

Kathleen Kenna

by Alison Macpherson

There are not many people who can include “survivor of a grenade attack” on their resume but when learning of Kathleen Kenna’s accomplishments, that’s only one defining moment of many that jump off the page. Journalist, volunteer and author are the public roles that have allowed Kathleen to bring greater awareness of humanitarian causes to Canadians, made possible in part by her own personal commitment to social issues.

A reporter since age 15, Kathleen earned her Bachelor of Journalism degree from Carleton University at 21 and soon began a remarkable 25-year career with the Toronto Star. She traveled all over Canada and the U.S. as primarily a political reporter working in Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto. Moving up from reporter to editor, then Washington bureau chief from 1997 to 2001, Kathleen covered President Clinton’s last term, the Gore/Bush election and breaking news that included the Columbine school shootings.

As an author, Kathleen’s work was published in 1995 in “A People Apart”, a well received book about Old Order Mennonites, with photographs by the Star’s Andrew Stawicki. Earning the trust of two Ontario Mennonite communities garnered a close look at these private people. Her inspiration for writing it was the church of her childhood that provided a foundation for shaping her life and continues to hold meaning for her today.

Beyond these achievements, Kathleen’s statement, “I should always help the community in which I have found good fortune and joy” tells a broader story. Volunteer work for churches and non-profits spanning 30 years has extended her compassion and generosity to Somalian and other refugees, the homeless, the hungry and foster youth in Toronto. As a Big Sister to several teen girls from immigrant families since the 1970’s, Kathleen was awarded a lifetime membership to the Children’s Aid Society of Metro Toronto.

In late 2000, Kathleen was married to Hadi Dadashian and just a few months later, her new position as South Asia bureau chief took them to impoverished and war-torn areas in India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. She covered issues such as life in refugee camps, the spread of disease, disability, education and the dangerous situation for children in Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Having changed careers from engineer to translator-photographer after they met, Kathleen’s husband was accompanying her on a road trip in the province of Gardez in southeastern Afghanistan when their world was shaken.

On March 4th 2002, the couple and two others were traveling back to Kabul after a day of interviewing in the hot sun when a grenade was lobbed through an open window into their vehicle. The grenade exploded beneath Kathleen’s seat, resulting in severe injuries that she was not expected to recover from. Kathleen’s husband is credited with helping to save her life in the hours following the attack. After emergency surgery and weeks in intensive care in hospitals abroad, they returned to Canada for recuperation and extensive physical therapy to aid in Kathleen’s recovery.

Recognition for her work came from the National Newspaper Association with a special Board of Governors' award, and an award from the Committee to Protect Journalists in 2002, for her writing about the plight of refugees, widows, children and all those who were disabled and impoverished by war in Afghanistan.

Due to disabilities caused by the attack, her position as bureau chief in India ended, and in 2004 she moved on to a one-year fellowship in journalism and Canadian studies at University of California, Berkeley. During that year, Kathleen also spent time as a volunteer tutor to inner city kids in the area.

Kathleen is currently a full-time student in the Masters of Science program in rehabilitation counseling at San Francisco State University, due to graduate in 2008. She works part-time as a rehab counselor with the California State Department of Rehabilitation and the world-renowned Center for Independent Living (CIL) in Berkeley has also welcomed her as a peer counselor intern. The CIL is the first non-profit in the world to fight for rights of people with disabilities, which helped lead to passage of landmark legislation in the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act.

Five years after the attack that very nearly ended her life, Kathleen and her husband live joyfully in San Francisco. As a volunteer at the Veterans' Affairs Medical Center there, she shares that joy by working with elder veterans, caring for comrades of the Special Forces rescuers who airlifted her from the desert in Afghanistan. Kathleen has continued to blend her passions by becoming a kayak guide with a Sausalito based non-profit group, helping take children and adults with disabilities on adventure trips in the San Francisco Bay area. If anyone knows adventure, it’s Kathleen Kenna.