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Young Afghan Photographer's Work Highlights Plight of Children, Women

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Shagofa Alikozay is a bright woman who isn't far removed from childhood in Afghanistan, which she illustrates with her photos, sketches and poetry.

Her goal is to bring to light the challenges, problems and miseries of living in one of the world's poorest countries, a place riven by war and religious extremism, where going to school can take a back seat to earning money and where women struggle for equality.

And now, hoping to foster change, she's shining the light brightly, with one of her photos winning a national award and being displayed in Smithsonian museum in Washington, D.C.

The photo, of an 8-year-old boy named Pardes, was taken during a break in his work washing cars on the streets of Kabul. It is on display at the Smithsonian's Turquoise Mountain exhibit, showing the youthful exuberance that even the drudgery of Pardes' job can't diminish.

"Kids are the future of Afghanistan, and that is why most of my work is focused on them," Alikozay, who is from Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province, told VOA. "I do all this to bring a positive change in the lives of these kids."

The photo simultaneously tells the story of the past, the present and the unknown future for the country. The cars in the background belonged to two former kings of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan and Mohammed Zahir Shah.

Pardes, who accompanied Alikozay to the Smithsonian exhibit, hopes his flash of fame can help improve his life.

“I want to go to school and become a police officer,” he said. “I also want to do photography.”

Alikozay also is an accomplished sketch artist, has written several books, and has a blog where she publishes her own poetry and articles about Afghan kids and women. One of her poems won a BlogHer “Voices of the Year” award.

“I want back my happy homeland, my smiling faces. I want God to erase all this violence, these screaming mothers, this sky of smoke,” the poem says. “I have speech for those who would silence speech. My heart burns to explain these problems, this terror, with honesty.”