

UNSUNG HEROINES 2023

St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church and Pro-Cathedral



Shabana Basij-Rasikh (1990-), Educator, Champion of Women's Rights

Shabana Basij-Rasikh was born in 1990 in Kabul, Afghanistan. She was six years old when the Taliban took control of the country. Women and girls were only allowed outside their homes if they were wearing a burqa and accompanied by a male chaperone. Girls were not permitted to go to school. Secret schools were set up in private homes and run by women whose families were willing to risk retribution. Shabana's older sister attended one of these schools, but since Shabana had no male chaperone, her parents cut Shabana's hair and dressed her as a boy. In that way, both children went to school. She recalls her father saying, "You can lose everything you own in your life. Your money can be stolen. But the one thing that will always remain with you is what is in here (pointing to his head). Your education is the biggest investment in life. Don't ever regret it."

When the Taliban regime fell in 2001, girls were once again allowed to attend school, and Shabana attended a year of high school in Wisconsin as part of the State Department's Youth Exchange studies program. She later enrolled at Middlebury College in Vermont. While at Middlebury, in 2008, she founded SOLA (School of Leadership, Afghanistan) which is dedicated to giving young Afghans access to quality education abroad and jobs back home. She returned to Kabul after graduation and turned SOLA into the first Afghan

boarding school for girls, providing an education to girls ages 11-19 and helping them to gain admission and financial aid to universities around the world.

With the resurgence of the Taliban and impending U.S. withdrawal, Shabana realized that she'd have to find a way to continue their education. She decided to move the students and faculty to Rwanda. In August of 2021, she spent three days at the airport in Kabul gathering the children, their families and faculty in the hope that they could be evacuated. Shabana burned all the records from the school in order to protect the families left behind and eventually she evacuated 256 people on one of the last planes allowed to leave Afghanistan. Her plan is to eventually make her way back to Afghanistan and re-establish the school.

Submitted by Nancy Nicolette

Sources: sola-afghanistan.org, CBS *60 Minutes*