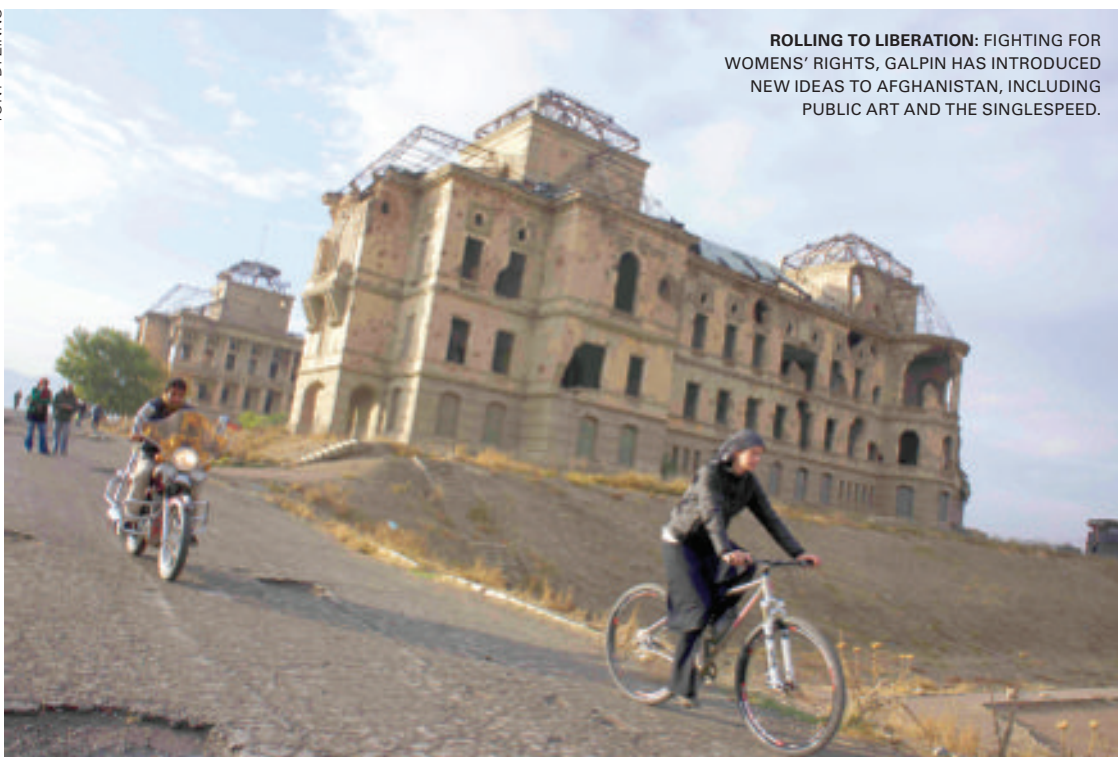


TONY DI ZINNO



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**ROLLING TO LIBERATION:** FIGHTING FOR WOMENS' RIGHTS, GALPIN HAS INTRODUCED NEW IDEAS TO AFGHANISTAN, INCLUDING PUBLIC ART AND THE SINGLESPEED.

**Bikes Not Bombs**  
National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, Shannon Galpin, brings her battle against gender violence in Afghanistan back home to Colorado through a new domestic non profit.

By Jayme Moyo

Last fall, Breckenridge resident Shannon Galpin, 38, didn't know that she was about to be named one of National Geographic's Adventurers of the Year. She wasn't even aware that she was being considered. In fact, her response to their email asking for an interview was *yeah, right*. "I thought Fitz [the writer] was just messing with me," Galpin says. "I was like, okay, what do you really want?"

Part of Galpin's disbelief was due to National Geographic's cryptic process—the organization keeps its annual honorees top

secret, even to the honorees themselves, until it's ready to publish. But the bigger reason is that Galpin's adventures—pushing cultural and social boundaries in Afghanistan—are controversial and not always well received. A single mom, Galpin is often forced to explain how she justifies taking risky trips to Afghanistan with an eight-year-old daughter at home. "There's a more critical look at the work I do over there, since I am a mother," Galpin says. "So I was completely floored to be chosen by National Geographic."

## MOUNTAIN2MOUNTAIN

The tall, athletic blond was working as a Pilates instructor when she founded the non-profit Mountain2Mountain in 2006. Inspired by Greg Mortenson's book *Three Cups of Tea*, she envisioned mobilizing volunteers and resources in mountain towns in the U.S. to improve living conditions in mountain towns located in conflict regions. She chose Afghanistan—which has

been called the worst country in the world to be a woman—shortly after her daughter entered preschool. "I found it hard to raise a girl in a world with places like Afghanistan—where women suffer from extreme gender violence, where rape is acceptable—and not trying to do something about it," Galpin says.

When she was 19 and living in Minnesota, Galpin herself was a victim of a brutal rape and knifing. But she doesn't lead with that information, because she doesn't want the label of victim. Instead, Galpin prefers to let her work speak for itself. She's traveled to Afghanistan 12 times in the last four years. Her accomplishments include implementing midwife-training programs in the country with the highest maternal death rate in the world, and creating literacy programs in women's prisons, where women are jailed for adultery after being raped. In 2011, she rode her singlespeed mountain bike 140 miles across the Panjshir Valley, a bold act considering women in Afghanistan are not allowed to ride bikes (straddling the saddle is thought to be obscene). She used the ride as a conversation-starter with locals, and as a fundraiser back home in the U.S.

Her latest trip, in October 2012, earned Galpin the National Geographic Adventurer of the Year designation. While there, she put on Afghanistan's first uncensored art exhibit, "Streets of Afghanistan," and displayed it in public spaces and historical sites. The exhibit featured 28 life-sized photographs by both Afghan and Western photographers depicting daily life in the country. As a safety precaution, Galpin kept the venues secret, and used a minibus to discreetly transport the oversized pieces to seven showings in and around Kabul.

Her most gratifying moments were watching locals view the art. In an isolated village north of Kabul called Istalif, a group of young boys stood for 20 minutes studying a photo of busy life in Kabul. It was their first glimpse of the capital city. But there were disheartening moments as well. The day "Streets of Afghanistan" opened in Istalif, a suicide bomber killed 41 people in the northern province of Fayrab.

## STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Galpin claims she's more afraid of not being able to get enough funding to continue Mountain2Mountain's work than she is of traveling to Afghanistan. She is already planning her 13th visit in April 2013, when she'll return to ride with the Afghan Cycling Federation (see *sidebar*), the country's first bike racing team. But that's not to say that her risk tolerance for travel to Afghanistan couldn't change quickly. Violence continues to rise as U.S. troops transfer security operations to Afghan forces, and American-led NATO troops are scheduled to pull out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Galpin admits that travel to Afghanistan may no longer be an option in the coming years—for anyone.

Because of this, she plans to launch her first domestic program this spring—a series of mountain biking camps called Strength in Numbers. The five week-long camps will take place across the U.S., targeting American women in their 20s and 30s who've experienced gender violence. "I realized recently that the worst thing



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**THE LONG ROAD:** GALPIN WILL BRING WHAT SHE HAS LEARNED CHAMPIONING FOR WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN TO THE U.S. THROUGH HER NEW PROJECT STRENGTH IN NUMBERS.

## THE AFGHAN CYCLING FEDERATION

Afghanistan's first national cycling team is based in Kabul and managed by Abdul Sadiqi, who rode solo across the country in 1978. The team consists of roughly 50 members who train three days a week in the streets surrounding Kabul. The dozen women in the group train just once a week and keep the date, time and location of their ride secret for their protection. The team competes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Galpin discovered the group during her last visit to Afghanistan in October. Most of the bikes in Afghanistan are Chinese-made clunkers or decades-old road and mountain bikes, so Galpin is currently collecting gear and apparel donations, for both men and women, to deliver when she visits Afghanistan in April. [mountain2mountain.org](http://mountain2mountain.org).

—J.M.



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that ever happened to me happened on U.S. soil," says Galpin. "Gender violence isn't just something that happens over there. In the United States of America, a woman is raped every two minutes. That's just the ones that are reported."

Strength in Numbers aims to use the bike, a tool in Galpin's own healing process, as a vehicle for social justice. Through learning the sport of mountain biking, participants hone bigger skills—namely breaking out of the victim role and reclaiming their power. The idea is that each woman who goes through camp will launch a project, using tools and resources from Mountain2Mountain, in her own community. The project could combat gender violence, like sex trafficking, or an unrelated injustice

like food deserts. "The subject doesn't really matter," says Galpin. "We're building an army of changemakers."

Camps will take place in Aspen, Breckenridge and Moab, with a high school prototype in the works in Harlem, New York. Mountain2Mountain has partnered with Denver-based Alchemy Bicycles, a hydration company out of Boulder called Skratch Labs, Primal Wear cycling apparel in Denver, Osprey Packs in Cortez and a women's mountain bike apparel company in Aspen called Shely. Galpin is looking for other Colorado companies interested in supporting Strength in Numbers, as well as camp volunteers. More information and an application form for potential campers can be found at [mountain2mountain.org](http://mountain2mountain.org).



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