



Decades after 'Charlie Wilson's War,' Houston socialite Joanne King Herring still making a difference in Afghanistan

By [Mike Snyder](#)

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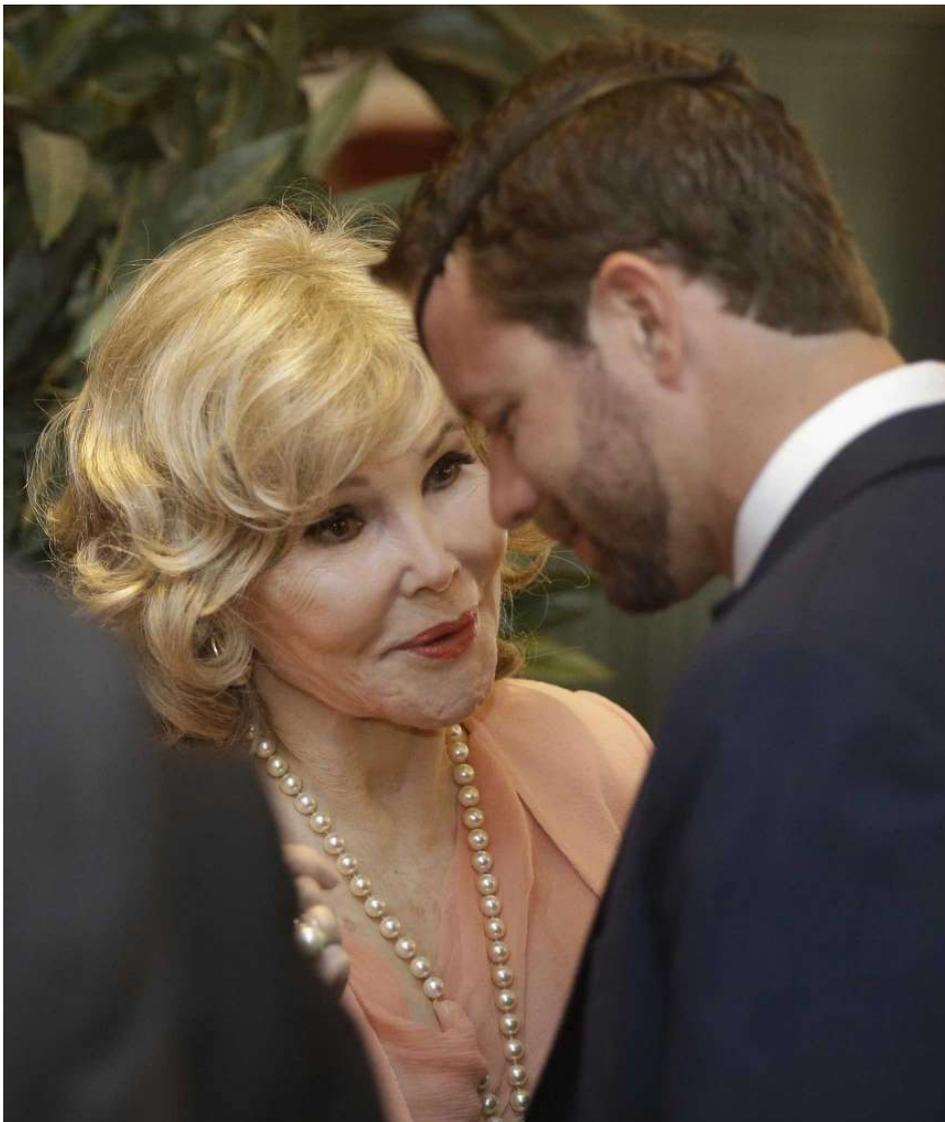


This photo, from a power point presentation on improvements in the Khairabad Village by Marshall Plan Charities, shows the Khairabad Shouz School in the Shawz Bazaar area. The location provides easy access and will provide educational services to 400 students from Khairabad who currently have limited to no educational opportunities. ... less

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Houston socialite Joanne King Herring, left, talks with Dan Crenshaw, Republican candidate for the 2nd Congressional District, right, during an award luncheon at Ouisie's Table, 3939 San Felipe, Friday, March 9, 2018, in Houston. The Afghan ambassador to the

United States, Hamdullah Mohib, spoke at the event sponsored by Sister Cities of Houston. The ambassador talked about the work done by Joanne King Herring to develop and assist a village in northern Afghanistan and also presented an award to Herring's son, Robin King, who helped produce a film that was instrumental in getting U.S. aid to Afghanistan in its war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. (Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle) ... less

Houston socialite Joanne King Herring, left, talks with Dan Crenshaw, Republican candidate for the 2nd Congressional District, right, during an award luncheon at Ouisie's Table, 3939 San Felipe, Friday, March ... more
Photo: Melissa Phillip / Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle



Robin King, son of Houston socialite Joanne King Herring, is shown during an award luncheon at Ouisie's Table, 3939 San Felipe, Friday, March 9, 2018, in Houston. The Afghan ambassador to the United States, Hamdullah Mohib, spoke at the event sponsored by Sister Cities of Houston. The ambassador talked about the work done by Joanne King Herring to develop and assist a village in northern Afghanistan and also presented an award to Herring's son, Robin King, who helped produce a film that was instrumental in getting U.S. aid to Afghanistan in its war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. (Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle) ... less

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Photo: Melissa Phillip, Staff / Houston Chronicle

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Houston socialite Joanne King Herring, right, shown with the Afghani ambassador to the United States, Hamdullah Mohib, left, speaks during an award luncheon at Ouisie's Table, 3939 San Felipe, Friday, March 9,

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A hungry child can't learn. A man afflicted with dysentery from foul drinking water can't work.

These principles inform Joanne King Herring's efforts to help villagers in Khairabad, in northern Afghanistan. She's convinced that the best strategy to improve the lives of impoverished people is to provide direct aid in a few key areas all at once, then get out of the way.

"We cannot fix it; they have to fix it," said Herring, the 88-year-old Houston philanthropist and socialite featured in the 2007 film "Charlie Wilson's War." "So how do we equip them? Food, water, basic health care, education, and jobs."

The approach has been so effective in Khairabad that the government intends to use it in other rural settlements, said Hamdullah Mohib, Afghanistan's ambassador to the United States, who visited Houston on Friday.

"We're implementing that on a larger scale," said Mohib, who sat next to Herring at a luncheon event sponsored by Sister Cities of Houston and the United Nations Association.

Before Herring tucked into her hamburger and Mohib into his chef salad, Herring worked the crowd of diplomats, business leaders and others. Chatting with Mohib, she occasionally put her hand on the ambassador's shoulder for emphasis.

Amid the clatter of plates at a River Oaks-area restaurant, Mohib thanked Herring for her well-known role in persuading American leaders to support Afghans resisting Soviet invaders in a 10-year war that began in 1979.

"A woman from this city started helping our freedom fighters," Mohib told the gathering of about 50 people.

Herring rose to speak briefly, but her words were hard to hear, and someone encouraged her to hold the microphone closer.

"I'm not a rock star," Herring said, laughing.

"Yes, you are!" someone in the crowd replied.

The village development project, of course, is not Herring's first work in Afghanistan. Her behind-the-scenes role in the Afghan-Soviet conflict is familiar to many Americans through "Charlie Wilson's War," a 2003 book by George Crile that was adapted into a movie starring Tom Hanks as the hard-partying East Texas congressman and Julia Roberts as Herring.

After the 1979 invasion, Herring and a small crew slipped into Afghanistan and made a film documenting Soviet aggression. Herring showed the film to officials in Washington and found a champion in Wilson, a Democrat from Lufkin who was a member of the powerful House Appropriations Committee.

Wilson, who died in 2010, played a key role in channeling shoulder-fired Stinger missiles and other weapons to the Afghan fighters, known as mujahideen. These weapons gave the Afghan forces the firepower to down helicopter gunships, ultimately forcing the Soviets to withdraw in 1989.

After the war, much of the world forgot about Afghanistan, Herring said. Attention was refocused on the ancient nation, however, after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when a U.S.-led coalition launched a military campaign against terrorist strongholds in Afghanistan. That launched a conflict that has lasted for more than 16 years.

About a decade ago, Herring began looking for an opportune target for economic development in the country. A friend in the U.S. military suggested Khairabad, saying he knew and trusted a village leader there.

"I said, 'OK, let's do it,'" Herring recalled.

Taking advantage of the broad network of contacts she had made in her previous work as honorary consul to Pakistan and Morocco, Herring started lobbying for money and political support to begin a development project in Khairabad. She talked her way into a meeting with then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and "forced my way into Admiral Mullen's car," she said, referring to Mike Mullen, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"I didn't get a good night's sleep for 10 years," Herring said.

In the end, though, much of the \$450,000 she raised came from donors in Houston, she said. Her associates in Afghanistan asked the villagers what they needed most, then began meeting those needs through Marshall Plan Charities, a nonprofit led by Herring.

The money that Herring raised was used to build a school and a health clinic, to buy seeds for crops, to train villagers to repair bicycles, and to provide fabric and training for women to weave rugs and sew school clothes for children.

Her nonprofit dug wells. It provided tablets and pencils for the school.

A 2015 letter from a village elder, translated from Urdu, made its way to Herring. Its message: The village was flourishing. Villagers were learning skills to help feed themselves. The health clinic was saving lives. The school was thriving, but more pencils and pads were needed.

"Those were the most beautiful words I ever heard," said Herring, who has never seen the village she worked so hard to assist.

The transformation of one small village might seem inconsequential in a country of more than 34 million people. But if the Khairabad strategies were applied more widely, Herring said, the American military presence in Afghanistan might no longer be needed. The development work her nonprofit is doing is far less costly than keeping soldiers in the country, she said.

Mohib, the ambassador, said Herring's work in Afghanistan offers an important lesson.

"If one woman from Houston can make such a difference," he said, "imagine what millions of Houstonians could do."

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