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February 13, 2012 | By Mike Jensen, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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Kevin and Nancy Peter of West Mount Airy were a little worried as they traveled to New York's JFK Airport in 2010 to pick up the young man who would be staying with them and going to high school at Friends Select.

Their concerns were for an Afghan teenager traveling alone on a one-way ticket, from Kabul, Afghanistan, through Dubai to New York.

And he was arriving on 9/11.

"We thought there might be helicopters over our house," Nancy Peter joked.

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In reality, as a second academic year unfolds, they've added a member of the family, Hussain Ali, whose own mother in Afghanistan is committed to his education and that of his older sister, a Friends Select graduate now at college in Virginia. He went through rigorous interviews at the U.S. Embassy at home, he said, to get approval to come here.

Hussain Ali is a 17-year-old soccer player at Friends Select, a high school junior who also plays the sport at the Starfinder Foundation facility in Manayunk. His goal, he said, is to get "a complete education" in this country, through college, then return home. To help pay his expenses, he said, his two older brothers are working in Iran, one as a carpenter, the other as a metalworker.

"My father was killed by the Taliban," said Hussain Ali, whose full name is not being used to protect his family. He declined to go into detail about the killing, which he said happened during an uprising a dozen years ago that killed many people.

In his city, Hussain Ali said, members of the Taliban typically dress like everyone else - "No one knows who is Taliban, who is not," he explained. That's one reason he has to be careful. Just his immediate family and closest friends know about his being in the U.S.

He went home last summer but didn't tell many people where he'd been.

"Whether it's because of his country of origin, religion (he is a devout Muslim), birth order, upbringing, gratitude for being in the States, or genetic wiring, Hussain Ali is one of the kindest, least selfish, and most giving people I have ever met," Nancy Peter said.

He had learned some English in school in Afghanistan, although it turned out he was far from fluent, Hussain Ali said. However, he was able to apply to Friends Select online. Nancy Peter said that when Hussain Ali arrived, he had never seen a traffic light but had a flash drive with him.

Hussain Ali had never played on an organized soccer team at home, just kicked the ball around with his friends. He doesn't claim to be a star but said he really enjoys being at Starfinder. Whatever your nationality, he said, "If you can play, you can play. There's no difference between black people and white people. . . . They always give a pass, a chance to take a shot."

He has found there is a common soccer language at the facility, Hussain Ali said, "and there is no word for selfish."

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