

EXPOSURES

EDITED BY CONOR RISCH



ALL PHOTOS PAGES 146, 148 © STEVEN WOHLWENDER

The Real Afghanistan

Photographer Steven Wohlwender presents an alternative perspective of a nation on the front line of the battle against terrorism.

Story by Anna Carnick

FOR MOST OF THE LAST FEW YEARS, THE WAR IN Afghanistan has been obscured by media focus on the Iraq War. But the profile of the war-torn country has risen dramatically in recent months, as its border with Pakistan is increasingly considered the most important front in the battle against terrorism.

But Steven Wohlwender wants to make sure we remember that the nation is more than just a flash-point in a global conflict. His photographs challenge us to see not only the country's hardships, but to revel in the humanity of its people. "It would be easy to shoot what everybody expects to see," Wohlwender says of photographing

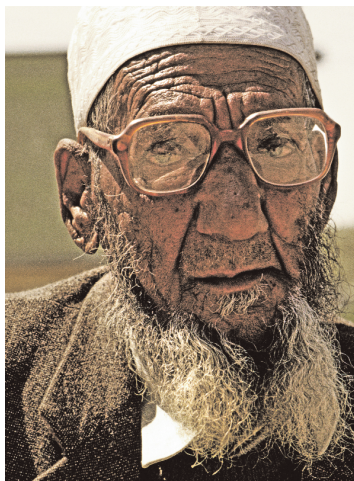
Afghanistan, "but not everything about the country is sad." As *The Kite Runner* author Khaled Hosseini writes on Wohlwender's Web site, "His camera commits to film the hardships the Afghan people have suffered and the resilience they maintain. If you look closely, amid the ubiquitous dust, the roofless walls, and the heaps of rubble, you will see a grace and beauty that is unique to the Afghans."

Wohlwender traveled to Afghanistan in 2006 with Afghan Friends Network (AFN), a California-based nonprofit organization committed to cultivating relationships between individuals, organizations and communities in the United States and Afghanistan. The goal of the trip for AFN was to see first-hand the impact their work was having

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Above: Stephen Wohlwender's photographs challenge viewers to revel in the humanity of the Afghan people.

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on Afghan schools, and Wohlwender asked to tag along. He self-financed his travel, and shot a powerful series that focused on Afghanistan's culture and her people, providing an unusual perspective of Afghan life. Wohlwender donated this series to AFN for promotional and fundraising use.

"The trip appealed to me from a visual, cultural and educational standpoint. As a photographer, you're always looking for inspiration, for new sub-

ject matter. And I think we all have perceptions of what Afghanistan is like, but until we experience the people and the place ourselves, we don't quite understand. I knew my initial perception would be in sharp contrast to the reality." Escalating violence has postponed any follow-up visits.

Wohlwender, a San Francisco-based, ADDY award-winning photographer, shoots commercial, editorial and fine-art projects. He's only

been photographing professionally for five years. For almost 20 years he worked in advertising as a successful video director, and as an art director for heavy hitters like Leo Burnett, FCB and J. Walter Thompson.

Wohlwender and the AFN group traveled in Afghanistan for two weeks, visiting Kabul and Ghazni. They saw schools, spoke with teachers and students, and Wohlwender struck out on his own, shooting everywhere he went (mostly on film with a Canon 1V and a Mamiya 7II). Despite warnings from Afghan guards, he wandered the towns by himself, meeting people in butcher shops, orphanages, barbershops, and on the street, asking to take their photos. "Walking the city, I saw as much as you can see in such a short period of time," he points out. "I'm glad I did it that way, as opposed to being surrounded by guards, being told when and where you can go and who you can talk to, and not getting deep inside."

His wanderings produced photos of people at work and at play; women begging in the streets; and children at school, in orphanages and participating in the national pastime, kite flying. Wohlwender always asked permission to photograph, and not a single person said no. He says he has never encountered such eagerness, and attributes this to a longing for acknowledgement. "From their standpoint, if people are taking pictures in their country, it's normally of tanks and ruins of buildings."

Wohlwender hopes his portraits are respectful. For example, "Man with Glasses" (middle image above) is a regal photograph of an older gentleman who followed Wohlwender around Kabul for a half hour silently, until Wohlwender realized he wanted his portrait taken, too. After the man posed for a picture, he shook Wohlwender's hand and walked away. Other photos reveal a joyful

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side of life. In “Kite Flyer” (page 146), we see some of Kabul’s young men gathered under a brilliant blue sky for their favorite weekly event.

Though Wohlwender’s photography career is relatively new, this is not the first time he’s done pro-bono creative work for a social organization. He previously made short fundraising films for the Special Olympics and Mwangaza, an East African organization that aids the physically disabled.

Since the trip, AFN continues to use Wohlwender’s work for inspiration and fundraising materials, even auctioning off some of the prints. Wohlwender still volunteers for AFN at home. Both he and AFN are very interested in putting a book together, but he wonders if another trip is necessary first to make the project complete. He’ll have to wait for a break in the violence before returning.

The Work is the Reward

If pro-bono work appeals to you, Steven Wohlwender suggests that you begin with a simple phone call or e-mail to “a higher-up” at an organization you would like to get involved with. Put it simply, he says: “I’m a photographer, and I want to donate everything—my time, my expenses, and all the photos I take.” Forty-five seconds after sending a message like this to the Special Olympics, recalls Wohlwender, he received a response: “When can we meet?”

Don’t be discouraged if the organization you want to work for turns out not to need your help, advises Wohlwender, because plenty of them will want you. But when you do find an opportunity, be prepared to work hard and give substantial time to people who won’t be shy about asking for help, to “lose lots of money,” and to enjoy the camaraderie of co-workers who are “smart, generous and happy,” says Wohlwender.

Not only will you “find yourself deeply caring about the good you’re doing,” Wohlwender notes, “Work hard enough, and you just might end up in one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments. I shot the Opening Ceremonies of the Special Olympics World Games in Dublin. It was one of the most emotionally uplifting experiences of my life, ranking up there with my children’s births. Being in the middle of a stadium filled with cheering athletes and their families and friends from all over the world was life changing. And it would have been even if Nelson Mandela hadn’t spoken and U2 hadn’t performed!”

—Anna Carnick



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Point of View

Debra Bloomfield’s oceanscapes consider the relationship between setting and memory from a single spot on the seaside.

By Jane Gottlieb

OVER THE COURSE OF SEVEN YEARS, WORKING WITH HER HASSELBLAD CAMERA FROM A PERCH above a particular stretch of beach, Debra Bloomfield looked on as the ocean rolled out a series of colors and moods from just before sunset until sunrise. She recorded moments that ranged from calm to tempestuous, rarely including references to humans save the occasional airplane or sailboat passing through the frame.

It is a bit of a surprise, then, that on the final page of her new book, *Still: Oceanscapes* by Debra Bloomfield, a photograph shows a cluster of tall buildings along the shore. As Bloomfield explains, “I could look over and see this the whole time just by turning my head. That is where I did my work.”

Published this July by Chronicle Books, with an essay by Terry Tempest Williams and an interview with the photographer by Corey Keller, the collection reveals placid, mysterious and downright jarring scenes of ocean meeting sky. Bloomfield, who is known for her cerebral landscape photography, wanted the book to illustrate the way in which setting triggers memory. To underscore this point, and in contrast to her other geography-specific projects, she does not disclose the location from which she was shooting. “You can think, ‘That must be off the East

Above: Debra Bloomfield returned to the same seaside vantage point for seven years to create her “Oceanscapes” series.

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