



Moving Mountains

NO AFGHAN WOMAN HAD EVER REACHED THE 24,580-foot peak of Mount Nushaq—the country’s highest point—until Hanifa Yousofi stood atop it on August 10, 2018. The feat spoke to the long-suppressed strength and potential of Afghanistan’s women, more than 70% of whom remained illiterate, and led many to wonder what other heights Afghan women might soon reach. “I did this for every single girl,” Yousofi said in a 2018 interview. “The girls of Afghanistan are strong and will continue to be strong.”

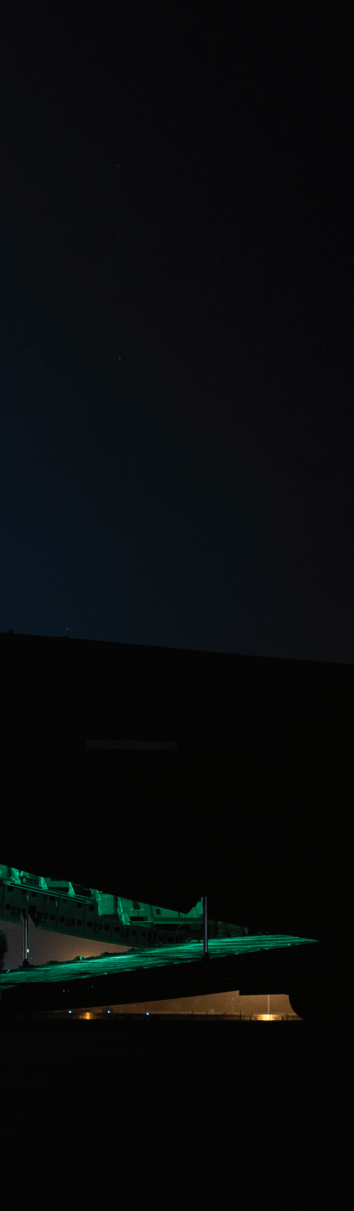
Yousofi’s summit was made possible by a fittingly named nonprofit, Ascend, which had both taught her how to climb—before joining Ascend, Yousofi had never done a sit-up—and covered the extensive costs involved in climbing one of the world’s highest mountains (Nushaq is 24,580 feet; Mount Everest is 29,031 feet). The nonprofit saw mountaineering as a way to instill mental and physical toughness in teenage girls navigating a society that demanded both—a way for them to be outside, rather than housebound

In the wake of the fall of Kabul, a nonprofit’s focus shifted almost overnight from empowering young women to evacuating them. Brunswick’s **PRESTON GOLSON** reports.

with chores, and learn to become leaders of their own lives. Yousofi’s climb, which grabbed international headlines, showed how Ascend’s work could help shift the narrative of what the world believed Afghan women were capable of—and what Afghan women believed themselves capable of.

Almost exactly three years after Yousofi’s summit, the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan, a military victory cemented by the capture of Kabul, the country’s capital city, which was home to Ascend’s operations and its newly finished bouldering wall.

Overnight, the nonprofit’s focus shifted from empowering girls to evacuating them. “Ascend exists to create change, and we do that by empowering people to create change where they are—we never wanted to be a reason people left Afghanistan,” says Marina LeGree, Ascend’s founder and Executive Director. “But after the Taliban took over, we realized we had to do whatever we could to get our people out. It’s so unfair for them. They’re just mired in the suffering they didn’t cause and can’t fix.”



An air crew prepares to load evacuees aboard an aircraft in support of the Afghanistan evacuation on August 21, 2021 in Kabul.

There has been a shocking amount of that suffering. The UN World Food Programme estimates more than 22 million Afghans, or over half the population, face “crisis-level hunger,” while 95% of the population lacks access to sufficient food. A separate forecast by the UN said that by mid 2022, 97% of Afghanistan’s population could be living in poverty. COVID-19 coupled with a drought have made an already dire situation even more so.

Ascend’s participants face yet another danger: the Taliban’s violent, repressive stance toward women. When previously in power, the group brutally restricted women’s access to healthcare, education and employment. Harrowing video footage captured the Taliban publicly executing a woman in 1999 at Kabul Stadium—the same stadium where, more than a decade later, girls in Ascend’s program ran laps.

In a conversation in April with Brunswick’s Preston Golson, LeGree, an American who spent years in the country as a development worker and used her own savings to get Ascend off the ground, explained how amid unrelenting stress, heartbreak and chaos, the organization managed to help 135 people get out.

Let’s go back to August 15, 2021, the day the Taliban enter Kabul. How was that time for you, for Ascend, for your people on the ground?

We’d been contingency planning, but it happened a lot faster than anyone really expected. First there was disbelief. Then chaos. Our Norwegian country manager sent me a photo of the Taliban in the street outside, as she stood in the garden burning documents. Our phones were flooded with cries for help.

The first thing we did was rally everybody that cared about our cause. We said, “Please help, particularly those in the Special Operations community, formerly or currently, or who are in the places to physically pass messages and open the gates so that our girls are allowed to come into the airport and get on a plane.” We had letters from senators vouching for our staff, we got on lists for access to certain gates at the airport, things like that, but we were one group out of many all trying to do the same thing.

Once we decided we would help people get out, we knew we had to not only get them out of Afghanistan, but get them visas. Millions of people were clamoring for that, so we had to be very focused on finding sources of actual, workable help. I had to answer every call, every message on every channel in case it was the one that unlocked a flight or visa—my phone actually overheated a few times. Our whole team, our Board of Directors, they turned into these 24/7 machines. And I turned into this unemotional being,

because as Afghans across the country tried to find a way out, they called the foreigners they knew. I’ve worked there since 2005, so I had not just the hundreds of girls associated with Ascend calling me, but people I had worked with calling and begging me to save their families. So I had to shut down any sort of emotional response and be like, “give me your message” then get off the phone. I was trying to answer every phone call and I never knew when someone that would be able to help might call.

We had tremendous support from our donor base. I was not acting like an executive director of a non-profit at all. I did zero fundraising. I didn’t communicate with our donors; I had to give all my attention to our girls and getting them out. You’re supposed to update your donors all the time about what’s going on. People didn’t even hear from me. And the fact that people understood that and they kept sending checks so that we would have options, that was really an honor. I felt like people could see our mission had integrity and were willing to support it.

All of that work was from a distance though. In Kabul, for our girls and our staff, it was a scary time. They were deciding in an instant whether to leave their homes forever. We would get permission for girls to enter at a specific gate at the airport, we’d make a perfect spreadsheet with all their data and send it to the right person, then send the girls to that gate. And they’d go, walking through Taliban checkpoints, and fighting through the crowds at the gates. And then that gate would close and we’d redirect them to another gate, a mile away. It took many tries to get one success. Speaking to girls on the phone, I could hear gunfire, people screaming. The Taliban’s behavior was a big unknown, and we had this situation where US forces were like six feet away from the Taliban, and everybody’s wondering “What are we supposed to do now?” But the airport was overwhelmed, and it became clear the biggest threat was actually the chaotic crowd at the airport.

Just how difficult was it to get people out?

Very difficult. There was tremendous pressure at the airport; everyone was trying to get through a very small number of gates, and the clock was ticking because the US departure on August 31 meant all foreign forces would be gone by that time. The crowds around the airport were desperate; there were security forces trying to control the crowds—violently in some cases. We were warned that ISIS was planning an attack and people should stay away from the airport—exactly at the same time we were told to send people to the very gate that was about to be hit.

We grabbed any chance we could get. Ascend worked with the Embassy of Denmark, for example, and the Danes told us, “We could treat one of your girls as if they’re Danish staff and they could get to Denmark.” But the Danish military’s footprint was small in Afghanistan. They didn’t really have an operational plan to get these girls to the physical custody of Danish soldiers and onto a Danish plane. So my two 17-year-old interns and their families spent three nights outside the airport, sleeping in the dirt and waiting for instructions to get inside. And I was their only connection to what was going on. I’m emailing Copenhagen asking: “Do you have somebody there I can text?” Because emailing felt outrageous when people are getting shot and tear gassed.

I was really proud of those two girls. They kept their heads—and they’re 17 years old. One of the girls’ mom, actually, was pregnant and delivered two days after they arrived in Abu Dhabi—and she never mentioned the pregnancy because she was worried that, because the baby’s name wasn’t on the list, she wouldn’t be allowed to board the plane.

Some of our girls were injured, and some were right next to people who were killed. At a certain point we said, “We cannot recommend anybody being anywhere near the airport.”

Land routes to Pakistan were another option, but also not easy. No one knew in the early days how they would be treated by border guards or by Taliban on the way. But some people just made a run for it. We told them, “Hire the fixer. Do whatever you need to do. We’ll pay for it. Just get yourself into Pakistan.” We had one group that tried three times before they got through under barbed wire and walked barefoot across the rocky ground to get to Quetta. Some friends in the Pakistani government were willing to safeguard our people so that they could board a flight and we sent them to Chile. That’s part of the group that’s living in Santiago.

So, some very dramatic stuff, some real danger. But for a lot of our girls, it was more like a slow burn of depression. Sitting with the knowledge that they’d lost everything. A lot of girls join Ascend because they have big dreams, they want to fight for women’s rights and change their society. So watching the Taliban wipe all that away was a nightmare come true.

A lot has been written about the fundraising and the charter planes that private groups mobilized to evacuate people. We were doing the same thing, and we raised quite a lot of money over a short period of time so that we could organize a plane. It was expensive—I’m talking over a million dollars for a larger plane and you had to buy insurance. We started

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down that path but ended up not needing to spend our donors’ money that way. People helped us, people accepted our girls onto their own flights at little or no cost. That gave us the opportunity to use those funds instead for the girls as they resettled.

How many different countries have the girls been relocated to?

We have people resettled now in the US, Chile, Ireland, Denmark, Germany, Poland, Canada, Kazakhstan, and New Zealand. There are now 95 people who are resettled legally, permanently somewhere. The remaining 43 are in transition; two are in Islamabad and the rest in a camp in Abu Dhabi. We helped them all apply to go to Canada, and we anticipate news soon.

Are you still in contact with the girls?

Every day. We set up two programs to serve the girls: Ascend Online is geared to those still in transition, who have little access to resources. Through Google Classrooms, our staff deliver classes almost daily in English, physical fitness, mental health support and life skills. The second program is the Ascend Alumni Association, for anyone who was a part of our Afghan program. It’s a way for the girls to stay connected with one another and share opportunities.

What we’re really trying to encourage, though, is for the girls to put roots down, to find ways to integrate and succeed—for them to not need Ascend. In many cases, the thing that gives the most joy and peace is getting out hiking and climbing again.

What we’re seeing a lot, right now, is girls asking us to please get their families out, which we have no ability to do. It’s an ongoing heartbreak.

Why can’t the asylum extend to their families?

It’s really up to government policies. Girls who are under 18 can usually apply for family reunification, but most governments don’t accept parents and siblings. We knew that would be the case even during the chaotic evacuation days. Those policies haven’t changed. We wanted to do whatever we could to help the ones most at risk: our girls. We were able to secure help because people believed in our mission and they wanted to support Ascend girls to have a future. That support would not have necessarily widened to support brothers, fathers or adult siblings. We basically said, “Please be sympathetic to our cause. Look at the profile of these girls—they don’t need to be vetted, please just take them.”

We were also able to secure visas because we pledged to support the girls when they landed.



Through our partners in Ireland, for example, we fundraised together so that the girls would come with their own resources, and be housed in homes in the community. They are not on government benefits. And they were welcomed into communities near Galway and Dublin, and they're working, learning English and building their futures.

We threw it all together on the go, and at the time we didn't know for sure whether the girls would be able to reunite with their families or not. The reality is that for most of them it will be a long time, and that is an ongoing heartbreak for them.

Having to deliver that sort of news—"there's nothing we can do for your family right now"—on top of all the stress, the sleepless nights, I imagine that's taken a toll. How are you holding up?

I'm good now. January 2nd was the last day we moved girls out of Afghanistan; after that I could breathe a little easier. I had a bit of a meltdown over the Christmas and New Year holidays, because the pressure never let up. I was desperate to unplug and focus on my family, but it wasn't possible. We still had people who needed plane tickets, cash, guidance. Given the time differences, I had to get up in the middle of the night again and again. The pleas for help never stopped coming. There were also some girls who were angry with me because they couldn't understand why we couldn't bring their families—so yes, there were some tough moments.

As these pressures were building, my youngest son broke his arm. I was on the phone doing one last

Marina LeGree, Ascend's founder and Executive Director, in happier times.

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thing for Ascend and I left him alone playing a little longer than I should have and he jumped off the fireplace mantel. So I said, "OK, it's time for me to shift gears and put some boundaries in place."

As the crisis fades, it's time to confront the longer-term implications of what happened. It's profoundly sad to see the dreams of so many Afghans crushed. There was a role for outsiders to play in the evacuation and resettlement period, but it is Afghans who have to deal with the new reality of Afghanistan.

The country has been in crisis for a long time. A lot of people have a lot to answer for regarding what happened. But I think we, as an organization, have to focus on our mission of empowering girls, and try to be constructive as much as we can and look forward.

You mentioned looking forward; what does Ascend's future look like?

There are three focus areas for Ascend's future. First, we will finish our resettlement work. We'll do our best to support the girls who aren't yet resettled through the Ascend Online platform, and for all the alumni we'll keep building the Ascend Alumni Association. We're working with partners around the world to plug the girls into the resources they need.

Second, we'll be starting an Ascend program somewhere else, with mountaineering and rock climbing-based activities, leadership classes, nutrition classes, mental health support—helping girls become leaders and change makers. We're in the process of selecting the new locations.

The third is to figure out what to do inside of Afghanistan. There are lots of organizations that found a way to co-exist with the Taliban when they were in charge last time, like MSF, [Médecins Sans Frontières, or Doctors Without Borders], and that's what is happening again. Any NGO that's been in Afghanistan for a while has had to deal with the Taliban in some form—they never went away. I'm hoping there's somebody reasonable to talk to in the government, but so far, we'd rather just stay quiet.

We have to be pragmatic and find an acceptable level of risk for the girls involved. That's what we're trying to understand. Almost all of the people we were able to help out of Afghanistan still have family and friends in Kabul, so they know what's going on. The girls on our leadership call are talking to their little sisters and saying, "OK, would you feel comfortable walking three blocks to come to a class?"

That's what we're thinking about right now: What can we do for Afghan girls? The answer is definitely not to walk away. ♦