

SHABANA BASIJ-RASIKH

Doctor of Humane Letters

“You could be forced to leave your home. You could be forced to become a refugee. You could lose any material possession that you have, but the one thing that cannot be taken away from you is your education.”

You recalled these inspiring words of your parents during a recent *60 Minutes* interview about the important work done at the School of Leadership Afghanistan, or SOLA, which you co-founded and for which you serve as president. SOLA is the first and only Afghan-led boarding school for Afghan girls in the world.

Your deep ties to education began in 1996, when you were only 6 years old, growing up in Kabul. The Taliban had seized power and forbade girls from attending school. Your parents, wisely valuing education for all, dressed you as a boy so you could accompany your older sister—who could not be in public without a male chaperone—to school. After the regime fell in 2001, you were selected to attend a year of high school in the United States through a highly competitive program funded by the U.S. State Department. You blossomed in Wisconsin and went on to Middlebury College, graduating magna cum laude and earning a B.A. in international studies and women and gender studies. While at Middlebury, your honors included being awarded a Davis Projects for Peace grant to build wells in your home country, being named one of the Top Ten College Women of the Year by *Glamour* magazine in 2010, and winning the Madeleine M. Kunin Public Service Award in 2011.

Importantly, your college years also were spent planting the seeds for SOLA, with the mission of providing access to quality education for girls across your homeland. Since its earliest beginnings, SOLA thrived, growing its enrollment from year to year. In 2021, however, the Taliban’s return to rule forced a massive change—a move from Kabul to the nation of Rwanda. You courageously led the evacuation of SOLA’s students and staff and reestablished the school on another continent, and SOLA has continued to grow, welcoming new students from the Afghan diaspora each year.

Your achievements with SOLA have not gone unnoticed, as you’ve received numerous accolades, including winning in 2018 the Malalai Medal, one of Afghanistan’s highest national honors, for your work promoting girls’ access to education and being named in 2019 to the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 Asia list in social entrepreneurship. You also have received honorary degrees from Roger Williams University, the University of Scranton, Cedar Crest College, and SOAS University of London. Since 2012, you have been a global ambassador for Girl Rising, a nonprofit with the stated mission of using the power of storytelling to change the way the world values girls and their education. In 2023, the National Geographic Society named you the Rolex National Geographic Explorer of the Year.

And to this day, you and the girls of SOLA have never stopped exploring, never stopped seeking out new pathways of opportunity. In the spring of 2024, you launched SOLAx, a WhatsApp-based online academy that brings education into the palm of a student’s hand. You enrolled more than 18,000 students in SOLAx in just its first year of operation, and your admissions season for new students to join SOLA’s campus in Rwanda is underway as we speak.

The need is real. In Afghanistan today, by Taliban decree, a girl’s education ends after sixth grade. No secondary school. No college. No graduation days. With SOLA, you are working to push back the darkness and to bring hope to an entire generation of young women.

In recognition of your extraordinary accomplishments and leadership in your quest to educate and to elevate Afghan girls, I have the honor of presenting you, Shabana Basij-Rasikh, for the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*.