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Lynchburg

Haven on Garland provides sanctuary for Afghan girls in Lynchburg

Rachael Smith

May 26, 2024

In a quiet, historic neighborhood, a house on Garland Hill has become a safe space and refuge for Afghan girls seeking education and a future.

Haven on Garland, created by Sarah and Shawn Hyska, provides a safe haven for young women who have escaped the oppressive regime of the Taliban. Their mission is to offer stability, education and a nurturing environment during a critical transition period in the girls' lives.

Sarah Hyska, originally from Iowa, moved to Lynchburg in 2001 to pursue her undergraduate and master's degrees at Liberty University, and spent 12 years in Uganda working with young women.

There, she focused on helping girls navigate the challenging period between high school and college, where the risk of teenage pregnancy often disrupts their education.

“I loved working with these girls, teaching them life skills and helping them build a strong foundation for their futures,” she said.

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In 2019, Sarah returned to the United States for a visit, with plans to go back to Uganda. However, the COVID-19 pandemic upended those plans, leaving her unable to return. During this pause, she met and married Shawn.

Making Lynchburg their home, they purchased the historic Tabb-Slaughter-Diggs house with a separate apartment, initially intended to provide missionaries on furlough with a temporary home.

But their mission evolved. The University of Lynchburg had offered scholarships to Afghan girls, but it needed accommodation and the Hyskas didn't hesitate.

“It was an obvious yes for us,” Sarah said. “We wanted to use our home for something greater and this was exactly the opportunity we had hoped for.”

The Haven on Garland offers more than just a place to stay. It provides a comprehensive support system, including privacy, dignity and a sense of belonging. Each apartment is fully equipped with its own bathroom and kitchen, allowing the girls to live independently while still being part of the Hyska family.

Beyond housing, the Hyskas want to enrich the girls' lives through various activities. This summer, the girls expressed a desire to learn how to swim and ride bikes. The Hyskas found a private pool and are arranging swimming lessons to ensure the girls can learn in a comfortable environment.

“The window for helping these girls is very short,” Sarah said. “Educated girls are increasingly at risk and many face the threat of being forced into marriages.”

The first Afghan student arrived in August 2023, followed by a second in December and a third just a week ago.

Shawn said Haven on Garland can accommodate up to four girls at a time, offering them a home and a supportive community.

“As part of their visa application, we are committed to providing all their housing, support and living expenses during their undergraduate studies at the University of Lynchburg, essentially a four-year commitment,” he said.

Funding for Haven on Garland comes entirely from personal donations and the generosity of friends, family and colleagues.

Shawn said that the nonprofit covers all costs for the girls, including food, personal care and utilities.

“We aim to give them a stable environment without any financial burden,” he said.

The girls may choose to work on campus in future years, but there is no expectation for them to contribute financially during their stay.

The Hyskas integrate the girls into their family life, sharing evening meals and ensuring their dietary needs are met with Halal food — food that is permissible under Islamic law and can be eaten by Muslims.

“It’s not just about giving them a place to stay, we want them to feel part of our family,” he said. “We respect their cultural and religious practices as a way to honor them.”

The Hyskas don’t take a salary from the nonprofit and all funds go directly toward supporting the girls.

“When the girls arrive, they often have just one suitcase with a few belongings,” Shawn said. “We make sure they have clothing for all seasons and other essentials.”

Unexpected expenses, such as specialized contact lenses not covered by insurance, are a constant concern, which is why the nonprofit looks for local support.

The Hyskas work with a network of organizations that facilitate visas, travel and other logistics.

“We can’t solve big country problems, but we can help one person at a time,” she said.

They said financial contributions are vital and donations help cover expenses such as swimming lessons, bicycles and other necessities.

“We are incredibly proud of these girls and feel very motherly towards them,” Sarah said. “We want to do everything we can to support them, but we also need help from the community to continue this important work.”

The Hyskas also hope to build a broader community for the girls.

“We’ve reached out to other Afghan nationals in the area, like a freshman at Randolph College, to help our students feel less isolated,” Shawn said.

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More Information

1. For more information about Haven on Garland, visit havenongarland.org.

"I loved working with these girls, teaching them life skills and helping them build a strong foundation for their futures."

— **Sarah Hyska**, co-creator of Haven on Garland

By Rachael Smith

Reporter
