

Moving Mountains

Shannon Galpin fights for women's rights in Afghanistan, becomes the first woman to ride a mountain bike there, and finds her own strength in the process.

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Photography By Tony Di Zinno



For her first-time visit to a prison, Shannon Galpin thought it couldn't have gone better. She'd just pulled away from a soviet-era women's compound in a remote village in northern Afghanistan. The 55-year-old was planning to start a program there to educate the inmates, most of them victims, imprisoned because, when an Afghan woman is raped, the crime is her fault. She'd brought a photographer to document the prison so that she would be able to tell the world about her plans. As Shannon relaxed into the backseat of the car, she smiled at their success.

The photographer didn't smile back. He jerked his head up, staring intently ahead through the windshield as the driver began to slow down. "Don't stop!" he yelled. Shannon sat up and saw four men in the middle of the road waving their arms.

The driver stopped.

The men rushed the car, forced the driver out, and began beating him in the street. Over the thuds of kicks and punches, Shannon could hear him crying and begging for his life—and hers.

Frozen, all she could do was stare at him, huddled on the ground. Shannon fought to control her emotions because she knew what it felt like to be a victim. Nearly 20 years ago, she'd been attacked at knifepoint while walking home through a park in Minneapolis. Now a world away, the noise of human struggle and the sound of the driver's begging brought back unwelcome memories.

The photographer had crept into the front seat, ready to accelerate away from the struggle, but as quickly as they'd yanked the driver from the car, the bearded assailants threw him back in. Bloodied and bruised, he stepped on the gas pedal and they fled the scene. Not far away, they reached a police checkpoint where officers warned them there was Taliban activity in the area. The warning came too late.

The officers warned that the Taliban were targeting drivers who transported foreigners as a scare tactic to get aid workers and missionaries out of Afghanistan. The violent assault was

meant to clear the country of people like Shannon, people trying to help. The Taliban wanted the world to think Afghanistan was a hopeless cause, paving the way for their conservative militia to take over.

Fortunately, it wasn't working.

Shannon has been to Afghanistan five times in the past three years. But witnessing this attack last spring was the closest she'd come to the type of danger she'd seen on television or in the newspapers at home—kidnappings, gang rape, torture.

"I know these things incidents are survivable," she says. "My main fear is if something more serious happened. I fear not coming back home at all. Not being alive for my five-year-old daughter."

It's a bold statement coming from a former ballerina who grew up in North Dakota. Behind her lithe frame and long blonde hair, Shannon's experience with survival might seem slight. Her pretty, polished façade hides a secret that she's only started speaking about very recently. Shannon doesn't want the brutal rape she endured at the age of 17 to be the focal point of her work in Afghanistan, but she knows they're connected. "I can't justify raising my daughter in a world where a practice like rape is still socially acceptable in some places," she says. "I have to do something about it."

She knows that she can't stop rape from ever happening again, but Shannon feels compelled to challenge cultures that tolerate it, that criminalize the female victim instead of her perpetrator, or that openly use rape as a weapon of war. It's not a coincidence that many of the cultures are the same ones that violate human rights on a daily basis: forcing women to marry against their will, or marry as children; denying girls access to education; permitting husbands to rape and beat their wives, or allowing honor killings—family murders of young women who have "dishonored" themselves or their families, sometimes with deeds as trivial as making eye contact or speaking with a stranger on the street.

Inspired by author Greg Mortenson and his best-selling book, *Three Cups of Tea*, which documented his own efforts to help Afghan girls, Shannon stepped away from

a career as a personal trainer in 2006 and sank everything she had into creating her own non-profit, Mountain 2 Mountain. The name plays on the fact that Shannon lives in Breckenridge, Colorado, a mountain town, and that she is reaching out to women in Afghan mountain towns half a world away. After applying for her 501c3 and awaiting non-profit designation, Shannon got her feet wet by fundraising for Central Asia Institute, Mortenson's organization. The experience taught her how to connect with donors and solidified her desire to improve the lives of women in Afghanistan. It also helped her realize that she wasn't satisfied with just fundraising.

Shannon wanted more direct involvement with the challenges on the ground in Afghanistan. She set up M2M to provide women's education and training, believing it could bring positive change to entire communities. She hopes students in her programs become teachers in a country where only 14 percent of women have completed a formal education, or that they become midwives in a country with the highest maternal death rate in the world—where a pregnant woman dies every 50 minutes. She hopes they'll start money-making co-ops and bring much-needed cash to the countryside where two-thirds of the population lives on fewer than two U.S. dollars a day. By educating children, saving lives, and increasing family and community income, these women will slowly break down their culture's built-in gender inequality. As perceptions change, women's rights will evolve within their own villages, literally transforming Afghanistan from the inside out.

Besides tipping the balance toward equality, women's education has far-reaching and positive effects on the economy. Data from the Nike Foundation's "The Girl Effect," an initiative started last year to recognize the positive impact of investing in female adolescents in developing countries, is staggering. It suggests that a girl with seven years of education marries four years later than a girl who

Bikes aren't the only thing Shannon has ridden in Afghanistan, she's pictured here atop a horse outside of Kabul's Ghazi Stadium.

never goes to school, and that she'll have 2.2 fewer children. Education also translates to a better understanding of health and nutrition, lowering the spread of communicable diseases such as HIV, and reducing malnutrition by up to 45 percent. If 10 percent more girls enter secondary school, a country's economy grows three percent. "You can't deny the powerful social and economic change that comes about when girls have the opportunity to participate in their society," Shannon says. "Education and training are the first step."

Shannon thinks Afghanistan is ripe for women-driven change. Thanks to a heavy American presence for the last decade, and Buddhism's foothold in Afghanistan before the Taliban takeover in 1996, there is more temperance with regard to religious extremism than you see in traditionally Islamic fundamentalist countries like Saudi Arabia or Yemen. Case in point: two women in Afghanistan ran for president in the last election. Two parliament seats in each province are reserved for women, so 64 of the 249 lawmakers are female. Not everyone accepts or condones this, but it's undeniable that the seeds of women's progress are there.

"Those seeds inspire me," says Shannon. "You have women not only willing to take on great personal risk, but who are demanding to further women's rights in their country. When you have women like that already pushing those boundaries, you want to do everything you can to support and encourage them, to be a catalyst so that they can create change in their own society."

Mountain 2 Mountain's projects this year are based on that concept—being a catalyst—and several of the projects focus on sparking women's empowerment. The first program educates women in prisons so that girls like Maymameh—an 18-year-old who

was convicted of adultery after being raped by her brother-in-law—have skills to fall back on after serving their sentence. Education and training are particularly critical for women in prison, since most have been disowned by their families or, as in Maymameh's case, fear for their lives once they're released from jail. Maymameh's husband has sworn to kill her to restore his "honor." M2M has programs in the works or up and running at a half-dozen women's prisons.

Another project teaches midwifery skills to rural women. Though most villages have a doctor, the demand for medical skills is greater than the supply, and Afghan women who live far from towns often can't afford to travel or seek out pre- and postnatal care. Along with Afghanistan's abysmal maternal death rate, it also has the highest newborn fatality rate in the world. M2M starts girls as young as ten years old in a four-week intensive training program that focuses on basic sanitation and prenatal care. The girls learn skills for delivering and caring for newborns and mothers; skills that have cut birth-related fatalities in rural communities by 70 percent. M2M follows up with annual continuing education programs that culminate after five years with each candidate earning a certificate.

Shannon's found that M2M's other goal, providing general education to women, is strongly tied to the midwifery training program. When she tried to establish a girl's school in the province of Panjshir, 90 miles north of Kabul, community elders dragged their feet about building it. Although land was available and Shannon's team was standing by for construction, the school's progress stalled. When Shannon switched the discussion to midwifery, everyone's eyes lit up—the village doctor needed help. As it turned out, midwifery was a skill they valued much more than reading and writing. Up to that point, every

woman in the village was illiterate and Shannon explained how this would impede them from learning the skills to save the lives of women and babies. How could they read a prescription label or pass along medical records? Within days the men of the village agreed on the adamant need for a girl's school and Shannon will spend part of this summer in Panjshir working out the details. "All they needed was a practical reason to understand why girls' education was important to their community," she says.

These are ambitious projects for a young non-profit. But Shannon has an effective approach to fundraising, as evidenced by the \$100,000 she brought in during M2M's first year. She focuses on mountain-sports enthusiasts and art communities, organizing events like the annual fundraising trail run in Breckenridge called "Race to the Mountains." M2M's latest multimedia art exhibit, "The Streets of Afghanistan," will premier in August in Denver, with exhibitions in Park City, Utah, and Washington D.C. planned before the end of the year. It's already scheduled for venues in New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and a handful of other major (and mountain) cities in 2011.

But Shannon's crown-jewel fundraiser for 2010 is a cycling event. She took up mountain biking right before she launched M2M, and doesn't think the timing was coincidence. She credits the sport for giving her the guts to carry out her quest for women's empowerment in Afghanistan. It was, after all, a medium for her own empowerment. Taking on the hills of Colorado by bike gave her back a sense of control over her body. It was perhaps the final bit of reinforcement she needed that she was strong and resilient. "I really feel like learning to ride changed me," she says. "Not to sound hippy drippy, but I didn't feel like a rape victim any more. Instead I felt like a force to be reckoned with."

For M2M's flagship fundraiser, Shannon is organizing community rides in Denver, Colorado Springs, Park City, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., New York, and Hawaii, with new locations still being added. Each city's ride will be different, a reflection of the individuality of that community—a road race in Los Angeles, for example, and a mountain-bike ride through the snow in Park City. The rides, dubbed The Panjshir Tour, will take place

simultaneously on October 5th. The date marks the one-year anniversary of Shannon's first mountain bike ride in Afghanistan, and Shannon will be riding through Panjshir's countryside on the same date this year, too. Her hope is to attract attention to M2M's projects among Americans and among local people in Panjshir. "The intent is to connect our donor communities with our project communities through the power of the pedal," she says as she outlines her long-term goal of holding bicycle events in several countries and raising money to empower women in Afghanistan, on the same day women there take to two wheels.



As integral as biking has become to M2M's mission, it wasn't apparent to Shannon at first that her love of the sport would carry into her work in Afghanistan. But in 2008, en route to visit a women's prison in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, she got to see the backside of 13,000-foot Salang Pass, a part of Afghanistan she'd never seen before. "I remember looking at the goat paths thinking this would be some of the most incredible mountain biking in the world," she said.

She talked to her translator, Hamid, about the feasibility of riding those trails. Women in Afghanistan don't ride bikes, and if they did, they would meet a brutal punishment, or even death. "He said I was crazy, but that logistically it was doable," Shannon said. "That's all I needed to hear."

She decided to try her first ride in the province of Panjshir, not only because several M2M projects were already located there, but because it has been a stronghold of the Northern Alliance, a military-political coalition that took over from the Taliban in 2002. Panjshir

is one of the most unlikely places to encounter the Taliban and one of the least conservative areas in Afghanistan.

Last fall, she dismantled the sturdy hard-tail bike she'd built five years ago to ride Colorado's rocky trails, packed it up, and took it with her to Afghanistan. With it loaded into the back of a Toyota Corolla, Hamid drove her to a remote section of Panjshir and they followed a riverbed until they found a goat path—a good place to ride because of the low probability of landmines. Shannon set off and Hamid waited by the car. When she returned, a small group of men had gathered, but she could tell by Hamid's smile that the crowd was curious, not angry. These were local goat herders, not the Taliban. Shannon took the opportunity to ask them their opinions. *What do you think of women riding bikes, of women playing sports, of girls' education?* The response was so encouraging that she found herself talking about M2M and her mission. She decided to do it again.

For several days, she and Hamid went out, following the same routine, staying remote, looking for a goat path. But each time, they moved slightly closer to populated areas. Each time that Shannon returned to the car, people had gathered and dialog ensued. Without fail, M2M would come up, and Shannon would be invited to someone's village to help. Finally, Shannon got the courage to bike the main road Panjshir. She passed old Soviet tanks, police checkpoints, and dozens and dozens of people.

"It absolutely blew their minds, seeing a woman riding through the hills on a bike," she says. She dressed conservatively, covering her entire body, even wearing a headscarf under her helmet. Shannon's fair skin and light eyes clearly set her apart as a foreigner, so men's perceptions were different for her than they would have been if their wives or daughters did the same. Potential animosity changed to curiosity. "What I didn't expect was how many barriers were broken by my bicycle," she said. People wanted to engage with me because they had never seen anything like it before. It sparked conversation in a way I could never have imagined."

Her ride as part of the Panjshir Tour this year will be an expanded version of those successful day trips. She plans to do a multi-day ride along the province's

primary road. The rolling course will cover paved highway as well as dirt, and if conditions allow, she'll climb to 14,000-foot Anjuman Pass, which marks the province's northern border. While she originally chose to ride in Panjshir because the province's relative lack of Taliban, she acknowledges that this year's ride presents a greater risk. Her outings will be more public, and word of her travels will spread more quickly than she rides. Spectators will be anticipating her arrival.

One can't help but wonder, is this ride worth the risk? On the upside, it exposes Shannon and her mission to local Afghans in a ground breaking new way. Her courage and vulnerability, paired with her status as a curiosity, create understanding and encourage collaboration on both sides. Her ride provides an opportunity for Afghans and Americans to interact, without the presence of guns, and it's a baby step that is breaking down barriers for women in Afghanistan. Shannon is even design a modest tricycle to introduce women in her midwifery training programs to the joys of riding.

The scale of the impact that Shannon's ride will have is small compared to M2M's other programs and projects, and the chances of the situation turning dangerous are high. The price of this ride could be her life, yet Shannon's mind is made up. For her, it's tied to the goals of M2M in an inseparable fashion: her own violent past, the struggle of women in Afghanistan, the mountains, the bike, her future. She admits it's a connection she still doesn't fully comprehend, but that it's what she needs to do. Studies by "The Girl Effect" program have shown that empowering women in developing countries makes them agents for positive social and economic change. Women then become the solution instead of the victims. Biking in Afghanistan may be Shannon's own personal empowerment. A rite of passage, if you will, that solidifies her as part of the solution. ■

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Shannon's work involves visiting schools, like this boy's school in Kabul's Murad Khane district (opposite), and making friends with local militia (above).

