

# Selendy & Gay's Managing Partner Is Helping Young Girls Evacuate Afghanistan

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In August, Selendy & Gay founding and co-managing partner, Jennifer Selendy, helped launch a project that was later named The Thirty Birds Foundation, focused on the evacuation of hundreds of at-risk girls and community members affiliated with the Marefat High School in Kabul, Afghanistan. So far, some 250 girls—all members of an ethnic minority group called Hazara—have arrived in Saskatoon, Canada, and are in the process of being resettled. Another 150 are currently awaiting evacuation from Pakistan to Ecuador.

**Christine Schiffner:** When you met the first group of girls arriving at the airport in Saskatoon, Canada, how did that experience compare to the professional success you have had throughout your career as a trial lawyer?

**Jennifer Selendy:** I've been very fortunate to do a lot of work that I find meaningful in various ways. But it's hard to describe, it's hard to compare the impact of this work to traditional pro bono work. I thought of 13-year-old girls who grew up in Afghanistan—when I met one, she was wearing this Washington Post T-shirt that said “Democracy Dies in Darkness.” These kids were studying human rights, democracy and freedom of expression and learning about civic participation in Afghanistan. And it's extraordinary to me, how much hope that gave them, especially these young girls, and they are still with hope.

**CS:** You have been spearheading the rescue effort. How did the project get started?

**JS:** I've been a member of a board at Tufts University called the Institute for Global Leadership for a number of years. That board is built around an incredibly strong network of alumni...A much younger alumnus of the program, the son of Marefat's founder, reached out in August and said that both his family and the community that they have built around a school in Kabul, were in danger under the Taliban because they are part of the Hazara community, a persecuted minority under the Taliban. The school was probably the most innovative project going on in Afghanistan. Traditionally, the Hazara have been denied access to education, but under the American occupation, not only have they built this school, which was a co-ed school, where girls were allowed to be in singing groups, on sports teams, and in theater groups, but it also became the top-performing high school in all of Afghanistan.

The Hazara girls have historically been forced to marry Taliban soldiers. They were forced into sex slavery and had been denied all kinds of rights. And so, here was a generation of young Hazara girls, they were planning to go off to Penn and Yale, universities across Europe and Asia, and suddenly they were faced with the end of life as they knew it with the Taliban's return to Kabul.

There are eight of us in total that worked on this project. They are journalists, authors and graduate students. They weren't people who had worked in NGOs or were professionals doing this kind of work. My partners [at the firm] responded with “of course”—and we raised \$250,000 from the firm and then I helped to raise almost \$800,000.

**CS:** What challenges did you have to overcome?

**JS:** There were a whole series of rescue operations that we were planning and then had to be canceled. At the end we ended up taking the girls overland in small groups. We made a relationship with somebody in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Pakistan and we were able to move them to Pakistan for 30 days with temporary visas, where we put them in hostels, got them vaccinated, got them medical treatment [before they were transferred to Saskatoon].

There are so many amazing stories. We didn't think of it as a rescue because we couldn't—no matter how careful we were, there was always a risk of some catastrophe happening. We first tried to fly them out of Kabul, then we tried to fly them out of Mazar-i-Sharif. They had traveled for 12 hours, they lived in safe houses, they had hidden and gone through 15 to 20 Taliban checkpoints. The women and girls could never travel alone, so they had to be organized in small groups led by a man.

We had to tell them about not taking too much stuff with them, not looking like they were leaving for a long time, not having Western contacts in their phones, not being on Facebook or other social media where they would have Western connections. No unencrypted communication, on and on and on. This was all organized by girls on the ground who were barely out of high school.

**CS:** What are your closing thoughts about these girls?

**JS:** This is the future of Afghanistan. These are the people who can change the future of the country in a way the British occupation, the Soviet and American occupation couldn't. If there is hope for the future of Afghanistan, it is these girls.

**Attorney**

- Jennifer Selendy

**Practice**

- Public Interest and Pro Bono