

# Stories Shake the Status Quo

From battlefields to child brides, best-selling author Gayle Lemmon shines a light on stories of survival that bring hope to women and men alike.

**G**ayle Tzemach Lemmon has authored books and articles about remarkable women rising in the face of adversity across the globe, from the unfair cultural practice of child brides to female entrepreneurship in war-torn economies — but don't call them "women's stories." Lemmon insists these are stories that transcend gender, and ones we should all be interested in.

"A story with no female characters gets to be a story, and a story with one or more women, becomes a 'women's story,'" Lemmon said. "And if my work does anything to erase that idea, then I will have succeeded."

Lemmon fights this stigma as a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a contributor at CNN, writing many articles about war and post-war communities and the women who find ways to survive, and even thrive, under those conditions.

She's the *New York Times* bestselling author of "Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Ops Battlefield" and "The Dressmaker of Khair Khana," both stories showing that women's roles in society are fierce, complex, and warrant the same amount of respect and interest as stories with predominantly male characters.

Lemmon is also a public speaker, advocating for women's safety and sharing stories of resilience. She



spoke to benefit The Shelter for Abused Women & Children this past season, among many other organizations, discussing the devastating impact of violence against women and women's ability to turn heartbreak into hope. Lemmon frequently tells stories about women due to her interest in access to equal opportunity. This is something women lack across the world, particularly in countries like Afghanistan, which

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, best-selling author and journalist, gives a voice to the voiceless with her work.

Lemmon has reported on since 2005. In Afghanistan, people indicated that child marriage is a larger threat to education than even the Taliban, she said.

"None of us should want to live in a world where the next Maya Angelou, the next Steve Jobs, gets married at age 10 and is having children by 14 and gets no say in their lack of education, no say in the shape of their future," Lemmon said. "Suffocated opportunity is, to me, the enemy of prosperity and stability. And that should be personal to everybody."

Lemmon describes the practice of child marriage, a cultural norm in Afghanistan and other countries around the world, as a national security issue. Girls are frequently pulled out of school and married before they're 18.

"It all comes down to the value we place on girls and women and the value of their experiences," Lemmon said.

She hopes to fight this practice, highlight the value of womens' and girls' experiences, and taking away this idea of "the other," where people think, "that couldn't be me." She points out that anyone can become a victim of child marriage, even here in the U.S., which she reported on for PBS.

While reporting on areas of war and conflict, Lemmon noticed an empowering trend, which was the way women in Afghanistan were able to find light in the darkness and economic opportunity despite the looming presence of the Taliban.

Such was the story of Kamila Sidiqi, which Lemmon tells in "The Dressmaker of Khair Khana." Sidiqi's dressmaking business, operated out of her living room, created jobs for more than 100 women in her neighborhood and helped support her five brothers and sisters.

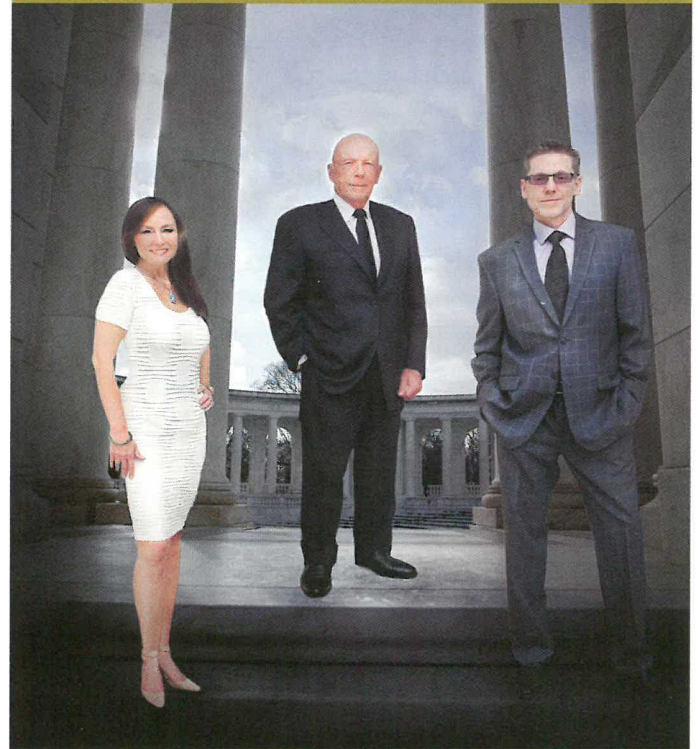
"For me, what is so compelling about this is that these are entrepreneurs who are truly manufacturing hope and opportunity in the most difficult circumstances imaginable," Lemmon said. "And doing it with tremendous grace, gut and resilience. No matter how bad things get, they keep going because they have to. People are counting on them; and honestly, that's what women do, right? When people are counting on them, they keep pushing forward no matter how difficult the circumstances are."

Another powerful group of women Lemmon has highlighted are the members of the Cultural Support Teams that the U.S. Army Special Operations Command created in 2010, about which she wrote in "Ashley's War." The program put women on the battlefield during special ops missions in Afghanistan for the first time in history.

Throughout Lemmon's exhaustive reporting, one theme has remained prevalent across the pages — these stories deserve to be taken seriously.

"I hope people are inspired to know that one person can make a difference," Lemmon said. "I hope that readers who are women realize that they might have far more power than they recognize, and that their stories matter." 🌸

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