

Kathleen Kenna – A Biography

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.



Rotary Club of Stouffville - Event Announcement

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

A very special evening is planned and we hope you can join us. If you would like to reserve tickets, please contact the individuals listed below.

Rotary Club of Stouffville's "Night of a Thousand Dinners" Presents ...

KATHLEEN KENNA

PLEASE JOIN US

Our Rotary club is proud to present renowned Canadian journalist Kathleen Kenna at a fundraising event on Thursday April 12, 2007 at Sleepy Hollow Country Club. You are invited to hear Kathleen speak about her experiences as a foreign correspondent in Afghanistan and life after the grenade attack that seriously injured her in 2002. It promises to be a fascinating presentation.

The event is being organized in conjunction with the "Night of a Thousand Dinners" campaign spearheaded by the Canadian Landmine Foundation, to support the eradication of landmines.

Thursday April 12, 2007

7:00 pm

Sleepy Hollow Country Club

10th Line, Stouffville

Tickets: \$25.00

(includes hors d'oeuvres)

To purchase tickets, contact

Ken Prentice 905-642-9507

Carol Watson 905-640-2376

John Pollard 905-640-3131

The Rotary Club of Stouffville is part of Rotary District 7070, which is one of the world's largest organizers of "Night of a Thousand Dinners", raising tens of thousands of dollars annually to help eliminate landmines and treat the victims. While significant progress has been made, millions of landmines remain an immediate threat in at least 70 countries, killing or maiming 10,000 civilians every year. Money is needed for removing mines and aiding victims with the physical and psychological recovery that allows the rebuilding of communities.

YOUR ATTENDANCE WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In keeping with the "Night of a Thousand Dinners" theme, it is requested that attendees bring a non-perishable food item for donation to the local food bank.

YOUR SUPPORT IS APPRECIATED

Reporter's harrowing tale of attack.

Husband of injured Toronto Star reporter recalls Afghan incident

By Andy Eckardt

Newsweek March 18/02

LANDSTUHL, Germany, March 8 — Along with 22 U.S. soldiers injured in Operation Anaconda, doctors at this American medical facility in Germany have admitted a 48-year-old Canadian journalist who was seriously injured in an apparent grenade attack in Afghanistan this week. Toronto Star reporter Kathleen Kenna's husband, who was traveling with her during the assault, spoke to MSNBC about the harrowing incident.

While Kenna's brother and sister flew in from Canada and the United States on Thursday to be with their sibling, Kenna's husband, 39-year-old Hadi Dadashian, has been with her since the attack on their vehicle occurred.

Dadashian stayed at his wife's side during their long odyssey and was also flown to the Landstuhl medical facility.

Dadashian gave a detailed account of the events that led to his wife's injuries, which doctors describe as serious, and was visibly shaken by the experience of the past week.

He told MSNBC that he and his wife had already been covering the crisis in Afghanistan for several months when they heard about renewed fighting in eastern Afghanistan, near the town of Gardez. Last weekend, they decided to cover the story.

"On Monday, Kathleen, a photographer, our local driver and I had made our way to a small town called Zurmat, when we encountered Afghan fighters who told us we could not go any further into the war zone," Dadashian said.

Not wanting to take any unnecessary risks, the group decided to turn around and spend the night in Gardez. It was getting dark and they could see that fighting was taking place in the distance. "The roads in Afghanistan are terrible.

About 25 minutes after we turned around. We had to slow down because of all the potholes in the street. Kathleen and I were sitting in the backseat of our car, looking out of her window at a group of Afghans playing soccer in the fields," Dadashian said.

'A LOUD EXPLOSION'

"Suddenly I saw an Afghan man throw what I thought was a rock into my window. I put my head into my lap and only recall the sound of a smashing window and seconds later a loud explosion," he said.

At first, Dadashian told the driver to speed up because he believed that they were being shot at, but seconds later he realized that the car was damaged by an explosion. They stopped the vehicle and Dadashian told everybody to leave the car and run. Kenna did not follow.

"When I asked her what was wrong, she said that she could not move. Then I saw her leg that was slushed from her knee up," Dadashian said. "We tried to stop some passing cars, but the drivers ignored us and then a mini-van with several journalists stopped."

Kenna and her husband were taken to a local hospital in Gardez, where she received basic medical treatment. Because the emergency room was poorly equipped, the Afghan doctors told the couple that they needed to go to a larger hospital in Kabul. Dadashian knew that Kabul was about 4 to 5 hours away and Kenna was having difficulties breathing and was very pale.

"Luckily, a few journalists had come into the hospital and told us that there is a U.S. military base only 10 minutes away," Dadashian said.

RELIEF IN DANGER ZONE

With a smile of relief on his face, Dadashian described how two U.S. army medics came through the gate and immediately took care of Kenna.

"From that moment on I knew that we would be safe, even though we were in a danger zone," he said. And, what followed was like the scene out of an action movie.

"The doctors told us that Kathleen needed to be flown to Bagram immediately, and we were put on a plane that got stuck in the sand and could not take off. Meanwhile, it was pitch dark outside."

Two military helicopters were called in, armed with machine guns, operated by pilots with night-vision equipment. Kenna and her husband were put on one of the helicopters that flew with its doors open, the other helicopter followed at a distance.

Kenna's wounds were cleaned at the field hospital in Bagram and a few hours later the two were flown to Uzbekistan, where the Canadian journalist received more medical treatment. Along with a large group of wounded U.S. soldiers, their journey continued via Turkey to Ramstein Air Base in southwestern Germany.

Doctors at the Landstuhl hospital are keeping Kenna sedated while her wounds heal, and she will remain in the intensive care unit for the time being.

Doctors say it will be several weeks before she can be transferred back to her family in Canada. Until then, Dadashian said he will stay at her side.