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# A Light in the Fog of War: For One Alumna, Education is the Best American Export

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## UP CLOSE

### A Light in the Fog of War

For one alumna, education is the best American export.

**F**or **Mary Jae Abbitt Sushka '70**, life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?" Her life has been dedicated to answering it.

Sushka began her career teaching eighth-grade English and history, eventually earning a master's degree in the science of business analysis from Boston University's international program in London, where her husband, Peter, was the submarine liaison to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

That degree, she says, primed her for working overseas, and from 1998 to 2012 she applied her energy and expertise to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). During her tenure with USAID, Sushka worked in a dozen countries, including Bulgaria, where in 2004 she established funding for two female Abbitt Goodwill Scholars in Furman's international educational program. The investment was a harbinger of things to come.

In 2009, Sushka traveled

to Bamyan, Afghanistan, as the business development and gender advisor for USAID. With a population of some 6,000 people, most of them poor potato farmers, Bamyan village is perched on a high ledge in the Hindu Kush mountains in central Afghanistan. In one program Sushka supervised, women who owned at least one cow were taught how to make yogurt and sell it at a local market stall. In another, she helped women start a craft business, and created and managed a program to teach female inmates who were unjustly imprisoned the skill of tailoring so they would be able to support their children upon being released (the families of these women frequently disown them). "It means a great deal to me to let women know that there are other options available to them," she says.

During the following year, Sushka met one of the pivotal people in her life: Amina Hasan Pur, the Provincial Gender Advisor for Bamyan's governor. The two women became fast friends and Sushka learned of the private school Pur had started in a rented house in order to give children—including her own two—a better quality of education.

"Thirty years of war in Afghanistan has left every generation challenged, but they are a positive people who want to make their country better," she says. "Education means empowerment for the students."

Before leaving Afghanistan in 2012, Sushka made a promise to Pur that she would help build a proper school. "Amina is an outstanding local leader in a conservative society that does not value female excellence," she says. Committed to the work Pur described, and in spite of cultural challenges,

Sushka helped local officials become receptive to the pair's vision for a school.

The Baba Private School opened in March 2015, funded by Sushka and her husband. It sits on a hill overlooking old Bamyan town across the river. Today, Pur manages the solar-powered school ("Baba" means "respected elder" in Persian), where 126 children attend kindergarten through eighth grade. The goal is to add grades 9 through 12.

Sushka goes back to Afghanistan every year to visit. Even though she does not venture out alone in Bamyan, she says she has never sensed that she was in any serious danger. In the end, however, danger may not matter because what lights up Sushka's grey-blue eyes are the students at Baba School, and in particular how education is changing their aspirations: Zahra (age 11) wants to be a pilot; Surhia (age 10) wants to be an engineer; Amir (age 8) wants to be a photographer. Unlike at traditional public schools in Afghanistan, boys and girls at Baba School intermingle in the classrooms.

"It is so rewarding to walk into the classroom and have the kids speak to me in English," Sushka says. Her hope is for students to continue their education at Bamyan University, the only institution of higher learning in central Afghanistan. Sushka believes it is good education that will eventually strengthen the government and economy in this war-ravaged country.

"Baba School is my legacy," she adds. More than that, though, it is a twinkling symbol—and reminder—to the village whose name itself translates as "The Place of Shining Light." ●

—M. Linda Lee