

Pali High Junior Alicia Escalante Working to Help Evacuees in Afghanistan through the Power of Social Media

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Photos courtesy of Instagram/@foragirlfromagirl

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Imagine having everything taken away, an uncertain future being shattered by a war-torn, violent present where anything and everything has and will continue to change in an instant.

Imagine being forced to make unthinkable decisions on which the very survival of your family depends.

This is the reality for people currently living in Afghanistan, particularly for women. As the war rages on in Ukraine, it is important not to forget the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan as well. Families are being torn apart. The hopes and goals of women and girls that once seemed attainable are now obliterated, their lives in danger simply for being born a woman.

Women in Afghanistan are being especially targeted for their careers, philosophies and voices since the violent Taliban takeover. Little girls as young as 8-years-old are being kidnapped and sold as brides. The threat of death and torture loom over the heads of ambitious women pursuing their dreams. Women's rights have been stripped away and their options for education, careers and freedom are gone.

Enter founder and president of Warrior Angels Rescue, Valerie Edmondson Bolaños. Bolaños started Warrior Angels Rescue in 2017 when Hurricane Maria hit her hometown of Puerto Rico and she lost contact with her family. Bolaños chartered a six-seater plane to Puerto Rico to rescue four of her family members, but knew she could not let the other two seats go to waste. She spread the word via social media that she had two seats left, hoping to fill the seats with either a couple expecting a child or a new mother and her baby. Flooded with requests for help, she knew she had to do more. She promptly began around-the-clock work to bring supplies into Puerto Rico, while shuttling people out of the ravaged island for the next three months. She registered Warrior Angels Rescue as a 501-C3 charity organization and has not stopped helping those in need of disaster relief since.

The volunteer-based organization went straight to work when Kabul was taken by the Taliban on August 15 in 2021.

"We got involved once a Hazara school asked us for help evacuating the most at-risk people: girls, female teachers and faculty members who were big targets because of their tribal ethnicity, their activism, the fact that they were recognizable, accomplished women," Bolaños explained.

They were able to get 250 to 300 people safely to Ecuador in the first months, and have since evacuated over 600 people, most of whom are now resettled in Canada.

“Once we started operating in Afghanistan, we started getting requests from the State Department, the D.O.D., and the U.N.,” Bolaños said.

“There were so many non-governmental organizations and governmental agencies asking for help evacuating their personnel who were at great risk, that then we started taking on people beyond families, not just from the original school that inspired this. That’s how we ended up expanding.”

Warrior Angels Rescue works tirelessly to ensure the success of their evacuees once they reach their final destinations.

“You can’t just get them out and hope for the best. Like for a hurricane [or other disaster], you need to make sure they have an ambulance to get them from the plane to the hospital, that their medical records are transferred over, there is housing for their families near the hospital, food, and anything else,” Bolaños said. “We’ve always had the mentality of providing point A to point Z, not just point A to point B.”

Bolaños has even started a school in Ecuador for the evacuees, and offers services like job training, language training, entrepreneurial workshops and community building events. Her hope is to keep the evacuees together and build a strong sense of community, rather than have them spread apart.

While the organization provides a bright light in a world of darkness, there is also great sadness for the evacuees.

“We realized we need to make it a full solution, and one of the problems is that there’s a big emotional toll. This is traumatic,” she said. “They are living through the darkest trauma of their lives, cut off from the world as they hide in their homes.”

Volunteer Stacie Isabella Turk answered the call to action when a close friend of Bolaños posted on Rustic Canyon NextDoor that Bolaños needed volunteers for help evacuating families from Afghanistan.

“Valerie [Bolaños] would share messages with me that she was getting, and some were suicidal from the evacuees who were having a hard time,” Turk said.

During their talks, they would reminisce about their days at Girls Scouts camp and how uplifting it was to receive letters from loved ones. They knew a letter writing campaign was not feasible, but they realized an Instagram feed with encouraging messages from other girls could lift their spirits just the same.

“The girls in Afghanistan [could be] told they could [go to Instagram] and that there would be new messages waiting for them every day,” Turk explained.

Their next project was born: For a Girl, From a Girl.

“I knew that we needed help getting followers and attention to that feed,” Turk added.

She turned to NextDoor again to find volunteers for their new project. The post caught the eye of Palisades High School junior Alicia Escalante’s mother, who knew her daughter would be the perfect person to lend her expertise.

Escalante, described by Bolaños as her “saving grace,” tremendously helped launch the For a Girl, From a Girl Instagram feed.

Escalante’s proactive approach to helping the cause worked. She geared the initiative towards high school students looking to fulfill their community service requirements. The idea brought more attention to their cause and doubled their amount of followers. Escalante is still working to get more schools involved in the initiative, hoping that more students will feel compelled to make the quick post and help those so desperately needing a glimmer of hope.

The Instagram feed had an immediate and profound effect on the girls in Afghanistan. Each family has their own dedicated What’s App chat on their solar-charged cell phones, many of which are provided by Warrior Angels Rescue in the event that the families’ cell phones have been confiscated. With these lifelines, they are able to see the posts.

“[The Instagram account] made such a difference in the emotional well-being of the evacuees we shared it with,” Bolaños said. “They instantly felt like ‘maybe we’re not forgotten, maybe there is hope, maybe there are a lot of people working hard to get us out of this.’”

It proved to be exactly what the evacuees needed. Each post made by a student counts as one full hour of community service towards their school requirement. All that is required is to hand write a note of love and hope on a piece of paper, and hold the paper just below the eyes.

“[The uniform approach] is partly in solidarity with the girls and women whose voices are being silenced in Afghanistan, and partly to protect the identity [of the children posting the messages],” Bolaños explained.

Next, it is crucial to both follow and tag For a Girl, From a Girl in the post so that they are notified and can post it on their feed for the families to see. Escalante detailed instructions and hashtags for the posts in the page's highlights section.

While the name of the initiative is For a Girl, From a Girl, anyone can make a post. The goal is to get new posts for the families to turn to every day for support. For Escalante, this is more than just a school requirement; it is a passion. She has made announcements at school in support of the account, and has plans for a car wash and fundraising event. On an even larger scale, she has her sights set on starting a club at school.

"I want the club to focus on girls specifically supporting other girls," Escalante said. "I want to create more messages, expand and grow the account. I [would love] every single person at Palisades High School to create a message to increase the insights on [@ForAGirlFromAGirl]."

While donations and volunteering are always welcome, this small act of posting can pull an evacuee from the darkest depths of despair. Mental health is an oft overlooked issue, and Escalante is working around the clock to make sure that for these evacuees, they are seen, they are heard and they are valued.

For more information on Warrior Angels Rescue, visit warriorangelsrescue.org or follow @foragirlfromagirl on Instagram.