

“Faith in the Human Spirit” A Conversation With Cassandra Nelson

Cassandra Nelson wrote this issue’s article on deforestation in Afghanistan while she was visiting the country and took photos as well. She has done a number of other stories for us in past issues. Nelson’s work takes her to some of the very places we’d like stories from, so it’s lucky for us that she freelances as a photojournalist. The globetrotting Nelson recently took some time to tell us about her work and the world as she knows it.



Cassandra Nelson

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALFREDO DELARA

Q. When and why did you move away from the United States?

A. I left the U.S. in February 2001 for a six-month project to help launch the first private cable-TV station in Pakistan and to be the executive producer of the televised South Asian Federation Games—a regional sporting competition. Prior to 2001, the only television networks were owned and run by the Pakistani government and were often heavily censored.

While I was in Pakistan working on the television program, the 9/11 attacks happened. Most foreigners in Pakistan left immediately because the security conditions became difficult, but I chose to stay and cover the post-9/11 events in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a photojournalist.

Eventually, Pakistan became my home, without my really knowing it. I decided to stay there because I had made a lot of good friends and was enjoying my work.

Q. What kind of work do you do now?

A. I work as the global spokesperson and media officer for a humanitarian aid organization, so I get sent to all the disasters and wars that the media cover. I appear on TV news programs to talk about humanitarian issues,

and how people are being affected in cases of wars and natural disasters.

Q. What are some of the most interesting places you’ve visited?

A. Afghanistan is the most interesting place I’ve ever been. Even though I’ve been working there and visiting for the past seven years, I’m always learning something new. The people are incredibly hospitable, and the land and weather are just the opposite—inhabitable! Hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. It’s a stark and harsh place, but the people always seem to have a smile and a sense of humor.

North Korea has to be the strangest place I’ve ever visited. I had to have a government “minder” with me at all times. He was responsible for making sure that I took photos only of what they wanted the outside world to see. I wasn’t allowed to take pictures of people who looked poor. This was very hard because it seems like just about everyone in North Korea is poor. I convinced him (by buying a coat for his wife) to let me take some pictures that the government forbids, but someone at the market saw me take the pictures and told the government. I had to hide

the memory card with my photos on it in a packet of baby wipes to sneak it out of the country.

Q. What are the most intractable problems you have seen?

A. The situation in Darfur is one of the worst humanitarian disasters I have experienced. It just keeps getting worse, and it seems that the international community cannot—or will not—stop it. Millions of people are suffering needlessly.

The 2004 tsunami was the greatest devastation I’ve seen, but today the situation is better. I met high school students in Aceh [Indonesia] who lost family members and had their school destroyed. We’re still in touch by e-mail. They’ve gone on to university and are doing fine things with their lives. It gives me faith in the human spirit and our ability to survive and do great things, even after we have experienced horrific tragedies. **JS**

For a 2005 Q&A with Nelson, go to:
mercycorps.org/countries/pakistan/916