Steve McCurry, whose poignant images capture the essence of human struggle and joy, is recognized as one of today's finest photographers. For more than 25 years, his images of the young and old alike have told the story of joy and suffering in the world. His work serves as icons that chronicle the changing face of Asia, especially the conflicted tapestry of Afghanistan. It was a journey that started in 1979 in India, where he learned to watch and wait. "If you wait, people will forget your camera and the soul will drift up into view", he says.

Through ImagineAsia, a foundation he helped form and whose long-term goal is to provide stipends for teachers and develop an infrastructure for training programmes within schools, McCurry has assisted in providing thousands of books and supplies to schools in the Bamiyan region of Afghanistan. His photography has focused the world's attention on the critical need to educate the Afghan children. He is perhaps best known for his haunting photograph of the green-eyed Afghan girl, featured on the cover of National Geographic in June 1985.

McCurry’s photos will be part of an exhibit at the United Nations in the fall of 2006. Co-sponsored by Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU), the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations, the United Nations Population Fund and the Department of Public Information, the exhibit will include quotes from a new book, Coming of Age in a Globalized World: The Next Generation, by FDU President J. Michael Adams and Director of Communications Angelo Carfagna. It is a collaboration that promises to be an enlightening journey and will help focus international attention on the plight of the Afghan children.

Steve McCurry spoke about his work in Asia, particularly his experience in Afghanistan, with colleague Art Petrosemolo of FDU, who accompanied him to Kabul and Bamiyan in March 2006 (see photo on page 43).

What brought you to Afghanistan the first time?

After working at a newspaper in Philadelphia [United States], I left to do magazine freelance assignments in India in 1978. I spent one and a half years travelling throughout India and Nepal, photographing for a variety of small magazines. In the spring of 1979, when the temperature was over 40° Celsius, I travelled up into the mountains of northwest Pakistan to explore that part of the subcontinent that I had not visited before. While staying in a small hotel in the village of Chitral, I met some Afghan refugees from Nooristan, who explained that many of the villages in their area had been destroyed by the Afghan army. I told them I was a photographer and they insisted that I come and photograph the civil war that was raging. I never photographed in an area of conflict and wasn’t sure how I would react.

After a few days, I walked with them over the mountains into Afghanistan and spent nearly three weeks photographing life there. I was astonished to see so many villages that had been virtually destroyed with no inhabitants left to tell the tale. The roads were all blocked or under government control, so we had to walk everywhere. I met some people who I became very close to. I was also very affected by the culture and the beauty of the country. It was a different way of life, with no modern conveniences, and I was drawn to the simplicity of the lifestyle; everything was reduced to basics. It has drawn me back time and time again.

You have visited Afghanistan more than a dozen times, how has it changed?

Afghanistan has changed in many significant ways. When I first visited Kabul, the city was intact and functioning. Visiting for the past 27 years, I have seen Kabul as a fully functioning city to a city on its knees—and I am happy to say I am seeing it now in its rebuilding stages.

I have seen countless villages destroyed during the fighting in the 1970s and 1980s; it is nice to see that in large measure they too are being rebuilt. There were millions of displaced Afghan people who were in camps in Pakistan and Iran and neighbouring countries, and many immigrated—a huge displacement of the population—anytime this happens, it affects the fabric of the country. Roads were also destroyed, but are now being rebuilt, and life in some rural areas has remained unchanged. The biggest physical change was the destruction by the Taliban of the Buddhas of Bamiyan—a great cultural loss. Also, when I first visited, the Government was very liberal. I have seen changes to socialism and now to a more religious government.
You brought the plight of Afghan refugees to the attention of Americans with your signature photo of the Afghan girl*. Did you know this was a special shot?

I took the photo in a refugee camp outside Peshawar, Pakistan, one morning in the fall of 1984 during my ninth or tenth trip. It was taken inside a tent. I heard voices coming from the tent and when I looked in I realized it was being used as a school for girls. The teacher gave me permission to take some photographs of her class, and I took about three students—Sharbat Gula was the third one. I probably photographed her for three minutes. I knew she had a compelling expression, with very expressive, haunting eyes and a troubled look. She seemed bright and alert. We couldn’t talk because of language and cultural barriers, but I felt that her personality and expression were coming through. I knew she had an amazing look and a strong emotional component to her expression.

You can never predict what photo others will respond to, although I thought it was compelling. I couldn’t tell how others would react to it.

[*The picture mentioned is not part of this feature.*]
You were able to find and visit the Afghan girl in 2001, tell us about that. And what is your hope for the Afghan children?

Rarely a day has gone by in the last 22 years since I took the photo that there’s not a phone call, e-mail or some query about her. It’s astonishing how people connect and respond to the photograph. It was a profound and moving experience to go back and find her. It was an absolute miracle to find this little nameless girl out of literally hundreds of thousands of refugees.

After the events of 11 September 2001 and the fall of the Taliban, I went back on a National Geographic television assignment to see how Afghanistan was faring. We wanted to spend some time in Peshawar in a last attempt to find the Afghan girl before the refugee camp she had lived in was dismantled and removed forever, losing the possibility of ever finding her. All we had was that photograph, so we walked around the camp asking hundreds of people if they remembered her. Finally, a man came forward, claiming to remember her and her brother, and said they were living in a small village in Afghanistan. He offered to travel there and try to find them, so we gave him some money for transportation. After a couple days, he showed up with someone who said he was Sharbat Gula’s brother. He had the same amazing eyes that I remembered. After some hours of talking to him and Sharbat’s husband, they agreed to let us meet and eventually photograph her. We were absolutely astonished that we were able to find her after so many years with so little to go on. Having her image as a 12-year-old girl in my mind for 17 years, I was shocked to finally see her as a nearly 30-year-old woman. Living in a refugee camp had taken a physical toll on her, but we were relieved that she was alive and happy and had a family living peacefully in Afghanistan. It was a good feeling to be able to finally give something back and make her life better.

When I look into the eyes of the Afghan children, I see a tough, hearty race, full of dignity and fortitude. Life there is often harsh and unforgiving, but its people accept the challenges with resilience and often with a sense of humour. My hope for the children of Afghanistan and anywhere else in the world is that they are all given a solid primary education and provided adequate health care. Every child has the right to those two basic things.

Many photographers try to keep some distance between themselves and their subjects, what prompted you to be involved?

When you visit a place so many times, you notice what areas really need help and you want to call it to the attention of the world. You realize that even a nominal effort can be a significant contribution to a country like Afghanistan. It was a way for me to thank and give something back to the many people who have helped me in my work over the years. After we rediscovered the Afghan girl, there was renewed interest in the original photo and the plight of Sharbat. I felt it was a chance to use that interest to reach out to others to bring some help to the needy people of the area.
Can you describe some of the activities of ImagineAsia?

ImagineAsia helps children in rural Asian communities by addressing fundamental education and health-care needs. We work in partnership with community leaders and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to establish primary schools, which offer the added benefit of medical care. Our most recent accomplishments have occurred in eight villages in the Waras district. They have been selected for the Bamiyan School project, where there are more than 2,000 participating students. The foundation provided funds and facilitated the registration for two schools—Patewqul and Wozdarghoon—for girls’ classes, with the Ministry of Education in Kabul enabling volunteer teachers to be paid a government salary. We also provided thousands of new textbooks and supplies to students. We are currently working on providing stipends to ensure hiring and training of teachers and administrative staff, and securing funds for the necessary learning materials, supplies and furniture that will enable the schools to operate efficiently. We are also partnering with NGOs to build schools in various provinces of Afghanistan, starting in Bamiyan.

ImagineAsia is dedicated to assisting in the implementation of pilot programmes in the fields of peace, education, computer literacy, health education and environmental awareness. One of our main goals for the immediate future is to provide for a medical clinic and doctor to visit the schools monthly. We are working to bring these programmes to other villages in Afghanistan, Tibet, Pakistan and India.
With Afghanistan’s newly elected government, what do you see as its immediate challenges and what role can art play in the creation of its future?

I think Afghanistan’s biggest challenges are: getting opium production under control and helping farmers find a crop to grow that will provide them with a fair income; helping the Pashtun tribes of south and southeast Afghanistan play a bigger role in the mainstream of Afghan life and society; and ensuring that the central government is able to reach out and assist many of the rural villages. Afghanistan has a rich tradition of music, poetry and art. It is important for the soul of the Afghan people that they can express their hopes and dreams—and that is flourishing again after the establishment of a democratic government.