

I'm Proof That ...

Hula Hoops Can Change The World

By Charlotte Austin



Wasfia Nazreen was chastised for hula hooping when she was eight years old. In Bangladesh, girls do not shake their hips in public. She grew up in the tiny village of Feni, which is located in one of the most conservative parts of the tumultuous country. Her parents and grandparents lived through wars, colonialism, and revolutions. By the time the country gained independence in 1971, the national feeling was

one of anti-establishment. Wealth was scorned; education was coveted.

Wasfia left Bangladesh at age 17, when she traveled to the United States on an academic scholarship to Agnes Scott College (ASC) in Atlanta, Georgia. She earned a double major in psychology and studio art, and in her last year at school, she conducted six months of research on how women in India were using art as therapy.

After visiting more than a dozen research sites, she found herself in Dharamsala, where she spent time with political prisoners who had escaped from Tibet. “When they were in prison, these women had been raped, sterilized for life, had hunks of their breasts cut off. But they were praying for their torturers and using meditation to forgive their guards. Seeing the laughter on their faces and the light in their eyes changed my life.”

When her research project ended, Wasfia came back to the United States for her graduation. Then she sold everything she owned and moved to Dharamsala, where she served as a social worker and coordinated with nonprofits in Tibet, Nepal, and India. “I traveled a lot for my work,” she says, “and that’s when I fell in love with the Himalayas. And once you’re in love with big mountains, you never really recover.”

Despite the beauty of her surroundings, though, the eight years she spent in Dharamsala wore her down. “To be a good activist, you need to take care of your soul. My home country was calling, so I moved back to Bangladesh.”

In 2011, Bangladesh celebrated 40 years of independence. The nation—which had long been ravaged by political violence, civil unrest, and natural disasters—was going through a gruesome and complicated time, and Wasfia felt that the country’s young people were heartsick and uninspired. “The women are working especially hard,” she says. “There are so many good things happening in Bangladesh, and so many of them are being done by women and girls. But it’s a patriarchal, Muslim, male-dominated society, and nobody was acknowledging the country’s kick-ass female population! My generation needed something positive to focus on, so I decided to do something to celebrate the amazing women and men in my amazing country: hula hoop on

WASFIA NAZREEN

Age: 31

After an expedition, I always... "Take a shower and walk around naked."

Never travel without ... "Spicy chili peppers. And headphones to put me to sleep."

Lucky charm: "Amulets from His Holiness the Dalai Llama."

Training regimen: "I carry tires. That's the best training for a mountain like Denali, where you have to carry big loads. I also eat a lot and drink a lot, which keeps me strong, and I do yoga and meditate every day, which keeps me sane."

On every mountain, I take ... "My hula hoop. It's customized: 3.5 pounds with red and green colors for Bangladeshi flag."

Favorite beauty product: "Coconut oil. We massage it into dry hair before bed, sleep with it, and wash it out in the morning. You can add lemon juice to cure dandruff, or you can whisk in an egg yolk for conditioning. Bangladeshi women take very good care of their hair—it's always thick and shiny."

What I miss about Bangladesh: "Rice, fish, and the monsoon rains."

What I look for in a partner: "Honesty, intellect, and compassion toward the planet and her inhabitants."

the summit of the highest mountain on every continent."

To fund her quest for the so-called "Seven Summits," Wasfia sold her mother's gold jewelry, took out bank loans, and organized fundraisers. Since 2011, she has climbed Kilimanjaro (19,341'), Mount Everest (29,029'), Aconcagua (22,841'), Mount Vinson (16,050'), Mount Elbrus (18,510'), and most recently Mount McKinley (20,322'). To finish her quest, she'll need to climb Carstensz Pyramid (16,024'), the highest mountain in the Australian/Indonesian continent.

It hasn't been easy. The expeditions are long and expensive. She has battled political controversy, loneliness, death threats, raging storms, and frostbite that required hospital stays and surgery.

She has never been alone on her journey, though. "I've been lucky to have wonderful mentors, including Patrick Morrow," she says. She met Morrow—the first person to have completed the Seven Summits—while they were both working in Dharamsala, and he has since designed a training program that includes dragging tires up hills and carrying heavy loads at altitude. "Everything we do together is training," she says, "but it's more than training to climb mountains. I also learn about life. He and his wife are down-to-earth, humble people, and they've taught me so much about what it means to be a human being."

In her training, Wasfia has also climbed with other legends of the alpine community like Will Gadd and the Benegas brothers. "I'm training with all these big-time mountaineers. It's thrilling—and intimidating!" she admits. "They're so humble and cool, but I feel totally out of shape." Still, she says, it's worth it. "The global climbing community has rallied around me. I'm just a random person from Bangladesh, but I have friends

all around the world who embrace me and make me feel loved."

When she's not in the mountains, Wasfia works with the Bangladeshi on Seven Summits Foundation. She created the foundation to develop educational programs, employment opportunities, and outdoor training for at-risk adolescent girls in Bangladesh and Nepal, who she hopes will feel empowered to choose lifestyles beyond those dictated by traditional gender roles. She has also mentored a team of Nepalese women attempting the Seven Summits, blogs for an environmental website called Fragile Oasis, and acts as an ambassador for BRAC (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), the world's largest nonprofit.

Wasfia isn't sure what she'll do when she finishes the Seven Summits, but one thing is certain: She will continue to give back. She plans to work with her foundation, raise awareness for the

wonderful women and children in Bangladesh, and write about her adventures.

When she speaks about her experiences climbing mountains, she has one request: don't call them conquests. "Summiting is the proper word," she says. "But when you're pushing yourself to the extreme, the experience is more like surrender."

