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Afghan journalist shares inspiration with WKU students

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Students at Western Kentucky University listen to a talk given by Afghan journalist Lotfullah Najafizada, the winner of the second annual Fleischaker/Greene Award of Courageous International Reporting.

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Afghan journalist Lotfullah Najafizada goes to work every day with the memory of a deadly Taliban bus bombing seared into his brain.

“The Taliban killed seven of my colleagues just last year ... 17 others were wounded,” said Najafizada, who spoke to journalism students and faculty at Western Kentucky University on Thursday. “Most of them returned back to work after they recovered from their injuries.”

Despite the dangers journalists face in Afghanistan, Najafizada doesn't consider himself courageous, but instead “committed.”

Following that bus bombing, his mother asked him to leave his job and the country.

“I said, ‘Mom, if you look at those wounded colleagues who have returned back to work and they’re even more committed, it would not be fair for me to leave,’ ” he said.

It’s that commitment that earned Najafizada the second annual Fleischaker/Greene Award for Courageous International Reporting. The award is made possible by the Fleischaker/Greene Fund for Excellence in First Amendment Issues, which Louisville attorneys Jon Fleischaker and Kim Greene created in 2008.

During his talk, Najafizada spoke about his work as director of TOLONews, Afghanistan’s first and largest 24-hour daily news channel. All told, about 200 people attended the talk.

Najafizada has interviewed global leaders, including former British Prime Minister David Cameron and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, among others.

Forbes selected him among the “30 under 30” top media influencers in Asia in 2017. Time Magazine named him a Next Generation Leader in 2016, and Reporters Without Borders named him a Press Freedom Hero, according to a WKU news release.

“Clearly he is a journalist with a passion and commitment to truth,” said Larry Snyder, dean of WKU’s Potter College of Arts and Letters, while introducing Najafizada.

In Afghanistan, Najafizada said the media works tirelessly against seemingly universal opposition to make their country a better place.

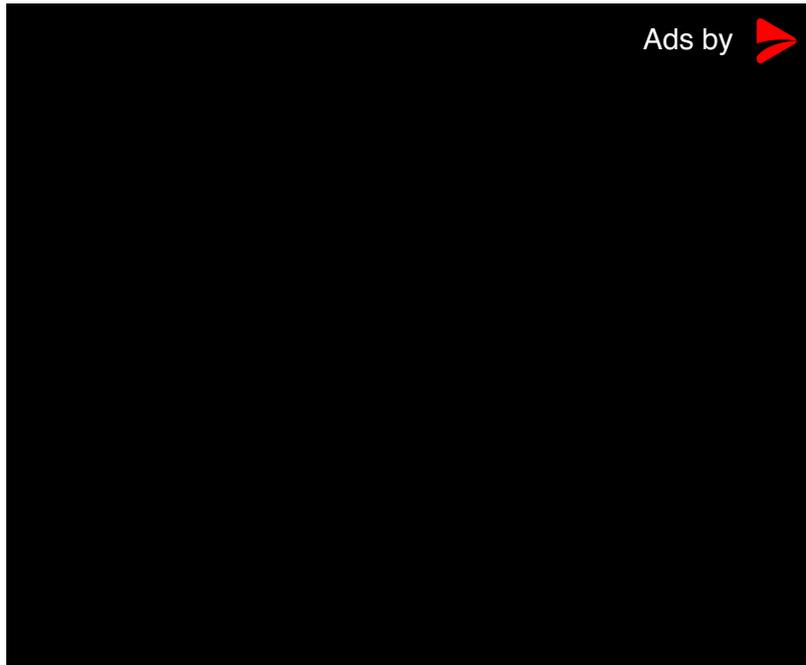
“The Taliban hates it because we tell the truth. The government hates it because we expose their corruption. Warlords hate it because we expose their crimes. And druglords hate it because we go after them,” he said.

For Najafizada, Afghan journalists tell unexplored stories. Western media too often focuses on the conflict and western journalists rarely venture outside their assignments as military embeds, leaving the stories of everyday Afghans untold.

Despite 16 years of conflict, Najafizada said life has gotten better for many Afghans. About 10 million kids are now in school, access to health care has tripled, life expectancy has increased and many Afghans can study abroad and return to their country.

“Just two decades back, my family could not even tell their stories at a dining table fearing that someone might tell this to the government and they would be prosecuted,” he said.

However, Afghanistan still has its challenges.



“Over 10 civilians die a day. Our forces are fighting battles in 20-plus provinces every single day,” he said.

When he hears about the possibility of America pulling out of the conflict, Najafizada believes there’s a greater cost for leaving than staying and that Afghanistan needs to be given time to stand on its own.

He sees hope in the faces of the more than 100 media professionals he oversees at TOLONews. More often, he’s seeing young people step into the field – including women, who make up about 20 percent of his staff.

“I see more maturity in the Afghan media in the last decade and a half,” he said.

Louisville junior Morgan Price said she appreciated the perspective Najafizada offered.

“I like what he said about making Afghanistan more relevant to people in the United States,” she said, adding that her own understanding of the country is dominated by media images of violence.

The country’s progress doesn’t belong to any one person, Najafizada said.

“It’s the story of a generation. It’s the story of a country trying to change for the better,” he said.

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