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Stuart R. Givens Memorial Fellowship

March 29, 2017

## Personal Statement and Proposal



You probably recognize her, or at least remember her haunting green stare. She is the Afghan Woman, pictured on the cover of National Geographic in June of 1985. Sharbat Gula was and still is a product of the war in Afghanistan, one of thousands fleeing conflict.

Although never reported, there was much more to Sharbat than her headscarf and her refugee status. Sharbat had a family. She had a favorite song her grandmother would sing to her. She had 12-year-old dreams of being more than her circumstances dictated. She wanted an education. However, her story was simplified for media consumption. Without context, she became a symbol of refugees for the western world.

By reducing refugees like Sharbat to their political status, we dehumanize them and condense a complex human life into a handful of labels. At a time when xenophobic legislation is at the forefront of American discussion, deconstructing these labels is

critical. Otherwise, they are denied the understanding that comes from seeing them as more than their religion or their nationality. Instead of fearing refugees, we should educate ourselves about their families, religion, culture and societies. With the support of the Givens Fellowship, I aim to do just that.

I've had a taste of refugees' experiences through continued involvement with refugee resettlement organizations in Toledo and Richmond, Virginia. My research for the National Undergraduate Research Conference led me to visualize the impact of constitutional law on refugee populations. Founding a Model Arab League program at BGSU has also been instrumental in gauging the effect of refugee crises on Arab countries. However, America, much less Northwest Ohio, only offers so much.

The Givens Fellowship would enable me to humbly follow Sharbat's path toward enhanced understanding and growth. It was early freshman year when I wrote my first article on the refugee community flourishing in Toledo thanks to Corine Dehabey at Us Together. Since then, my interest in advocacy journalism has grown into a persistent urge to embed myself into their way of life to comprehend the situation, an aspiration left unsatisfied by my current depth of understanding and by BGSU curriculum.

Advocacy and journalism can reinforce each other. However, they are also in conflict. Sometimes advocacy requires manipulating the truth to do what is best for those who are underrepresented. On the flipside, if you stick to the truth-seeking foundations of journalism, you sometimes fail those who you are trying to help. A real catch-22.

This conflict brings up important moral and ethical questions: questions I don't have the answers to. While these questions may be contemplated hypothetically in an academic context, I know the answers I am looking for cannot be found in a classroom. The answers are in the reporting.

To help me discover the balance between advocacy and journalism, I will spend three weeks in Egypt and three weeks in Greece. While the west is the final destination for many refugees, these two countries are stops on the most heavily trafficked refugee routes. My journey of discovery begins in Cairo, Egypt where I'll partner with Saint Andrew's Refugees Services [StARS]. After three weeks in Cairo, I'll work with Caritas Hellas in

Athens, Greece. By working alongside these organizations, I will gain access to vulnerable refugees in one of the most crucial stages of their journey, in critical need of recovery, planning and nurturing.

New York Times and NPR publish heartwarming stories of the few refugees who make it through vetting processes and find success in America. Al-Jazeera and BBC have impressive coverage of refugee conflicts. However, stories of the journey from displacement to resettlement are left untouched by traditional news outlets.

Through the Givens Fellowship, I hope to pick up where mainstream media left off. With my reporting experience as an editor with on-campus publications, this fellowship would give me the ability to accurately report on these marginalized people. By documenting my interactions with refugees in picture, audio and word, I want to give names, faces and voices to people who have been stripped of their individuality.

I won't be observing from afar as I have done and as so many journalists do. I want to soak myself in the situation, not just read second-hand stories. By embedding myself in the crisis, I want to comprehend Sharbat's experiences. Submersion is not only necessary for me to grow as a writer and advocate but also an indispensable opportunity to expand my and my readers' awareness of refugee-related issues, as a handful of journalists have done before me. Nick Kristof, an editor for the New York Times, embedded himself in the humanitarian disaster in Darfur, visiting the region 11 times and writing in-depth articles on the crisis. Submersion is what journalist Katherine Boo did when reporting on slums in Mumbai. It is what photographer Steve McCurry did when he heard his Afghan Woman had been arrested in Pakistan for false identification papers.

However, there are limits to immersion. There's a hard distinction between the experiences of refugees and the experiences of an outsider. As a journalist visiting a region, I have permission to come and go as I please. My American passport grants me that liberty. This is not the case for refugees. The relationship between privileged visitors and displaced people is a tense, moral dilemma, one that I need to muddle my way through. It is a relationship I would like to explore in a real context, as I see my future self facing situations of this nature on a regular basis as an advocate and journalist.

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This is Sharbat today, green eyes still piercing the photographer's lens. This photo captures a more complete person, one who has matured as a result of many complementary experiences since the first photograph. As McCurry would find out, Sharbat had been in Pakistan since the original photo was taken. It took 30 years for McCurry to put a name to her face. But for every refugee, like Sharbat, whose story is told, thousands more slip through the cracks. With assistance from the Stuart R. Givens Memorial Fellowship, I hope to catch their stories before they fall out of reach.

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## Proposed Budget

Expense and Purpose	Amount
<b>Airfare</b>	
Flight from Saint Louis, MO to Cairo	\$1,000
Flight from Cairo to Athens	\$250
Flight from Athens to Saint Louis, MO	\$1,000
<b>Airfare Total</b>	<b>\$2,250</b>
<b>Housing</b> (through Airbnb)	
Cairo: 20 nights	\$475
Athens: 20 nights	\$505
<b>Housing Total</b>	<b>\$980</b>
<b>Meals</b>	
The cost of meals for 6 weeks (42 days), estimated at \$10 a meal, 3 meals a day	<b>\$1,260</b>
<b>Equipment</b>	
Camera – Nikon 3300	\$670
3 SD Cards (for photo and video storage) at \$10 a piece	\$30
Recording Device (for interviews)	\$30
<b>Equipment Total</b>	<b>\$730</b>
<b>Visas and Traveler's Insurance</b>	<b>\$400</b>
<b>Miscellaneous</b> (transportation, emergency funds, vaccinations, etc.)	<b>\$380</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$6,000</b>