



**FREE TO RUN**  
Annual Report  
**2021**

# LEADERSHIP LETTER

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Free to Run started with a bold idea, and with one project in Afghanistan. We introduced running and outdoor adventure sports for women and girls at a time when everyone else said it would be too difficult, and we used this as a platform to support the development of leaders in regions of conflict. In 2019, 875 girls and young women attended approximately 1000 sports sessions and 650 educational sessions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our award-winning work made international headlines in 2020, winning the With & For Girls Award for being the most disruptive girl-led organization and the Beyond Sport Award for Peace & Social Justice. We're extremely proud of our women-led teams, who have been staunch and outspoken proponents of women's rights.

The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021 was both traumatic and devastating for our whole team. We were forced to close our offices and leave the country. We moved mountains to evacuate our most at-risk staff and some of their immediate family members. Free to Run has always had a passionate and enthusiastic community and their support throughout the 2021 crisis in Afghanistan was remarkable. Together we were able to successfully resettle many members of our team in Canada and the United States. We are continuing to look for safe ways to restart our programs in the country and if any organization is positioned to do this, it will be Free to Run.

That said, the deteriorating situation in the country further cements the many reasons why our programs are so critical. Conflicts have a devastating impact on societies, causing suffering on a widespread scale, and women and girls are often disproportionately affected. Their invisibility from society is precisely the reason why we focus on using outdoor sports to help girls and young women reclaim public space, which changes views about the roles they can (and should) play in a society. Our programs are uniquely designed to develop the strengths of young women who can become powerful leaders in their lives, their families and their communities.

Looking ahead, we're taking our transformative, high-impact programs into more conflict-affected communities, particularly those where girls and young women need support and where there is a high-potential for adoption and scale. We are growing quickly in Iraq, a country that has seen decades of conflict and bears the scars of the impact. We remain energized and inspired by our participants who forge new possibilities for their future every day in our programs. We are deeply grateful to the organizations and individuals who have enthusiastically supported us on this amazing journey. Thank you for helping us persevere during one of our hardest years on record.

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*With gratitude,*  
**Leah Anathan, Chair of the Board**  
**Stephanie Case, Founder and President**

# MISSION AND STRATEGY

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**Our Mission:** Free to Run enables women and girls to safely and boldly engage in running and outdoor activities in conflict-affected regions.

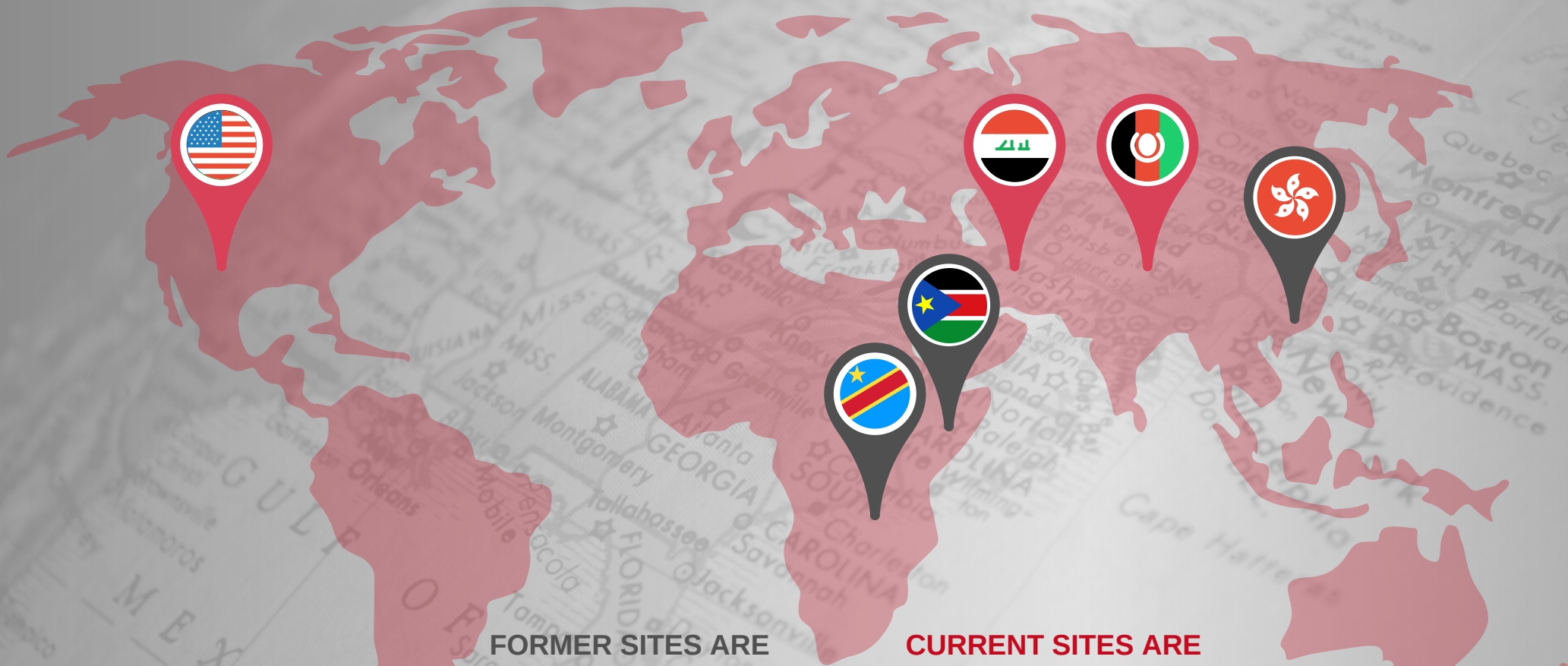
**Our Strategy:** We support the development of girls and women's leadership through regular sports participation, gender-informed life skills training and deep community engagement. We do this work to help expand girls' and women's presence in public space, to advance their mental and physical health and to accelerate progress towards gender equality in societies more broadly.

## Our Work Is....

- **Rights-Based:** Everything we do is rooted in girls' and women's rights as an ethical and practical imperative - a means and an end goal. This includes the right to play sport but transcends into freedoms in all domains of life.
- **Health-Oriented:** Our programs have significant impacts on the mental and physical health of populations of girls and women who are typically experiencing health inequity. We honor and cultivate the connections between activism, leadership and access to good health and wellbeing.
- **Participant-Led:** The majority of our sessions with adolescents are led by Community Development Leaders - young alumni of the program who want to further develop their leadership skills.
- **Community-Owned:** In every community where we operate programs, people from the community design, develop and lead implementation. There is literally no other way to do this work with depth, impact and authenticity.
- **Diversely-Integrated:** We intentionally bring together participants from diverse ethno-religious and cultural backgrounds as a grassroots strategy to improve peacebuilding and stability in places of conflict through girls' and women's leadership.
- **Safety-Conscious:** Sport participation and rights-activism is a counter-cultural act in most of the communities where we operate. We are experts in understanding how to ensure mental, emotional, physical and political safety of our participants and staff.
- **On the Edge:** Our work exists at the places where it's most challenging to be assigned female at birth, in places where few others dare to work. We exist where our work is most acutely relevant and has the greatest impact.

# AREAS OF CONFLICT WHERE WE WORK

SITE OF OPERATION



FORMER SITES ARE

CURRENT SITES ARE

-  DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
-  SOUTH SUDAN
-  HONG KONG

-  IRAQ
-  AFGHANISTAN
-  USA



# OUR REACH AND IMPACT

We take the insights gained from our monitoring and evaluation process seriously at Free to Run. In 2021, data from our program evaluations taught us that:

- **80% of participants see themselves as “equal to boys”** following a year in the program, compared to just 50% at the start of the program.
- **100% of participants report feeling capable of making decisions about their own lives** at the end of the program, compared to 73% at the start.
- **80% of participants reported setting a goal and achieving it** at the end of the program, compared to just 45% at the start.
- **100% of participants said they were extremely interested in running a marathon** after participating in the program, compared to 73% at the start.
- **Iraq ranks 146th (out of 189 countries) in the Gender Inequality Index, 70% of Free to Run Alumni parents/caregivers think their daughter is capable of making her own decisions.**

# AFGHANISTAN

2021 was a year of existential crisis for Free to Run in Afghanistan, as it was for millions of Afghans in the wake of the Taliban taking over the country on August 15th. Our team members lost their homes, their sense of safety and security, and their dreams for their futures. Girls and women could no longer walk freely on the streets or attend school above a certain age, not to mention run or participate in sports.

Due to the conflict between the nature of our work and the ideology of the Taliban, anyone who participated or held a leadership position at Free to Run was (and still is) in jeopardy in Afghanistan. As an organization, we lost access to all our funding in Afghanistan as sanctions were imposed. We had no choice but to pause programming, close all of the offices and focus our efforts on helping our team survive.

With the ferocious dedication of the team and ardent support from individuals around the world, we were able to evacuate our core program and administrative staff from all five provinces in which we worked and to help them resettle, primarily in the U.S. and in Canada.

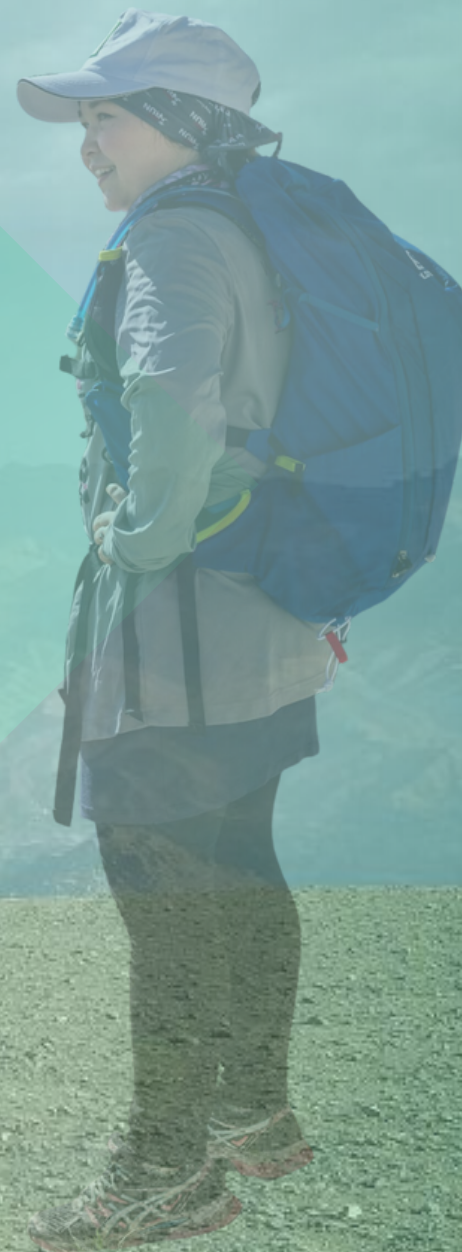
We supported a group of young leaders and their family members to evacuate to Pakistan, where they are still awaiting approval of their asylum applications as of the writing of this report. Free to Run continues to support their basic living expenses and legal affairs during this painful time in prolonged limbo.

To look back at Free to Run's work in Afghanistan in 2021 is both proud and painful. We spent eight years building a high-impact program that no one thought could ever really be successful. Thousands of girls and young women ran regularly, in even the most conservative provinces such as Kandahar. We trained and supported the first Afghan women to run a marathon, run an ultramarathon, and compete in a triathlon. The leadership and empowerment built through these experiences exist at a scale that we will never fully be able to comprehend.

To literally tear that program down, ditch our equipment, and run away was heartbreaking for everyone who contributed to our work over the years. It's hard to imagine the ground that we lost in girls' and women's rights in such a short period of time. And at the same time, Free to Run brought our athlete's spirit to the catastrophic moment. We dug in. We pushed. We worked together to help as many people as we possibly could, given the resources that we had.

# 2022 GOALS FOR AFGHANISTAN

Free to Run is not giving up. Afghan girls and young women need the reprieve and strengthening that comes from physical activity now more than ever. We have started carefully partnering with local, women-led organizations to help provide (indoor) physical activity sessions for girls and women. While this is a shift from our typical model of both direct service and outdoor participation, we believe it's a courageous and realistic way of continuing to support the mental/physical health and leadership development of adolescents in Afghanistan under the oppressive Taliban rule. The program we've developed with our partners is called "Omid" - which means "Hope" in Dari.



# IRAQ

Since 2018, Free to Run has been implementing programs in Iraq - a country that ranks among the lowest in the world for gender equality in terms of educational opportunities, life expectancy, health, human rights, and access to justice for women. We work in Northern Iraq (Mosul) and the Kurdistan region where over 25% of the population has been displaced.

We have made an intentional decision to exclusively support internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees (primarily from the conflict in Syria) due to the complex discrimination and trauma of their experience. According to our baseline survey results, over 90% of Free to Run participants in Iraq have suffered some form of conflict-related trauma; whether it was physical injury to themselves, violence or death of a relative, forced displacement, or gender-based violence.

***The girls and young women that we serve are resilient and strong - ready-born leaders who simply need opportunities, support and an enabling environment to reach their full potential.*** 7

# 2021 HIGHLIGHTS

- Implementing consistent weekly programming in two IDP camps (Harshem and Baharka) with primarily Arab girls and women who were displaced because of the ISIS occupation. We continued our high-impact programming, despite the challenges of operating safely during the COVID pandemic, which was a feat of persistence, agility and team strength
- Hosting a jubilant Free to Run 5K in Erbil - a first running race experience for all of our participants
- Supporting Iraq participants in running a 10K Race in the U.S. Consulate
- Taking girls on a peak experience: their first-ever backpacking expedition in a mountainous district near Lake Dukan in Iraq
- Co-designing and implementing a gender-based violence Training of Trainers for sport for GIZ (German Foreign Ministry) development coaches in partnership with Emma - an Iraqi women's rights organization
- Seeing Free to Run Coach Shaimaa featured in *Time magazine* for her individual resiliency and community activism through running



## GOALS FOR 2022 IN IRAQ

- Free to Run is looking to geographically expand, diversify and scale in Iraq after several years of successfully implementing programs in Erbil. In 2022, we will pilot programs in Duhok (with Yazidi girls and young women) and Kasnazan (Syrian refugees) and prepare necessary registrations to expand our work in Federal Iraq. Our goal is to double our participation in 2022.
- To sustain this programmatic growth, we'll invest in team building and operational development
- We hope to support at least one top runner in completing the full Erbil marathon - to inspire other girls and young women to go the distance.



## IRAQ PARTICIPANT PROFILE: FATIMA

“ I am 21 years old and originally from West Mosul. I grew up there with five sisters and six brothers, until we had to flee our home because of an ISIS attack.

My father was taken in the attack, and is still missing. I've lived in Baharka Camp, a place for internally displaced Iraqis, for seven years now. I was mentally very tired and didn't want to see or speak with anyone when I first heard about Free to Run.

But it was not long before I looked forward to practice because I got to spend time with other girls and the Programme Officer encouraged us so much. The days we went hiking in the mountains were my favorite because there was so much laughter amongst my teammates. We grew strong together, and I gained so much self-confidence. I even started to enjoy being back at school, and encouraged other girls to return too.

My goals have entirely changed. Now, I want to study for as long as possible and continue participating in sports. I'd love to lead a group of girls in sports by myself one day. I wish more girls in the world could participate in marathons so they can achieve it for the ones who still cannot participate.



# 2021 TEAM

This is the team of people who led us through our toughest year yet. Big gratitude goes out to:

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**Stephanie Case**  
*(Founder and President)*

**Leah Anathan**  
*(Chair of the Board)*

**Alex Bancroft**  
*(Treasurer)*

**Jingjing Liang**  
*(Secretary)*

**James Wilcox**  
*(Director)*

**Duncan Wilson**  
*(Director)*

**Sandra Feinzig**  
*(Director)*

**Dr. Saleyha Ahsan**  
*(Director)*

## STAFF AND INTERNS

**Taylor Smith**  
*(Executive Director)*

**Maria Ghigliotti**  
*(U.S. Intern)*

**Christina Longman**  
*(Country Program Manager, Iraq)*

**Alivo Mati**  
*(Finance and Operations Officer, Iraq)*

**Juan Jaf**  
*(Program Officer, Iraq)*

**Danielle Bertaux**  
*(Intern, Iraq)*

**Sima Ayad Kadhim**  
*(Intern, Iraq)*

40 Afghan staff members who cannot be named individually in this report to protect their security

## VOLUNTEERS

**Ericka Kriedel**

**Kathryn O'Connor**

**Sabina Van Mell**

**Kim Madill**



*“Run without a destination and you'll finally see what freedom can be.”*

# JOIN US

BECOME A PART OF OUR GLOBAL  
COMMUNITY OF SUPPORTERS



<https://freetorun.org>



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[facebook.com/FreeToRunNGO](https://facebook.com/FreeToRunNGO)



[youtube.com/FreeToRunNGO](https://youtube.com/FreeToRunNGO)



[instagram.com/freetorunngo/](https://instagram.com/freetorunngo/)



[linkedin.com/company/10526397](https://linkedin.com/company/10526397)

# AMBASSADOR PROFILES

Every year, Free to Run invites 100 passionate and motivated people who agree to represent the organisation and raise money for the organization through peer-to-peer, race/expedition based funding. In 2021, our Ambassador Program consisted of 87 amazing people from around the world.



## AAKASH NAMBIAR

*“ My overall experience was great, I got connected with many other runners who were raising funds for the same cause, it made me realize that together we humans can do more to help others . I love running and at the same time there are certain causes I believe in, I connected both through Free to run and now am confident I can do more such runs ”*

Age: 33

Location: - Bangalore, India

Occupation: Advertising Manager



## KHRISZHA YABUT

*“ I am a huge advocate for the outdoors and experienced firsthand how empowering it is to push yourself physically while taking in the beauty of nature. I want to be able to share that with others and break down barriers. ”*

Age: 27

Location: - Dupoint, WA

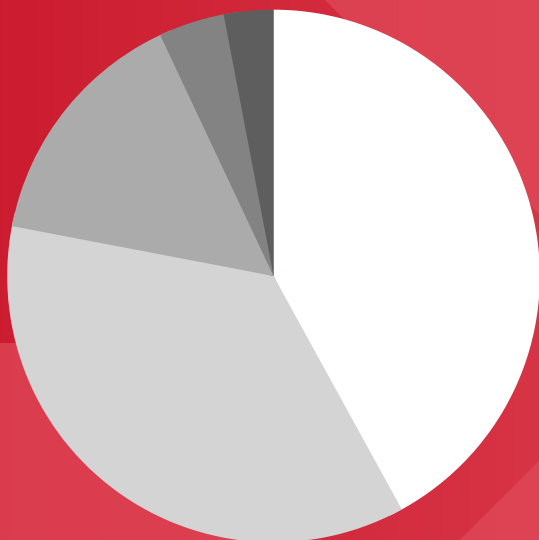
Occupation: Army Veteran

APPLY TO BE A FREE TO RUN AMBASSADOR

[FreetoRun.org/Ambassadors](https://FreetoRun.org/Ambassadors)

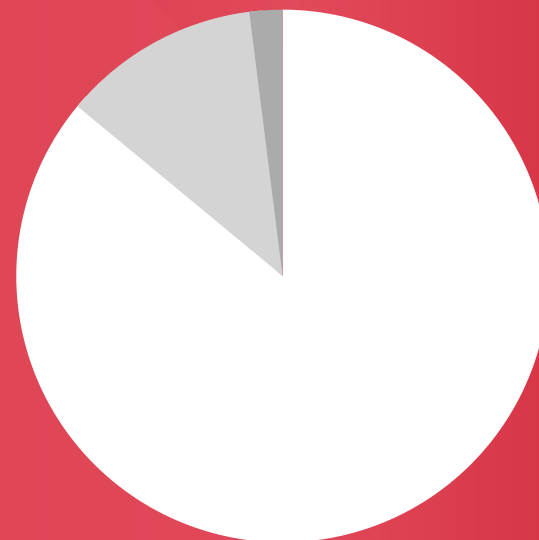
# FINANCIALS

At Free to Run, we aim to have a diverse funding base to adequately support our goals and activities. We are diligent stewards of financial resources and use the income that we do receive intelligently and responsibly.



## INCOME

- Government: 42%
- Individual Donations: 36%
- Foundations: 15%
- Events: 4%
- Corporate: 3%



## EXPENSES

- Programs: 86%
- Administration: 12%
- Fundraising: 2%

# OUR PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS

Afghan Sport Trust

Beyond Sport

GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH)

Spirit of America

U.K. Online Giving Foundation

U.S. Consulate (Erbil, Iraq)

U.S. Embassy (Kabul, Afghanistan)

Women Win

## THE PEOPLE WHO MADE IT POSSIBLE

Free to Run received donations from hundreds of individuals who are passionate about our mission and showed up at a most crucial time in 2021 to support our work. These donations comprised 35% of our overall income for the year.

Without this support, Free to Run simply would not have been able to address the crisis in Afghanistan and continue to implement our programs in Iraq as we did. We are deeply grateful to all of the people who stood behind us in 2021 and continue to support our work.



Free to Run

