The Initiative To Educate Afghan Women

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TRIP TO AFGHANISTAN- July 2006

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This was the most important time that I visited Afghanistan. Not many outsiders are choosing to venture in since the Taliban is trying to fight their way once again to power.

Margie was with me this year. She is the coordinator for the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women. One week before we left the US her family was pleading with her not to go. The news reports from that region were not good. Caroline, a senior and new friend, had only been in the country twice with dignitaries as a part of the US Women's council. She had not really stayed with "the people" and had no freedom of movement during her previous visits. She asked to come on the trip when we spoke on the phone one month prior. Caroline purchased her ticket the night of our conversation.

We were checking security alerts with the government and our hosts until the last night before travel to Kabul. Fatima Gailani director of the Red Crescent, our host and my long time friend, told us finally that we would have to shorten our trip to five days from the previous nine. She also informed us that we would be house bound since security was a concern.

We were veiled as we arrived at the Dubai airport. This was normal procedure for me on these trips. Dubai was the point to "cover up". This year was different though as we made our way to the ticket counter of Ariana Airlines, the official airline of Afghanistan. People were looking at us and we were looking at them. They were wondering who the "foreigners" were; three women, going into the country, and we were wondering if they were Taliban. It was a bit frightening.

I could feel the difference when we arrived in Kabul. Normally Fatima met us at the airport with the driver, we spent time saying our hellos and chatting. This year we were met at the plane, taken to a car, and taken immediately to her home. This year also there were many more beggars on our path and more chaos on the streets. My host looked tired.

Their family compound is owned by Fatima's father, Pir Gailani, the highest spiritual leader of the land. It is walled and is heavily guarded. Once I reached her home I felt safe and "at home" in Afghanistan once again. The guards are also protecting Fatima's husband, Anwar Ahady, Minister of Finance.

We were met by our students looking so happy to see us and ready to go to work. Two IEAW students worked in Kabul this summer organizing our five days. We were to see 60 scholarship candidates in 3 sessions each. In addition there would be the annual family party and lots of issues that current students had. Nine days of work stuffed into five. The students needed to be home by 6 because of the security situation, so our days began very early.

These two students were chosen to work for the IEAW this summer since they are top students at their American universities. Adela attends Simmons College, has three majors, will graduate in three years and has almost a 4.0. Zohra attends Middlebury College, was a

freshman this year earning very high grades. She started a world wide organization supported by students on campus that helps women in need around the world. They are both revered on their campuses.

They, like other women their age in Kabul, use the daylight of the morning to take classes away from home. At 6AM they both take driving lessons with 3 other IEAW students. It is unusual for women to be behind the wheel in their country. When they have their lesson in morning traffic lots of people stare since they are in the drivers seat. Other students are taking French classes in the early morning before work.

Margie and I spent our days qualifying 20 candidates. All were top students in high school and have a command of English. The interview questions ask why they want to study in the US and if their family agrees with their decision. Ultimately, each father must give his approval. We also look for financial as a criteria, and a commitment both to returning each summer to Afghanistan to work for reconstruction and returning there after graduation. Candidates who have family in the US, for example, immediately send up "red flags" for us.

The qualifying candidates have one more hoop after we leave. Adela and Zohra will tutor them for the TOEFL exam, the Teaching of English as a Second Language. They will meet either early in the morning or right after work for 2 hours three times a week to prepare. The exam is in October and is the last step in this selection process.

Caroline is starting a dental hygienist training clinic in Kabul. She traveled with lots of supplies to bring to the clinic. Villagers will train full time for one week and learn the skills necessary to bring preventative and basic dental skills back home. Caroline also visited villages that recently installed solar with the help of Barefoot College. In addition she toured orphanages and schools, traveling many an unpaved road. Caroline is our hero of the trip. She feared no one and was clearly on a mission!

A highlight of our trip was the annual family party. With 30 students this year we had the students, their parents, and some Kabul friends of the IEAW. Once again my heart was warmed knowing that people of different ethnic groups that normally would not socialize were together for a common cause. Fatima said this party was needed more than ever since the families do not have as many relaxing, socializing times this year. People did generally look more tired, concerned, but certainly proud of their daughter's accomplishments. A very fine time was had by all.

Dinners at Fatima's were the usual delicious foods with the most interesting guests. The cooks adjust their oil quantities when they hear I am coming! We all enjoy the various Afghan stew type meals with lots of different kinds of rice and daily made Afghan bread.

Yogurt at every meal. Fruit for dessert instead of other sweets. Dinner is much of a repeat of lunch since the mid day meal is also large and a time for conversation.

One of the guests this year was Bunker Roy, the founder of Barefoot College in India. He told stories of how he has trained illiterate village people in medical care and how to run their schools. Also Bunker is now training the same folks solar paneling, so villages can be self-sufficient in medical, education and solar. Bunker is a very fascinating man who had devoted his life to making the lives of the poorest better.

We ended up staying 7 days instead of 5. So much to do and a lull in the bombing. A good time to get all of our work done and visit a bit with students and our hosts. Not much shopping on Chicken Street this year. I did open a bank account for the Initiative and go into a grocery to bring some goodies home.

Another wonderful time in Afghanistan. We all left with a feeling of wanting to do more for the people of Afghanistan. A bit of frustration that all the news is about tragedy in that area, keeping people away. We are warmed that we went and happy to be home, and ready to go!