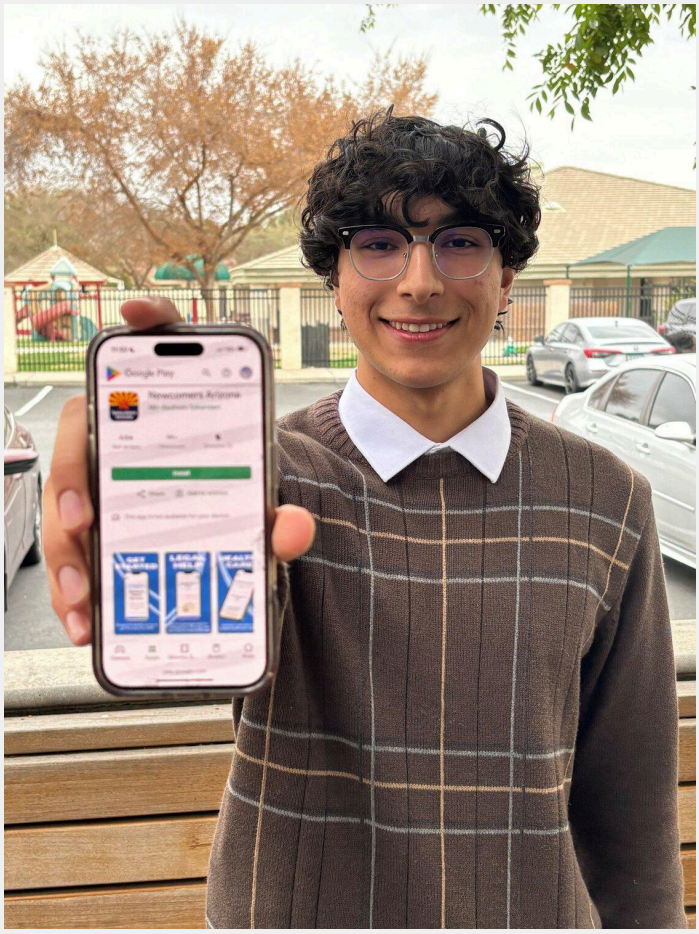
# High school senior from Glendale develops refugee app to bridge cultural gap

## Mountain Ridge student develops Newcomers Arizona




(Independent Newsmedia/Richard Smith)

**Mountain Ridge High School senior Mir-Aedress Sekandari holds his phone opened to the Newcomers Arizona app in Glendale on Feb. 13. Sekandari designed the multilingual app to help refugees navigate basic services and legal forms.**

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By Richard Smith

A child of Afghani refugees, Mir-Aedrees Sekandari got used to helping his parents bridge language and cultural barriers from a very young age.

His parents fled during the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

"When they came to America and had us, they had a very difficult time of going through the systems. When they came to Arizona back then it was completely inaccessible. They had to manage learning English not through ESL classes but by watching TV," Sekandari said. "As a young child I had to help my parents with documentation and some extremely complex vocabulary. I didn't know what taxes were. I was filing for the IRS and I was like 6."

He said he has been surrounded by refugees his entire life and learned how difficult it was for local refugees to access necessary documents and services.

Sekandari Works with RISE, a part of the American Muslim Women's Association, tutoring for refugee children ages 4 through 16.

Those experiences informed him when developing and coding Newcomers Arizona, a mobile app assisting refugees in Arizona with basic services across the state. The app

provides multilingual resources for legal aid, healthcare, housing, jobs, education, mobility and community hubs.

One caveat — Mir-Aedrees Sekandari is a teenager who will graduate from Mountain Ridge High School in May.

“I’ve been helping them directly for a long time hand to hand and tutoring,” Sekandari said. “I got an opportunity to meet a lot of the parents, who were also refugees. I looked for a one glove fits all solution. I saw applications and I’ve taken a lot of AP computer science classes at Mountain Ridge. In my sophomore year, I was able to code and develop a project. Over the years my computer science teacher has been my biggest help through it all. I wasn’t a natural coder or developer of any sort. I didn’t really know how to display UI. She helped me with all the development processes and polishing it so that it actually looked good.”

The goal is to transform complex and unnecessary forms into easy, clear steps. The app is free and private.

Sekandari said Mountain Ridge CTE Ambassador and marketing teacher LoriBeth Horton is an incredibly kind person who has always looked to help refugees.

“Edrees is a fantastic young man.  He is helpful, bright and kind. It has been my pleasure working and traveling with him throughout his Career Technical Student Organization journey with DECA and FBLA,” Horton stated in an email.

The app has prompts in 18 languages.

Refugees and asylum seekers arrive in Arizona to find most documentation, signs and conversation options in English and Spanish only.

“In developing an app, there’s only so much code you can input before it crashes on the user’s phone. So we did the 18 most dominant languages in Arizona, some of them being Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Farsi, Swahili, Kirundi,” Sekandari said.

He said it took about a year to get Newcomers Arizona onto the app store. Since then, he has promoted it to refugee people he knows.

Newcomers Arizona has 5,200 downloads as of Feb. 13 and averages about 400 daily users.

“At my mosque, a lot of refugees come every day for congregant prayers. I get the opportunity to meet and talk with them.  In doing so, I hear a lot of their issues and problems,” Sekandari said. “It’s very rewarding in creating this app that you can think about a niche subject that they need help with. I was speaking with my dad every Friday about building it. Finally when it was done I told him to search us on the Google Play store. He said, ‘No way.’ He was ecstatic, shouting in Arabic.”

Now the goal is to expand the app beyond Arizona, even as refugees and asylum seekers are swept up into the larger immigration controversies of the second Trump administration.

## RESOURCES FOR REFUGEES IN AN ICE AGE

Newcomers Arizona is a host organization of the Survivor Style nonprofit clothing brand, which Sekandari is also a part of.

The International Rescue Committee is a frequent partner as is UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

“We’ve been tackling assistance for refugee rights for a long time. Especially now in the current times, we’re helping with GoFundMe (campaigns) helping a lot of refugees who are immigrants,” Sekandari said. “We are kind of covering that entire sphere of anybody attempting to legally migrate.”

California is an early expansion target for the app. Newcomers Arizona recently received a $4,600 grant from that state for applying.

Sekandari said he is looking to use that money to help refugee and immigrant families in Echo Park, Hollywood and Fremont — among other California cities.

“We don’t just want to stay in Arizona. We want to branch out, hopefully,” Sekandari said.

Immigration is a controversial topic.

In the public sphere, there is not a lot of nuance in immigration discussions — with little distinction between refugees and asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, and those on a work visa.

“It’s crazy that the United States current administration is bringing all these people into one sort of pile. It’s not fair to the people who don’t deserve it, who are refugees, who are here on EAD or working. They are the ones who have worked incredibly hard. It’s not fair to anyone,” Sekandari said.

He was part of a student-led ICE protest at Mountain Ridge Jan. 30.

Sekandari said he tries to engage in discussions that can get people out of their bubble.

“We take these matters seriously. People are dying. But then there’s a large group that is very opposed to it. Whether they are gaining that kind of view from their parents or social media, I never try to oppose them entirely. I try to learn from them and their perspective and give them a little bit of our insight,” Sekandari said.

## A PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Newcomers Arizona users get started with background, language and when the user arrived in Arizona.

The app is then tailored to the user and their location.

“We’re kind of a resource hub. When you’re navigating on the internet refugees have to go on English-only websites and it’s so complex. There’s an IRS website here and you’re filing for your EAD and you don’t know what to do, so you put everything into our app. With it, we connect with every partner they need to connect with — whether that be your ESL

class, we partner with ESL classes and programs at ASU and they put their resources, websites and locations — we're the bridge in between," Sekandari said.

Abdullah Mbudji recently moved to Phoenix and was interviewed by Survivor Style.

Here is an excerpt of his interview translated from Arabic to English.

"When I would call these offices that sometimes never pick up, they get frustrated with me and my broken English. Not being able to do things yourself makes you feel like a burden. But Edrees's Newcomers app is so simple and easy. It has everything jam packed into my phone, and I didn't download it for a while because I didn't believe there'd be Arabic on it. I didn't believe there would actually be jobs I could apply for or ESL classes I could put my kids in. But there was, and a whole lot of other features I am greatly thankful for, especially in my early days in Arizona," Mbudji said.

Sekandari said he wants to major in human rights and international relations, or a related diplomatic field. He wants to impact legislation.

He was recently named one of the 150 total 2026 Coca-Cola scholars nationally.

"It's been hell trying to promote an app to thousands of refugees in the state," Sekandari said. "It is a bit of a shock and they sometimes ask, 'Why do you care about us so much?' ... I don't think I could have done it without the help and support I received from my family, my teachers."