The Story of an Inspiring Young Afghan Woman

Recent UNFPA contest winner

Darya (her artist name) is a young Afghan woman, mentioned in the final pages of my memoir, *My University of the World: Adventures of an International Film and Media Maker*. She contacted me in November 2021, after the Taliban had taken control again in her country. She's an example of resilience in the face of difficult circumstances—something needed by all of us who cherish human rights and freedom today, given the recent political changes in the U.S. and trends in other countries. See more of her artwork and her story on the link below, and contact me if you have ideas or connections for her present situation or her unknown future.

As a child, Darya was influenced by the most successful and long-lasting media project I started, UNICEF's Meena Communication Initiative. She was born and grew up as a refugee in Peshawar, Pakistan. (Her late father was from a minority community and the family had escaped the first Taliban rule.) Her mother, a teacher in her school, brought her Meena comic books to read and she saw Meena cartoons on television. The Meena stories challenge traditional South Asian gender norms, and from an early age she understood that girls in her family and society do not have the same rights as boys, and that this is not right.

After the Taliban were overthrown, the family returned to Afghanistan, where she completed secondary school. But Darya is one of thousands of young Afghan women whose dreams of a university education were interrupted when the Taliban returned to power. (She wants to become a professional art therapist and return to Afghanistan to help when the time is right.) We communicated many times and I encouraged her not to give up. She tried as hard as possible to continue volunteer work with UNICEF Afghanistan's Youth Network and to teach art for children at local NGOs. But she knew artwork of

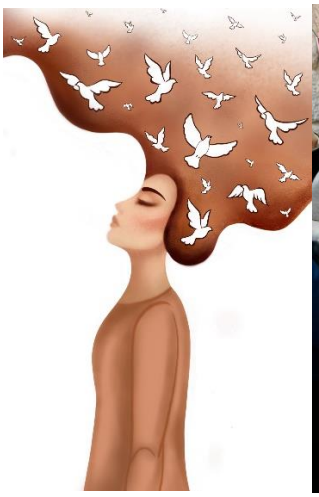
humans and other living things was forbidden by the new government and she would become a target. Also, there were bomb threats aimed at minorities and women appearing in public, so she managed to escape to Pakistan with her mother.

When she reached Islamabad, I contacted three former UNICEF-Pakistani colleagues. Between the four of us, we supplied her with a new laptop computer, an electronic pen, a new cellphone, a little cash, lots of encouragement, and she took off from there! The title painting at the beginning of this story has recently won a competition organized by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Pakistan.

Since then, UNFPA invited her with others to meet their Regional Director, and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) contracted her to complete six cartoon-style illustrations (see below) for their "16 Days of Activism," Nov. 25 - Dec. 10, 2024. Not only that, since arriving in Pakistan, Darya's artwork has been displayed by women's groups in the U.S., U.K., and Italy, where one piece was published by Avvenire newspaper and presented to Pope Francis, and another added to Monastery Di Marango's calendar for July 2025. Some of her work has also sold/been published for social-cultural purposes. She used the sale of her artwork to run five distant art courses for disadvantaged children in Afghanistan, and applied for and received an Afghan Bridge Fellowship from the U.S. to fund an additional course. She was also contracted by the Idries Shah Foundation to narrate 30 children's stories in Dari language.

In preparation for her future, Darya registered in the California-based online University of the People to study health sciences, and has completed many online certificate courses in diverse subjects: psychology, art therapy, online teaching, self-empowerment, international leadership and organizational behavior, social management, and managing project risks and changes. She translates testimonials of Afghan women refugees from Dari to English for the American NGO, Team Themis, and produces posters for them. In addition, she has signed up to do voluntary work for UNHCR, Pakistan.

Darya is a refugee herself, but does not see herself as a victim. Somehow, by her personality and talents, she succeeds. She came from humble beginnings and doesn't know what the future has in store for her or where she might end up. You can contact me at the email address below if you want to communicate on this: nmckee20@gmail.com. Also, enjoy more of her artwork below.



Avvenire newspaper members presenting Darya's artwork to Pope Francis, May 2024

An Afghan version of a poster character (right) created for Team Themis, Pakistan, based on "Rosie the Riveter" an allegorical cultural icon in the U.S. who represented women who worked in factories and shipyards during World War II, plus earlier artwork on the more feminine side.

Cartoons created for UNHCR's "16 Days of Activism" on gender violence, empowerment of girls and women, non-discrimination, protection and solidarity, support mechanisms, and transformative change, below:

And other expressive work by Darya below:

Darya

SCHOOL