Friends of Afghan Women Judges: Book launch and fund-raiser
October 23, 2025 at Davies LLP
Remarks by The Honourable Fran Kiteley

Panel moderated by Janice Dickson, The Globe and Mail, including Karen Bartlett, author of **Escape from Kabul**, Justice Anne Molloy of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, and Judge Hamida Froozanfar of the Primary Court of the Third District of Kabul, Afghanistan.

I would like everyone to thank Karen Bartlett for writing **Escape from Kabul** which is an engaging and descriptive book about the crisis, chaos and danger as it unfolded in 2021 when the Taliban took over the government of Afghanistan.

270 of the almost 300 Afghan women judges escaped as explained by Karen. As you have heard and will read, The International Association of Women Judges had a great deal to do with that.

I now want to describe how the 25 Afghan women judges who escaped in 2021 and 2022 and now live in Ontario are progressing. We refer to them as "our" Afghan women judges.

On the panel, you just heard from **Judge Hamida Froozanfar** who Karen Bartlett had interviewed about her escape. Hamida had been a very talented tv presenter until she decided that she needed to help women in Afghanistan by pursuing a legal and ultimately a judicial career. When you read **Escape from Kabul**, pay particular attention to chapter 18 and to the Epilogue.

After her arrival, Hamida was amongst 15 of the adults in our group who took advantage of the offer by Centennial College to provide bursaries for some or all of Centennial's 3 semester English for Academic Purposes program. In 2024, Hamida had an opportunity at the University of Toronto Faculty of Law for a one year research fellowship supported by some of the U of T alumnae in the audience.

I want to introduce you to two of the Afghan women judges. Arezoo Amini was a judge of the Family Court in Herat Province in Afghanistan in August 2021. She arrived in June 2022 with her children born 2011, 2015 and 2017. In March, 2025, she had a 4th child. She and her husband and children live in Mississauga. Arezoo has benefitted from the generous scholarships provided by Humber Polytechnic. She attended 2 semesters of the English program - during which she had a part time job at the college - and she started the paralegal program in September 2025. Four other Afghan women judges in Mississauga have or will be enrolled in the paralegal program on scholarships to cover tuition and related costs. Arezoo lives in the same building in Mississauga with Hamida who recently moved there with her children and husband.

Finally, I want to introduce you to Mahmmody who was a judge in a Province in Afghanistan. She arrived in July 2022 with her son who was about 6 years old. Samira needed one semester of English at Centennial College and then she moved to Seneca Polytechnic where she just finished the Paralegal Accelerated Program. Her graduation is tomorrow!

Hamida and Arezoo and Mahmmody are three of the 25 Afghan women judges in Ontario who need your help.

All of the Afghan women judges have at least one post-secondary degree. Most of them arrived with their husband who all have at least one post-secondary degree. Their careers also included judge, prosecutor, defence lawyer, as well as other professions such as engineer and electrician. The women were in the **5%** and the men within the **15%** who had a post-secondary education in Afghanistan. The age range of most of the Afghan women judges on arrival was 30 to 42. They were young and already in leadership positions.

And where are they now? To my knowledge, none of the 40 or so adults have employment that is related to their education and experience. Instead, they have factory jobs. Or restaurant jobs. Or survival jobs such as fast food. Or gig jobs driving for Uber eats or Uber. The next time you take an Uber trip, ask about the background of your driver. One of them could be the husband of one of "our" judges or indeed, may have also been a judge.

Some of these well educated refugees have taken skills courses to ready them for jobs in this economy. Arezoo and Samira are in various stages of their paralegal education. What does that give them? A sound understanding of the court system in Canada and many of the laws applicable to day to day activities. With that education and their experience as judges, they hope to get employment in a law related field.

The almost universal experience of these refugees is no response to online employment applications. Given their education and experience, the characteristic they share is their lack of "Canadian experience".

As you will see from the program, this is an initiative by the "Friends of Afghan Women Judges in Ontario". https://afghanwomenjudgesinontario.ca/
The link to the website includes stories about the Afghan women judges and how they are progressing. I encourage you to start at Stories/Afghan Judges in Ontario and read the article written by Justice Anne Molloy and published in The Advocates' Journal in 2023 about three of our Afghan women judges including Hamida, and the sequel I wrote recently, soon to be published in the Advocates' Journal, as to their ongoing discouraging challenges.

As most of you know, judges in Canada are not permitted to participate in fund-raising for any cause. Retired judges are not so constrained. My colleagues Liz Stewart and Ruth Mesbur and I are amongst those who consider ourselves Friends of Afghan women judges. We have been joined by law firms, particularly BLG LLP. Hugh Meighen was the first lawyer in Ontario to enthusiastically embrace the needs of these families. BLG remains the only donor in the category of $25,000. Dentons LLP and Lax O'Sullivan are the two law firms in our Advocate category with many others in the Sponsor and Support categories. When these remarks are concluded, you will see a digital display of the donations we have received.

All of these 25 families are struggling financially and professionally. How can **you** help?

You can help us to raise $500,000. We are 20% there. With that fund, we plan to prioritize these goals:
* reducing costs to professional English training such as offered by schools of continuing studies

* reducing costs to post-secondary education such as skills programs at community colleges and, for those eligible, reducing costs for Masters programs, and LSAT preparation and testing
* Removing barriers to education by financing otherwise unavailable child care as well as before and after school care and extra-curricular and summer programs that enable the parents to focus on learning
* Providing career coaching to explore an attainable career and employment trajectory.

There are **25 families** so helping us raise the balance of $500,000 won't be enough.

You can also help by providing shadowing and mentoring opportunities that can be added to a resume and will get them over the barrier of "Canadian experience" and that will introduce **you** to a talented and committed individual who might be an addition to your workforce.

You can help by offering a scholarship that covers 1 or 2 years of professional language training; by offering a one year fellowship at a university; by offering training to ensure success at the LSAT's; a 1 year Masters of law program - or; in a few cases, a 3 year LLD.

You can also help with providing employment that reflects their considerable education, experience, skills and talents.

Investing in talented, educated and hardworking newcomers makes sense. Refugees land with dignity when they have opportunities. **You** can help them by providing financial and other opportunities.

The program includes my email address. Liz and Ruth and I look forward to hearing from you.

Before concluding, I want to mention the support we have received from the Afghan Women's Organization Refugee and Immigrant Services. Thanks to the leadership of its Executive Director, Adeena Niazi, the AWO has just celebrated its 35th anniversary. All of our Afghan women judges have benefitted by the resources made available to them by the AWO.

Lastly, I want to thank our most gracious host, Sandy Forbes. Sandy is a leading lawyer in Canada and the Vice-President of the American College of Trial Lawyers, soon to be the first Canadian Female President of the College. In my first conversation with her, she talked about the huge focus by the College to protect the independence of the judiciary and how that aligned with the leadership of the International Association of Women Judges in helping Afghan women judges to escape. Ruth and Liz and I are also very grateful for the professionalism of Katie Donaldson and her team in making the arrangements for this event.

On your chairs you each received the program for today's events and a donation form in a self-addressed envelope. Feel free to share the program or our website with others who might be interested in "our" Afghan women judges.