

That's a Wrap on the Michener-Deacon Fellowship!

By Molly Thomas

What a whirlwind the past few years have been. When I first applied to the Michener-Deacon fellowship in early January 2023, I had no idea where this pitch would take me. All I knew is that I deeply cared about the plight of Afghan women, and couldn't believe, considering Canada's deep rooted history with the country, we weren't seeing their stories in our headlines. The incredible honour of being chosen to look into the loss of school for Afghan women and girls was an incredible moment. It showed me that other people in our country believed in this public interest subject, and were deeply committed to keeping Afghan women in our news cycle. Little did I know that even though I had received the award, I would lose my network job and Canada's longest investigative TV show would eventually shut down, making my attempt at telling this story exceptionally difficult..

Our media landscape is drastically shifting; some of it was inevitable, other parts of it are a cruel reminder that public interest journalism doesn't usually pay. Yet this type of work is vitally important for public discourse and historical understanding of where we are as a country today. Such was the dilemma with this project. Finding a new home for this project was a feat I didn't anticipate. Many of the biggest broadcast networks, newspapers and magazines in Canada felt the project was too dangerous or too much of a liability while others didn't write back to the pitch. It was utterly disappointing to hear many editors claim 'they had done this story before'. As you know the ongoing plight of Afghan women and girls is not a one off magazine feature or podcast series; keeping this story in the headlines has to be a conscious choice and decision to keep the Canadian public up to date on all the barbaric barriers Afghan females are facing. Every few months, the Taliban cracks down with more limitations and few Canadians are kept in the know beyond a 500 word news story.

So I applaud the Michener-Deacon team for taking a chance on such a difficult yet important story. Thank you for funding a project, my former private network, refused to invest in. In a constantly shrinking world of news media, it is because of fellowships like this, that we can pursue these exceptionally important stories.

For myself as a journalist, I am incredibly proud of this project; not only the 3-part '*Dear Taliban*' series, but also all the freelance content I was able to get into different mediums on the back end of my trip. This was supposed to be a passion project that supplemented my regular job. Instead, my passion for this project put the rest of my life on hold. I don't regret a thing but am also grateful that this season is over. Without a job, I was hustling as a freelance journalist just to put money in the bank and pay my rent, just so I could continue to deal with the hoops this story posed. Building a small team and extensive plan to get into Afghanistan took months and was just one feat, but then doing that all over again to get into Pakistan was another challenge. I think I was less of a journalist in the day to day operations and more of a logistical, safety manager for most of this project, and had to trust my instinct in the

field to bring home the right stories. The good news is - we found three resilient Afghan young women, who exemplified the diversity and complexity of that special country; all from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds, lifestyles and experiences. Finding these girls and building trust, making them comfortable enough to share the worst parts of their lives, and ensuring we wouldn't further traumatize them in the interview process was absolutely essential to me. I have maintained close contact with the two girls who had access to a cell phone and regularly check up on them. We have become friends.

Since our story, Haya (episode 3) has made it to Canada as a government sponsored refugee. That was an amazing day to greet her at the Toronto airport after her long wait of 3 years. She and her brother are still waiting on the approval for their parents who remain in Pakistan. Because of our story, a random group of young adults in the GTA, compelled by Merwa's circumstance (episode 2), contacted me ready to privately sponsor her into the country. Luckily, her family had found another route and are actively pursuing government sponsorship; the mobilized group, including myself, is standing by if that falls through. And what's so encouraging, is that so many new listeners and viewers have contacted me, through socials and email, with a renewed sense of the raw realities of Afghan women since the 2021 takeover. I've also been able to contribute as a workshop facilitator to the Afghan Journalist Support Organization (AJSO) which provides training to Afghan journalists who are either still stuck in the country or now find themselves as refugees around the world. I used my experiences with this fellowship to provide tips for Afghan journalists to pitch themselves and their stories to mainstream networks.

Thank you for the opportunity to pursue a project that has had such a profound impact on my life. As a Canadian woman but also as a daughter of immigrants from South Asia, I saw myself in many of these girls. I don't know what my life would have been like if I wasn't able to go to school. I wouldn't be the same confident, strong, opinionated, principled person. There is a role for women like me to play, when we see our sisters, unable to have the same basic human rights as we do. Thank you for granting me that privilege with this incredible fellowship.

Molly Thomas Stories for 2023 Michener-Deacon Fellowship:

Podcast Series:

[*Dear Taliban* - 3 Part Podcast Series, Canadaland](#)

[*Dear Taliban* \(Extended Web\)](#)

Print:

The Price of Fighting for Freedom - Herizons Magazine (out in print currently, jpegs of articles **attached**).

[*Former Afghan Interpreter Slams Ottawa Over Slow Response* - Ipolitics](#)

[*Against Afghan Odds* - Toronto Star](#)

[*Refugees teaching Refugees* - Calgary Herald](#)

[*Education at All Costs* - Degrees Magazine](#)

[*Meeting the Women the World Forgot* - Faith Today](#)

Luther Story - will be out in April 2025 (**pdf attached**)

Radio:

[*Afghan Secret Schools with a Toronto Connection* - CBC Metro Morning](#)

[*Road to the Olympics*, CBC Your World Tonight](#)

Training:

[Afghan Journalists Support Organization \(AJSO\)](#)