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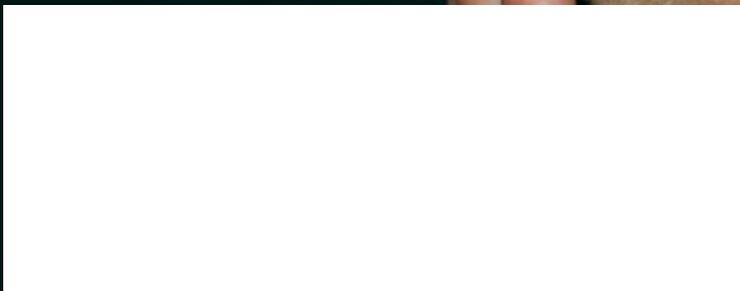
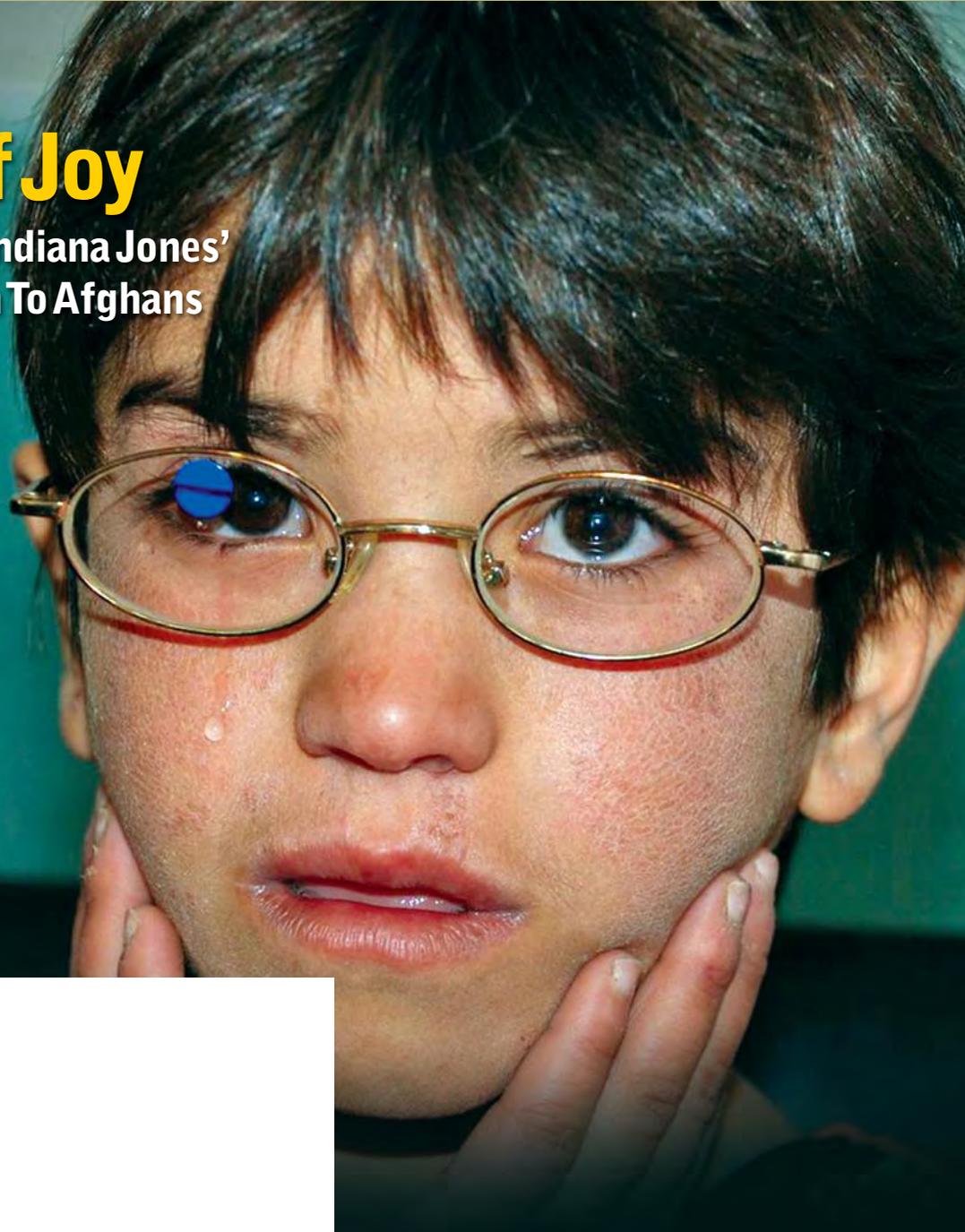


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Tear of Joy

Lions' Own 'Indiana Jones'
Brings Vision To Afghans



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Bowersox explores Badakhshan, Afghanistan, in search of gemstones.

Afghanistan's Treasure

Lion Gary Bowersox has spent his career gem hunting in Afghanistan. Now he's a precious connection for thousands of Afghans in need of vision care.

by Vanessa N. Glavinskas

Lion Gary Bowersox has unearthed millions of dollars worth of gems, explored terrain that the U.S. military won't enter, advised the CIA, dodged bullets and brought humanitarian aid to a region most volunteers won't touch.

He was even compared to Indiana Jones on *Good Morning America*.

All because of the 40 years he's spent exploring Afghanistan's mines as an international gem dealer.

At 70, the years have thinned his hair and turned his beard more salt than pepper, but there's still a vigor about him—and a yearning that continually calls him back to Afghanistan, no matter the danger.

"I'll retire the day I can't lift a one-carat stone," he jokes.

Bowersox, a member of the Kamehameha Lions Club in Hawaii, continues to go back to the unforgiving mountains of Afghanistan to train local miners in exploration, extraction and marketing of gems, providing an economic boost for the troubled nation.

"I teach them marketing of the gem materials," Bowersox says. "It builds a business rather than just giving aid money... you know the saying, 'teach them how to fish.'"

Without proper training, mining is not only frustrating and dangerous, but often fruitless. Bowersox equates it to buying lottery tickets for a living.

"Gary helps the miners get more of the potential of what they mine and educates them on what they do and the value of the items," says Bowersox's friend and fellow Lion Jim Bryan. "That's a big part of his whole humanitarian mission—let these people realize their own potential."

It's also his job; he turns a profit. But it's the humanitarian aspect that has grown in importance to Bowersox over the years, and that ultimately led him to Lions. Now,

when he returns, it's not just to buy gems – but to bring eyeglasses to those who need them most.

Becoming a 'Gem Hunter'

Bowersox hasn't always lived the globetrotting life of an international gem dealer. He started out in Kalamazoo, Michigan, with an apple-pie upbringing.

"I went to Western Michigan, and went into the army from there," he says. "I came out a major after Vietnam, and I decided to go back into civilian life."

His last assignment was in Hawaii, which is where Bowersox settled and started several businesses.

"I started a tax and bookkeeping service, and went on to buy a jewelry store in Waikiki," he says. "That's what

got me into the gem business. But after three years of working 9 a.m. to 11 p.m., I got the urge to travel, so I sold the store and went into the jewelry wholesale business."

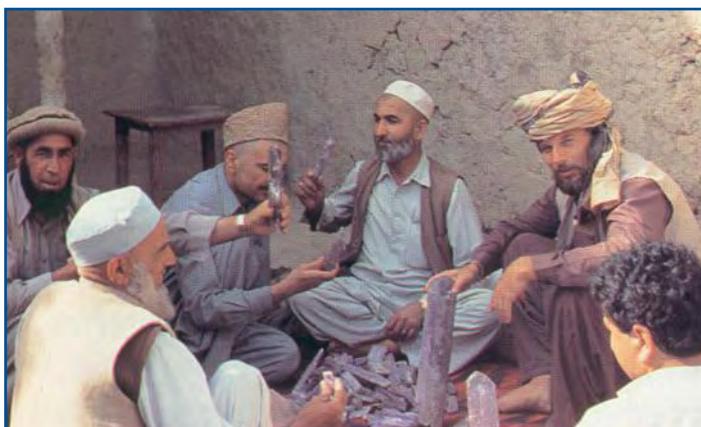
The decision changed his life. He became certified in gemology and began traveling to buy stones. One key trait defined him: he's not afraid of risk.

Fast forward to October 1979. Bowersox had taken a risk that led him to Kabul, Afghanistan, to buy lapis lazuli, an exquisite blue stone that has been mined for 7,000 years.

He was almost 10 years into traveling the world, spending months on horseback and hiking high into the mountains to buy rough gemstones directly from Afghan miners. He then sold the stones at a discount since he had fewer middlemen than a less intrepid dealer.

Several years earlier, he had brought his former wife and 2-year-old daughter to Afghanistan and things had gone smoothly. Not this trip.

His first night in Kabul, Bowersox awoke to automatic weapon fire.



Bowersox, in turban, purchases Kunzite crystals from villagers in Bajour on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

“Despite all the hardships and dangers, I’m always aching to return and happy when I’m back.”

Commander Sher Mohammad, Haji Shaloon and Bowersox. Haji Shaloon had just received glasses from Lions Club members.



He recounts the scene in his autobiography, *The Gem Hunter—True Adventures of an American in Afghanistan*.

“Rat-a-tat-a-tat-tat! More gunfire! Automatic weapons—closer this time—no more than a block from our building. Another loud KABOOM resonated through the dark night, followed by a red glow that lit up the streets of the city.”

The Soviets were battling the Afghans.

By morning things had calmed down, but Bowersox quickly realized why he had been called to Kabul. He was there to buy lapis, and the foreign currency he offered would be used to finance the resistance against the Soviets, who officially invaded Afghanistan two months later and took over for a decade.

Things got dangerous under Soviet and later Taliban rule, yet Bowersox managed to make the right friends, sidestep politics and get back into the country time and again to buy gems.

“Despite all the hardships and dangers, I’m always aching to return and happy when I’m back,” he says.

Sept. 11th

No matter who’s been invading Afghanistan, “Mr. Gary” has remained consistent. The locals trust consistency, and in return, have protected him with their lives.

One legendary Afghan became of particular importance to Bowersox. In 1989 he met General Ahmed Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance. Massoud

fought against the Taliban, and was credited in the *Wall Street Journal* as the “Afghan who won the Cold War.” Massoud had a gem hobby and liked Bowersox because he provided jobs for his people and the profits helped to keep his resistance movement going.

“He walked six inches above the ground,” Bowersox says, who felt the loss personally when General Massoud was assassinated just days before Sept. 11, 2001.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 shifted everything for Bowersox.

“I was doing 60 gem shows a year and every one canceled after 9/11,” Bowersox says. In 10 days, his business came to a screeching halt.

Yet another door opened. Bowersox was tapped by the U.S. Department of Defense for information about Afghanistan. He was one of few Americans who knew the topography of rural Afghanistan firsthand and had spent years mapping mines in the region.

“Gary would be one of the first people they’d pull in to identify where Bin Laden was when he’d appear on those videos,” says Bryan.

Bowersox had been contacted by the CIA throughout the years, but this was different. “They had me fly home and get my photos and my maps of Afghanistan,” he says. Bowersox briefed U.S. Defense Intelligence on General Massoud and his commanders. He gave his take on who the “good guys” were and the current political situation.

Then, Bowersox did what he always did. He returned to Afghanistan about three months after 9/11.

A Turning Point

After 9/11, areas where locals rarely see an outside visitor or aid worker became even more closed off, but Bowersox always returned.

Children run to greet him and people line up for him to a look at their stones and tell them their worth, says Bryan. Strangers have taken him into their homes, allowing him a night's rest and food.

"They view a visitor as a gift from God," explains Bowersox.

It was in his interactions with locals that a dire need caught his attention.

"I work up into the mountain areas, where they don't have any access to eye care. Someone would tell me, 'I have the perfect emerald,' and I'd take my glasses off and give them to him," he says.

The need haunted Bowersox. He was already a Rotarian and regularly distributed supplies to Afghanistan schools through his Rotary club. Who could help him with vision care?

Back in Hawaii, Bowersox called Jim Bryan and asked if he were still a member of a Lions club.

"Gary said, 'Aren't the Lions involved in eyeglasses and the blind,' and I said, 'Sure, what can I help you with?'" recalls Bryan.

Bowersox approached the

Kamehameha club about organizing and funding an eye-glass program for the people of Afghanistan. It wasn't an easy task.

"Basically, it was that Lions didn't want our members to get killed somewhere they shouldn't be," says Bryan about trying to get Lions Clubs International or LCIF to support the project. "Even our district couldn't endorse it at first."

Regardless, club members took on the project and collected 5,000 eyeglasses for the Afghan people and shipped them to Bowersox's contact in Kabul. Then came the problem of distribution. Volunteers needed to be on the ground to give out glasses in rural regions. There were no Lions in Afghanistan to partner with.

It seemed the project might stall, but Bryan started thinking.

"I'm a film producer and writer, and I thought going [to Afghanistan] could be a story of a lifetime," he says. He had just one stipulation. Bowersox had to join his Lions club.



An Afghan girl reads letters on an eye chart before receiving her eyeglasses.

Mateen Khan Jegdalek and Jim Bryan (right) of the Kamehameha Lions Club distribute eyeglasses in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's Treasure



Bowersox and Lion Shahiq Habibi, both members of the Kamehameha Club, pass out eyeglasses in Khenj village, Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan.

An Afghan man tries on eyeglasses.



“I said, if I’m going to die over there, I’m not going to die with a Rotarian, so you have to become a Lion,” Bryan says, laughing. “I sponsored him into the Kamehameha Lions Club.”

After six months of getting immunizations and paperwork together, the Lions set off.

A Project for the People

“The State Department told us this is totally out of the bounds of what we want Americans doing over there,” recalls Bryan.

According to Bryan, the remaining Taliban fighters don’t want the West to “look good” to the Afghan people, so westerners who arrive on a humanitarian mission become targets.

“The military said you guys are on your own, you’re going into villages and areas where our troops never go,” Bryan says. “You have to trust the local militia to take care of you.”

Bowersox wasn’t worried.

There’s no question that he would not have survived in Afghanistan without his many strong relationships. When the turmoil was really bad, friends would help him get into Afghanistan “through the backdoor,” covertly crossing the border from Pakistan. He even crossed the border in a woman’s burqa once to avoid detection. For him, the trip was one of the easier ones.

Indeed, Bowersox’s contacts came through and shuttled the Lions from the Kabul airport to their compound in an old pickup truck. The glasses had been shipped and stored safely. All that was left to do was to map out a distribution strategy based on which villages were safe.

Of course they hadn’t advertised the eyeglass distribution, so Bryan

began to wonder how they'd find the people who needed help. Turns out, he didn't have to worry.

"You won't believe how word spread," says Bowersox. "Villagers would come out of nowhere," echoes Bryan.

Over the next four weeks, the Lions drove into a village, set up where they could, often in a clinic abandoned by another aid group, hung an eye chart and started fitting glasses on people's heads.

"We do basic trial and error over there," Bowersox says. "We just keep trying the different intensities. That's why it would be great to get an eye doctor to go with us."

"Many times we'd get in and start distributing and we'd get word that the Taliban was near and we'd pack up and have to go," recalls Bryan. "We were hop-scotching all over."

Along the way, they slept in barns or goat houses or bunkers.

Today, Bowersox estimates that about 10,000 eyeglasses have been shipped to Afghanistan. The problem of distribution still exists, but was ameliorated when the military began helping to give out glasses.

Bryan, a district officer, also inducted 10 of Bowersox's Afghan contacts into the Kamehameha Lions Club. They continue to distribute glasses sent to them by the Hawaiian club.

Looking back, Bryan is still amazed that his Lions club was able to pull off an eyeglass distribution project in rural Afghanistan.

"Here we are, this little speck of dirt in the ocean, and all the way around the world we have 10 Lions working for us in Afghanistan," says Bryan. "It's a great Lions story, but you need a Gary Bowersox to get the door open for you."



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