they're happy because they're all together. And that's what's most important to them.

Mohammed: To me, if I have my family members with me, I'd rather say I am living my life in the best possible way.

Mia: We'll be right back with more of Mohammed's story. Stay with us.

Ad Break

Mia: This is *A Better Life?* from Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Mia Warren. Let's get back to Mohammed and his family. Here's Naina Rao.

Naina: It's a cool, cloudy day on Friday, May 21st, 2021 in Warren, Michigan, just outside of Detroit. This is where the family is concluding their big trip.

Shaheen Haque: *(Translation from Bengali)* "We went to visit Los Angeles first."

Naina: That's Mohammed's father, Shaheen. He's recalling the places he visited on his trip while playing cricket with his childhood best friend, Romel Zaman, in his backyard.

This is the first time they're seeing each other after 29 years.

Mohammed: Because my uncle actually left in 1992.

Naina: Mohammed calls him uncle because of how close his father and Romel are. He's practically family.

Mohammed: And then he couldn't really go back to Bangladesh. So they were trying to reunite. So I thought it's a good time to make them united. So that's why we're here, you know, so that they can spend time together after 29 years.

Romel Zaman: It's very, very exciting. Almost shocking.

Naina: That's Uncle Romel.

Romel: When I left my country, I was young man. My friend was very young. Me and my friend both married two beautiful women, but we didn't have any kids at that time. Now that my friend comes with the two big kid, and I have my kids, we

could not recognize that we missed so many years in between, last seen and now. So it's very exciting, and I didn't know even until weeks ago that we will see each other again. So we are very happy and excited.

Shaheen: (Translation from Bengali) "You know, sometimes our children have to sacrifice a lot for their future. But what they don't see is, the parents also make a sacrifice here."

Naina: Shaheen is explaining how his children and many people from his country have to sacrifice a lot to have a better future. That's what his best friend, Romel, did.

Romel: Spending time together and sharing our memories together, like our youthhood memory together, in present time. Those things that I'm sharing with my friend, this part I will remember years and years, that I was able to share this event again.

Naina: June 10th, 2021. The family is back at Denver International Airport. And it looks almost exactly like the same scene from a month ago when they arrived. Mohammed and his wife are surrounded by family. Everyone's carrying backpacks and luggage. There's lots of hugging. Except this time, Mohammed's family is leaving America.

Mohammed: How time flies, how time flies. Yeah. It went like a crazy dream, I would say.

Now, tonight, it will be a nightmare for me. I have the fear of not seeing them again. Because if the plane, you know, somehow meets an accident, then I'm never going to see them again. That's the fear I always have.

Naina: And then, Tropa steps aside with tears falling down her cheeks.

Naina: Do you want tissue?

Naina: "No," she says. What she wants is for them to stay, her words barely audible.

Soon, everyone else starts to cry as they embrace, including Mohammed's father, Shaheen.

Shaheen: Thank you.

Naina: How do you feel? Are you ready?

Naina: He's so overwhelmed with emotion that he can hardly answer my question. So no, he's not ready to leave. But eventually, they step onto the escalator and make their way through security.

Mohammed has not shed a tear once since arriving at the airport. As he watches them descend the escalator, he finally lets it out.

Mohammed: I don't think I will be able to sleep. I'm planning to have a sleepless life- night. (laughing)

Naina: But Mohammed is also thinking about the trip he took with his family. Especially his father's reunion with Uncle Romel in Detroit. That visit gave him a glimpse of what his

life could look like if he stayed in the U.S. And it actually reinforced his conviction to return to his family in Bangladesh.

Mohammed: Yeah my uncle actually tried to convince me to stay here after my graduation. Because I might earn more. But I'm not convinced.

Naina: He says that yes, the educational opportunities available here are better. He wouldn't have made the sacrifice of moving halfway across the world unless that opportunity was really worth it for him. But it's not what he wants for the rest of his life.

Mohammed: If someone like me, who wants to spend his life with his family members, I don't think it's a good choice to live here all alone. But if one can enjoy his life by himself, it's the best place you can be.

Naina: A few days after Mohammed dropped his family off at the airport, I called to check in on him.

Mohammed: Hello?

Naina: Hi! Can you hear me?

Mohammed: Yeah, I can hear you.

Naina: But really, there was only one question I wanted to ask him. After traveling around the U.S., did he think his life could be better here than in Bangladesh?

Mohammed: No, I don't think so. I don't think anything could convince me to believe that.

Naina: "I would still choose the life in Bangladesh," he told me. Covid changed a lot of things in Mohammed's life, including strengthening his commitment to his family.

It made me think about how, despite the popular narrative of immigrants coming to the U.S. to improve their lives, it doesn't always work out that way.

This pandemic has allowed a lot of people to rethink what we've always known about the U.S. and the opportunities it offers. It's not a guarantee that America will make our dreams come true. It's on us to make it happen, wherever we choose to be.

Mia: This story was produced by Naina Rao.

A Better Life?'s executive producer is Quincy Surasmith. Jocelyn Gonzales is our technical director. Our editor is John Rudolph. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing. And Katelynn Laws is our intern.

Our theme music and original score are by Fareed Sajan.

A Better Life? comes to you from Feet in 2 Worlds. Since 2005, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and training immigrant journalists. The Feet in 2 Worlds network includes hundreds of reporters and editors. Some, like me, have been Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

To hear other episodes in this series, or to read more about the story you just heard, visit us at abetterlifepodcast.com.

I'm Mia Warren. Thanks for listening.

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