Thunder roared and rain whipped the earthen houses in the village of Ghani Khel on the night she was born, fourteen years ago. The girl’s father, Khan Wali, held her up in the light of a gas lamp and vowed: “You will have the same chances in life as a boy, to go to school and learn a trade.”

The girl was named Nouria, which means light in Arabic. “She will be a role model for other girls,” her father wrote on the back of his copy of the Koran, the holy book of Islam, the night she was born.

The years passed. Nouria turned seven and started going to a school built by Sakena Yacoobi’s organisation, AIL. Nouria was good at reading and writing, but found maths difficult. She loved her school, where boys and girls could study in the same class. But one day when Nouria arrived at school, there was a note stuck to the door with a knife. “This school is closed. We will cut the throats of parents who send their children here,” it said.

Nouria, who was 11 years old by now, knew exactly what was going on. The Taliban had closed the school! She ran home and told her father. On the same day, Taliban soldiers turned up in the village. They went from house to house telling people that they had taken over the village. Everyone had to obey their orders.

“They had beards and black turbans. And so many weapons... pistols, rifles and rocket launchers. I was sad and afraid of what was going to happen,” explains Nouria.

Nouria, 14
FAVOURITE FOOD: Sweets
BEST FRIEND: My cousin Fatima
WANTS TO BE: A teacher
LIKES: School, poetry, stories, sweets
HATES: War
FAVOURITE ANIMALS: Tigers and eagles

Took food
The Taliban soldiers started to invite themselves into people’s houses. Late at night
they would knock on the
door. “Give us food,” they
would say, “or we’ll beat you
to death.” Since there were so
many of them and they were
armed, no-one dared say no.
Nouria’s father asked her
mother, Amina, to lay every-
thing they had on the table.
Rice, lamb steak, raisins, nuts
and vegetables. The soldiers
sat there and wolfed down all
the family’s food. Then they
disappeared out into the
night. The same thing hap-
pened time and again. The
family didn’t have enough
food, and Nouria often had to
go to bed hungry.

Secret school
The school remained closed.
Until Nouria’s father and the
teachers at Sakena Yacoobi’s
school came up with a plan to
hold secret lessons.
“We would gather a hand-
ful of students and one teach-
er in someone’s kitchen or
living room. We pretended to
be running errands so we
could get there without being
found out. We hid our school-
books under our cans. Then
we went home again, one at a
time, not in a group. It was
terrifying, but also a little bit
exciting. We didn’t trust eve-
everyone in the village – some of
our neighbours sided with the
Taliban and thought girls
shouldn’t go to school,”
recalls Nouria.
For over a year, the Taliban
governed the village and
Nouria went to the secret
school. Then one day, there
was news on the radio. The
leader of the Taliban men
who had terrorised the villag-
ers had been killed in battle.
Now Nouria and the other
children could relax. The
school would open again, in
its usual building with class-
rooms, desks and chalk-
boards. The villagers who had
supported the Taliban fled.

Future dreams
Two years have passed and
Nouria is now 14. She has just
moved in with her grandfa-
ther in the city of Herat to
start a new school. The vil-
lage school can only take stu-
dents up to Year 6. Nouria
dreams of becoming a teacher
and educating girls about
their rights:
“Unfortunately, girls don’t
have the same chances as boys
in Afghanistan. But there
shouldn’t be any difference.
We are equal. I learned that at
Sakena Yacoobi’s school.
Without that school, I
wouldn’t even have been able
to write my own name.”
Nouria’s parents miss her,
as she lives so far from home,
but her father says it’s worth it.

“My daughter will be a role
model, a light for other chil-
dren. I made that vow when
she was born. So she has to go
to a good school, even if that
means we can’t see each other
every day. It’s like the poet
says: ‘A beautiful flower
often has thorns’.”