

A safe place to land

by Meribeth Deen

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It's been another quiet holiday season here on Nexwlélexwm, with smaller gatherings, fewer goings and comings. Many of us are disappointed about plans that had to be canceled, and many of us are grateful for the ability to be with loved ones in whatever way possible. One of Bowen Island's holiday visitors is particularly grateful for her time here, and for the connections made. This island, blanketed in snow and covered in colourful lights, has proven to be a safe place to land, and a bridge between one life, and an entirely new one.

Spozhmay crossed Howe Sound to Snug Cove for the first time on December 10. There was no certainty as to whether the journey to Canada could even happen, less certainty about how it would happen. A long string of emails, Zoom meetings, and phone calls around the world were required to make it a reality, and upon her arrival at YVR on December 9 at 7pm, she was greeted with a computer screen showing the faces of thirty smiling, teary-eyed people who had worked to get her there. Islander Brenda Morrison was holding the screen and told her: Three months ago we didn't even know each other, now, we are family.

"In Kabul, my life was one of constant worry," says Spozhmay. "I was teaching trauma and crisis intervention in the University, and at the same time, I felt the trauma in my own body. As a woman, I was made to feel like I should not be doing my job, and the men and women were separated. I used to spend all of my spare time reading, but then when the Taliban came to power again, my book had no value for me. I hid all my books in English. For two or three months, I couldn't read anything. All I did was write about what I was going through, every day."

Spozhmay works with an organization called The Pocket Project, which delivers programs that fuel trauma-informed living and leadership. When the Taliban took power in Afghanistan this past summer, the Pocket Project reached out to its international membership with her story. This is how Spozhmay got connected to Brenda, and how the team that worked to bring Spozhmay to Canada started to connect to one another.

Being here, Spozhmay says she is struck by a profound feeling of safety among the people she has met - especially on Bowen.

"Thomas Hubl, the founder of The Pocket Project, says healing trauma requires a healing environment," she says. "For me, this is a healing environment. And when I call home, my brothers and sisters say they can hear a change in my voice. When I send them pictures, they say my face looks different. They say they feel confident now that I have been rescued, but now my stress is for them. I feel so much pressure to help them."

And Spozhmay has learned that for some people, complete strangers even, her presence and the story she carries has the power to provoke an outpouring of tears and emotions.

"I met a woman in the Christmas Market in Vancouver who broke down in tears when she learned I was here to stay," says Spozhmay. "When she did, I asked myself why I can not also cry? But there is a numbness I have. With her tears, that woman gave me a gift."

This season of gifts has also been comforting to Spozhmay. She finds the appearance of gifts under the tree, and the ceremonial unwrapping of them particularly beautiful. She compares the making of Christmas cookies to the baking of special cakes during Eid.

"The holidays here are different, of course, but the rituals are familiar," she says. "And the weather is not so different from home. Maybe a little colder."

On January 6, she will move into her own little apartment, her new home at Simon Fraser University, where she will begin her PhD in Educational Psychology with a focus on trauma. Spozhmay says she is very excited to begin her studies.

"I am so thankful for this new life, and I will never forget the love and support I have experienced here," she says. "When my family asks me, 'Are you depressed because you are alone?' While I am worried about the safety of my family in Afghanistan, I say no, because I am not alone because I feel the love of family."