

Good morning, everyone.

My name is Sasha Protopopov, and I'm honored to speak with you today. I am visually impaired, a foreign student, and an asylum seeker from Yakutsk, Siberia. I want to share a little about my journey — not just where I've come from, but also where I'm going, thanks to the support I've found here in Vermont.

Back in Siberia, life was difficult. As an LGBTQ person, I faced discrimination every day. I had to hide who I was, constantly afraid of being judged or harmed. I was arrested for peaceful protest against the war in Ukraine — because I believed I had to speak up, even when it was dangerous. That moment made it clear: if I wanted to live in safety and be true to myself, I had to leave.

My journey to safety took eight long and difficult months. When I finally crossed the U.S. border, I felt safe — but completely lost. Everything was unfamiliar. I didn't know the language, the culture, or how to begin again. I felt invisible.

That's when two things changed my life: Vermont Adult Learning, and the Community Asylum Seekers Project (CASP).

CASP welcomed me when I had no one. They helped with housing and gave me the support I needed. At Vermont Adult Learning, I found more than just an education — I found hope, dignity, and a sense of belonging. I wasn't just a case file, I was a student, a learner, and a person with a future.

My school has been more than a classroom — it has become a home. My teacher, Paula, has guided me through subjects that matter deeply. In social studies, I've learned about freedom, justice, and American history. In literature, we've read *The Kite Runner*, *Animal Farm*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These books have helped me build vocabulary, yes — but more importantly, they've helped me understand the values of the country I now live in.

And now, I have a dream.

I want to become a teacher for others with visual impairments. I know what it feels like to be underestimated — and I want to be the kind of teacher who sees the potential in every student. I currently volunteer in a kindergarten classroom. I take care of young children, and every day I spend with them reminds me of the power of education and compassion.

Appreciation to everyone who supports Vermont Adult Learning. You are giving people like me the tools to grow, the strength to heal, and the chance to dream again.

Thank you for inviting me to the Vermont State House and giving me the opportunity to share my story. It means so much to be seen and heard by you — the Vermont Legislature.