

In Search of the Afghan Girl

1 She was one of the world's most famous faces, and yet no one knew who she was. Her image appeared on the front of magazines, books, and posters, but
5 she didn't know it. Who was this young girl and what happened to her? After searching for nearly two decades, *National Geographic* once again found the Afghan girl with the unforgettable green eyes. This
10 is her story.

For almost 20 years, the young Afghan girl's identity—and her fate¹—remained a mystery. After several unsuccessful attempts to locate her, *National Geographic* photographer Steve
15 McCurry, who had taken her famous photo, returned to Pakistan once more to see if he could uncover any information about the girl. She would now be a woman in her early thirties, and finding her, if she was indeed still
20 alive, would not be easy.

McCurry discovered that the refugee camp where he'd taken the original photo was still standing. He began his search there. He showed the girl's photograph to many
25 people. Most did not know the child. And then, a man who had also lived in the camp as a boy recognized the girl's picture. Yes, he told McCurry, she was alive. She had left the camp and was now living in the mountains
30 of Afghanistan. The man offered to find the woman and bring her to McCurry. It seemed a long shot, but McCurry agreed.

It took three days for the woman to arrive, but when McCurry saw her walk into the room,
35 he was **convinced** this was the right person. Time and hardship had erased her youth,



▲ Sharbat Gula in 1984

but the eyes had not changed—they were the same bright color, with the same intense stare. The woman, through an interpreter, was
40 introduced as Sharbat Gula. At last, the girl in the photo had a name and could tell her story.

In the winter of 1984, when Gula was just a child, bombs² **exploded** in her village, killing her parents. She, her grandmother, brother,
45 and sisters fled in **terror** across dangerous mountain roads to Pakistan. Once there, they stayed in various refugee camps along the **border** of the two countries, living in crowded surroundings at the **mercy** of other people. It
50 was in one of these camps that McCurry met and photographed young Sharbat Gula.





▲ Sharbat Gula in 2002

Gula had married at the age of 16. In the mid-1990s, during a pause in the fighting in Afghanistan, she and her husband returned home. Once there, however, the couple's life remained difficult and **unstable**. One of their four daughters died as a baby. Following this **tragedy**, Gula's husband contracted a serious illness, and there were no medical **clinics** in the region for him to go to. Although he survived the illness, money was scarce, and Gula's husband had to travel to Pakistan for work. His **wages** were just enough for the family to live on.



65 Though Gula received some schooling as a child, she was unable to complete her studies. Today she can write her name but cannot read; nevertheless, she has hopes for the future. "I want my daughters to have skills," she said. "I wanted to finish school but could not. I was sorry when I had to leave." Gula hopes her girls will get the education she was never able to complete.

She had also never seen the photograph taken by McCurry, nor did she know that it had become a famous image and inspired thousands of people worldwide to aid refugees. "I don't think she was particularly interested in her personal fame,"³ McCurry said. But Gula was pleased when she learned she had become a symbol of the strength of her people.

Today Sharbat Gula and her story are once again **mobilizing** people to help, for example, by inspiring people to assist in the development and delivery of educational opportunities for young Afghan women and girls. "She stood for an entire group of refugees, not just Afghan refugees," says Boyd Matson of *National Geographic*. "She has helped us with our mission⁴ of educating people about other cultures and regions—and she's helping us again by drawing attention to the lives of Afghan women and girls in general."

¹ A person's **fate** is what happens to them in their lives.

² A **bomb** is a device which explodes and damages or destroys a large area.

³ If a person achieves **fame**, he or she becomes very well known.

⁴ A **mission** is an important task or activity.

◀ A family portrait shows from left to right, three-year-old daughter Zahida, husband Rahmat Gul, Sharbat Gula, Alia, and Sharbat's older brother, Kashar Khan.

Opposite page: Dr. Harry Quigley, an ophthalmologist (eye doctor), reviewed photographs of the eyes, and said, "It's the same person." Other experts agreed.