



Roller rink: Sharna Nolan (left) is exhibiting photos of Afghan skateboarders (above and below) at Bondi Beach, where she will also hold a skate competition

Afghans are on a roll

Even the Taliban love a holiday in Skateistan, writes Angela Saurine

AS SHE stood in an empty fountain in Kabul instructing eager local boys on the art of skateboarding, Sharna Nolan noticed a group of men lurking nearby. Judging by their beards, turbans and rural dress, she suspected they were Taliban.

They stood watching, amused, a little bewildered, even. Eventually, one of the men approached a child she was coaching and asked what they were doing and why there was a foreign woman there.

Without missing a beat, Nolan walked over, greeted them in Persian and asked them if they wanted to have a turn.

She said it in a humble way — if she had learned anything during two years living in Afghanistan, it was that there was a right and a wrong way of addressing members of the opposite sex.

The leader of the group, who was on holidays from the Taliban-controlled province of Ghazni, took up the challenge and quickly landed on his bottom. Everybody laughed.

After a second attempt with the same result, Nolan told him to listen to her and hold her hand as she coached him.

She thinks it was the first time he had ever looked a foreign woman in the eye, let alone touched one.

"After two or three turns the others came over and I taught them how to skate too," Nolan says. "I think it's an advantage being a foreign woman sometimes because you can be quite forthright. I'm empathetic to them but I also stand my ground."

"They can see my eyes are very determined, but I'm completely non-threatening."

In the critically-acclaimed 2007 film *The Kite Runner*, the country's passion for kite flying was on display in all its glory.

Thanks to Nolan and fellow Australians Oliver Percovich and Travis Beard, skateboarding is becoming the new pastime of choice in the war-torn Middle East country.

Traditional barriers are being broken as children, adults, and even soldiers, interact across entrenched class, ethnic, gender and religious divides.

Nolan says that although you often see three generations flying kites together, you never see any girls.

"What I like about skateboarding is we have made it acceptable for girls as well," Nolan says.

It all began two years ago when the environmental researcher was in Kabul doing aid work. A keen skateboarder since her university days, the 32-year-old would often ride around her compound.

The security guards started bringing their children down to learn how to ride.

When her friend Percovich came over, he brought two more skateboards from Melbourne.

Nolan says being an aid worker can feel like you are living in a bubble. She explains workers are driven from their compound to work by 4WD every day, and it can be hard to make friends with people who have lived through so much trauma.

Keen to engage more with the community



around them, Nolan and Percovich quickly realised skateboarding was a great way to communicate. They began taking skateboards to schools and teaching children there.

A group of six young Afghan men also requested lessons, and proved to be naturals.

In turn, they began teaching children as well.

"They were trying something other people hadn't done before," Nolan says.

"It gave them a bit of confidence."

Oliver had always had a dream of opening a skateboard school, and Skateistan was born.

Boys and girls are taught separately until the age of 11 or 12, when girls can no longer be taught at all because they are considered marriageable age and no longer allowed to associate with members of the opposite sex.

"It might affect the family honour or reputation of that girl," Nolan says.

"We structure the classes so we get the kids supporting each other, sharing the skateboards, and we teach them English. If you get happy, smiling kids in a war zone it brings so much joy to the community. It gets so cold in winter that they're lucky they have power. Water pipes are frozen and firewood is very expensive."

So far, the trio has raised about \$US200,000 (\$310,000) to build Afghanistan's first skateboarding complex. But they need to raise another \$US20,000 before April, when construction is set to begin.

"It's -7C there at the moment so they can't pour concrete," Nolan explains.

"But security has been really bad there recently because elections are being called next year. It's getting harder and harder for us to skate in public spaces."

"We want to build a school to guarantee the security of our students."

At the moment there are only two places where it is safe to skate in Kabul — an orphanage and the fountain, which is filled with ice in the winter.

The complex will operate like a bowling alley or a roller-skating rink, with students borrowing equipment and returning it after each free lesson. A batch of 70 donated skateboards has just arrived from Germany and Australia Post has promised to ship over another 60.

They have had contributions of land from the Afghan government and are hoping to get sponsorship from companies such as Oakley

and Quiksilver to build more complexes based on the same model down the track. Already, they have been contacted by skateboarders in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Cuba and Iraq.

Nolan was forced to return home to Australia last July when her money started to run low. She returned for five weeks over Christmas and plans to go back mid-year, this time for good. Although the project is rewarding, Nolan is aware that living in Kabul is not without its risks. A rocket landed in her compound the first night she arrived, and three months ago a good friend she made from South Africa was assassinated. She used to be scared, but rather than becoming desensitised to the violence, she has learned to be street smart.

"There have been kidnappings and a few other things have happened that have really brought home the element of danger," she says.

"It's brought us closer to our Afghani friends. I realised when I lost one of my closest friends that every Afghani I worked with has had the same thing happen to them, or worse."

"What drives me forward is that they are so positive and hospitable."

"I can't let something like that put me off being in Afghanistan. If they can overcome such huge personal hardships, I can too."

Nolan will be among a team of volunteers selling images from the project at the annual Bowl-A-Rama World Cup skateboarding competition at Bondi Beach today.

Photographs from an exhibition of the Skateistan project will also be for sale at the Love And Guts art show at The Beach Road Hotel at Bondi tonight.

