

# CRY FREEDOM

Held hostage in Somalia, Amanda Lindhout speaks for the first time about her ordeal and redemption. TEXT: SUSAN MCCLELLAND

**A**fter five months in what would become a 15-month hostage ordeal in Somalia, Amanda Lindhout and her fellow captive, Australian photojournalist Nigel Brennan, made a break for freedom. Lindhout, a freelance journalist, had been given a pair of nail clippers by her captors—part of a care package that they had received from the Canadian government.

In an *Escape From Alcatraz*-like scene, Lindhout and Brennan used the clippers to scratch at the mortar between some bricks that blocked the bathroom window. After several days of chipping, a few bricks eventually gave way and the two escaped through the opening and ran to a nearby mosque. It was their first taste of freedom since they had been abducted at gunpoint in a rented SUV in August 2008 while en route to research a story on the internally displaced people of Somalia.

With their heavily armed kidnappers hot in pursuit, the pair burst into the mosque just as the male congregants finished their midday prayer. “The men got up off their prayer mats and argued with us and our hostage takers,



Amanda Lindhout with a child in Africa in August 2008, a week before she was kidnapped

“EVEN IN MY DARKEST DAYS, I THOUGHT OF HER BRAVERY.”

wanting to know what was going on,” recalls Lindhout, who was 27 at the time. “Then, this woman parted the crowd with her hands. When she reached me, she said, ‘You are my sister.’ She took me in her arms, pleaded with the kidnappers not to take me and told the men in the mosque to protect me.”

The woman’s pleas failed, and Lindhout and Brennan were both taken back, at gunpoint, to what Lindhout calls the “Dark House.” “I called it that because I couldn’t even see my hand in front of my face,” she explains. “It’s also the place where I experienced my darkest moments—where I endured every type of abuse imaginable.”

At one point, Lindhout’s captors took her out to the desert and set up a mock execution, making her believe that they were going to kill her by cutting off her head. ▷



In the many hours that she spent alone, shackled with thick, rusty chains around her ankles, she was forbidden to move and forced to lie for 24 hours a day on either side in a pitch-black room.

**From top left: A girls school in Somalia; Lindhout at a World Food Programme feeding centre in Mogadishu on August 22, 2008, the day before she was kidnapped; at the feeding centre in Mogadishu**

To survive, Lindhout tried to focus on something positive, including the woman who attempted to save her in the mosque. "I will never forget her," she says. "Even in my darkest days, I thought of her bravery—so outstanding in a country where human life is valued so little. When I was at my weakest, I had this revelation: Somehow, I came to see that my kidnapers' suffering was greater than my own. In that moment, I came to understand something of their lives—that they had known nothing but conflict and war from the time they were born. I wondered what they would be like if they were given opportunities and raised by educated, empowered women, like the woman from the mosque who tried to save me. I vowed that if I ever got out, I would do my part to make Somalia a better place."

On November 25, 2009, after her family paid a ransom, Lindhout and Brennan were released. Since her return to Canada, the former reporter from Red Deer, Alta., has dedicated

her life to the promise she made in Somalia. In May, she launched the Somali Women's Scholarship Program, which provides university scholarships and a living allowance to Somali girls. This September, 11 young women will start receiving support, but Lindhout's long-term goal is to have 100 recipients enrolled in university over the next four years.

Lindhout and her small panel of advisers—including Ahmed Hussien, national president of the Canadian Somali Congress—are selecting recommended applicants from six universities across Somalia. Part of the application process involves the girls sharing their strategies for making their communities and country better with the education given to them. One of the successful applicants is Amal, a 19-year-old cancer survivor who will be starting an undergraduate degree in environmental studies this fall. Amal's father died when she ▷



**Girls at school in Somalia**

## SOMALIA'S SAD HISTORY

Somalia, with a population of only nine million, has been without a central government since the start of its civil war in 1991. The country has one of the worst human rights records in the world and is considered the poorest nation. Northern Somalia, known as Somaliland, declared itself independent in 1991 and is relatively peaceful. However, various clans vie for leadership of the rest of the country, and lawlessness abounds. There are public executions of criminals for minor—and often petty—crimes. In the southern region, people follow a strict interpretation of Islam, which includes forcing girls into early marriage and the subjugation of women.

Making matters even worse, from 2006 to 2009, the transitional government solicited the help of Ethiopian forces to quell unrest with opposition forces, which only exacerbated the war.

As a result, over the past 20 years, an estimated 1.6 million Somalis have been internally displaced. Halima Ali, the executive director of the Central Alberta Immigrant Women's Association and an adviser with Amanda Lindhout's Somali Women's Scholarship Program, is a Somali-born schoolteacher. When Ali was growing up in the 1970s, women held high positions in Somali society. Like many Somalis living in Canada, she immigrated to this country after the start of the civil war, when Somalia's political, social and

economic structures disintegrated.

"Women used to be the backbone of Somali society," says Ali, "but the war has eroded that." As Lindhout observed first-hand, Somali


teenagers today have grown up knowing only war, violence and the oppression of women. "Even in the midst of all that she went through, Amanda witnessed the strength of the Somali women," says Ali. "In them, she saw hope and a dream that Somalia can achieve something great if women are given the tools to take control of their lives."

was a child, and she grew up in poverty while her mother struggled to support the family. Lindhout and her team chose Amal, based partly on an essay she wrote that outlined how she wanted to develop a recycling-and-waste-management program for her country.

Eventually, Lindhout wants her Global Enrichment Foundation, which is awaiting charitable status from the federal government, to expand the scholarship program and provide micro-financing to women entrepreneurs. "I'd like to help one of our future doctors set up a clinic or help Amal implement her ideas to make Somalia more environmentally friendly," says Lindhout. "I believe that when a woman is educated, so is an entire community."

Lindhout often shares another story when she's speaking at events to raise funds for her scholarship program. Just days before her kidnapping, she and Brennan filmed two camps for internally displaced people. There, she witnessed men pushing their way through the crowd to get to the food being given out, while women, often with babies on their hips, moved slowly to the front of the line. "The women would feed their children first," says Lindhout. "They were so dignified—I would even say elegant. I was so taken by it. They moved me."

At a speaking engagement earlier this year, Sumiya Musse, a Toronto-born woman whose parents are from Somalia, joined Lindhout onstage. The 19-year-old spoke about how a combination of war and clan violence has resulted in many girls being pulled from school to work around the house and be trained for marriage and motherhood. In her talk, Musse read one of the poems she wrote about her Somali sisters who have been left behind: "Blood

is shed / The children remain unfed, yet nothing is being said, nothing is said. / They remain in fear, while we are here...." But Somali women and girls *are* being heard. They are finding support from the most unlikely of sisters: Amanda Lindhout. 

*Amanda Lindhout is writing a book about her time in Somalia and studying development leadership at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S.*

**HOW TO HELP...** For more information on the Somali Women's Scholarship Program and how to donate, visit [globalenrichmentfoundation.com](http://globalenrichmentfoundation.com).

- A \$100 donation will send a woman to university for over a month.
- A \$1,000 donation will sponsor her education for an entire year.

Until Amanda Lindhout's Global Enrichment Foundation receives charitable status, all cheques should be written and directed to the Mary A. Tidlund Charitable Foundation ([tidlundfoundation.com](http://tidlundfoundation.com)). Tidlund is a former oil executive whom Lindhout met when she returned to Canada. Tidlund's foundation supports women's and girls' health and education programs in 20 countries. She is mentoring Lindhout, and her foundation is offering tax receipts until Lindhout's foundation is able to do so. "I couldn't wait to launch the scholarship program," says Lindhout. "I have a platform now that I can use to speak about Somalia and people will listen. When people hear my story, they always ask 'How can I help?'"