The Initiative To Educate Afghan Women

Paula Nirschel, Founder

One Old Ferry Road • Bristol, Rhode Island 02809-2921
E-mail: pnirschel@ieaw.org • www.ieaw.org

TRIP TO AFGHANISTAN- July 2007

Paula Nirschel

This memoir of my trip to Afghanistan was written on the plane ride home, June 26. I was rather tired before taking my fourth consecutive summer trip to where our students live. This past year was one of the best ever since we welcomed many more students, established a productive, distinguished advisory board, and worked harder to get systems in place. The year was spent caring for students and planning for the IEAW family welcoming 16 new students in the Fall!

"I am on my way home from Afghanistan with my heart at peace." I worked from 7:30 AM for 12 hours daily, non stop, giving lots of hope to many families in Afghanistan. I am feeling less stressed than when I began my travels at the end of a busy year. My fatigue has vanished.

I invited myself to Judy and Jack's house in Manhattan for a night before flying so I could be with friends and fly tired after walking the streets of NY. I do confess, I did some shopping too. The plane rides are 17 hours so I like to wear myself out the day before travel. Judy and I spent a few hours strategically planning for the increase in students, and brain storming about needed fundraising because I felt there were so many qualified new candidates that I would be interviewing this year. Judy is a thoughtful friend and active advisory board member.

Dubai was my usual over night so I could rest well before beginning my 2 weeks of work and visit in Afghanistan. Dubai was the usual grand construction site, friendly people, good food and nurturing for a needed rest before my work ahead.

Terminal 2 serves flights to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It was a bit more modernized this year with the addition of the only designer coffee shop in the airport. More women were traveling to Afghanistan and more of them not wearing traditional clothing.

I was traditionally clothed with a scarf over my head. Lots of the usual military men and Afghan men with turbans. Although I knew of the Taliban summer threats I felt little fear and instead I was excited to see my good friends Anwar and Fatima and the great young women we are all educating from Afghanistan.

I was met at the airport by my handlers from Fatima's home and a number of students. We spent time visiting at the outside garden waiting area of the Kabul Airport, hugging lots and talking about the joy students were feeling being home with their families. Since Afghan tradition is all about welcoming guests in the most proper ways, I knew they would be taking time off of work to meet me. The flowers I received went right in a vase when I arrived in my home away from home in Afghanistan.

Fortunately, Haseena scheduled lunch as the first thing on my agenda. She is the Kabul chief for the IEAW this summer and was excellent at scheduling 2 solid weeks of lots to do. Back to lunch. Oh boy, do I look forward to the meals in Afghanistan! Aushak is my favorite (Afghan Ravioli filled with leeks). The rice dishes are great. All other foods resemble American

stews with delicious lamb, chicken, veggies, and sauces. No cans opened, just daily ingredients from the market. The fruits for dessert are so sweet and the mango from Jalalabad could honestly be substituted for candy. Thank goodness I was fed first!

After, Haseena and I quickly went over my schedule. A couple months prior we decided that I needed to see all 60 plus bright candidates in the first 3 days since I needed to have 3 interviews with those that remained at the top of the list. Most of the candidates this year were almost straight A high school graduates, had solid CV's, and strong English. I knew that I would qualify many more than in the past. After 3 days of never leaving the apartment/office and non stop interviewing, I decided to see 30 women for a second look. Ultimately, I would qualify 25 exceptional candidates with the largest number of women who could easily attend any US Ivy school.

The IEAW site was visited by candidates much more heavily this year. Women are eagerly yearning for higher education. I am more than motivated to find the $20,000 needed per student annually to bring our newly qualified candidates to the US. They were given words of encouragement and hope by me, books to read from the IEAW, and book reports assigned that Margie and I will edit. In addition they were given toefl prep books and were told to take the test by the end of summer and do well. Many of the qualified students were schooled for one year of high school in the US by Ted Achilles through the Yes program.

I was overjoyed this summer to have many more women come for interviews from remote areas, Helmand, Jalalabad, Masar-e Sharif, Herat. I told the Helmand women that having them with us for interviews was a dream come true for me. Just what I was waiting for these past five years. They needed to return home and ask their father if he will allow them to study in the US. Students came for interviews from as far as 9 hours away.

On day 4 during breakfast, there was a loud explosion. Fatima's response was, "oh God, that was a bad one." We knew that so many innocent lives were taken just about a half mile away, in eye distance from our home. The Taliban targeted the police station at a time when police were in training. Over 30 young men were killed. We watched the news feeling very saddened and a bit spooked that the terror happened so close to where we were.

That afternoon Haseena and I went to Chicken Street so the bad guys would not win and keep us in the house for the rest of the day. As in previous years I was one of the only foreigners shopping. The crafts are beautiful. Most Americans living in Kabul are living in bubbles, confined to walled bases, not eating Afghan food nor experiencing Afghan culture, totally lacking any freedom of movement. They are missing out!

One morning Haseena came to work by cab a bit concerned and frustrated by an interrogative cab driver. She decided to dress more traditionally for a couple days to be safe. As usual, internet service was very poor. I sent a few emails to family telling them we were fine after the bombing. Other than the occasional email I decided to go without computer access and focus on meeting with all of our student's families individually. This was certainly a time of great joy for me and for them. Lots of positive words about their daughters and praise for parenting such fine young women! The IEAW was thanked many times for the hope we are providing these women, their families, and their country.

The family party was more grand than ever! Forty two students with their parents attended, along with Ministers, Princess Wana, and NGO leaders that are employing our students. The US justice department sent three administrators who are assisted this summer by the employment of 4 top IEAW students. I sat at dinner with President Karzai's head of Protocol, Mr. Akram, now a new key supporter for the IEAW. Minister Atmar, who is Minister of Education, and I, spoke to the enthusiastic crowd. I asked him to speak at the next advisory board meeting and he very willingly accepted.

Another guest that attended was Rory Stewart, author of the famed book, The Places In Between. I had the honor of spending a good amount of time with Rory, visiting him at the Turquoise Foundation and very much admiring his important work there.

This year I went to my first Kabul restaurant and had a memorable lunch in the garden with Haseena. I'll be sending a picture of this beautiful restaurant in the next newsletter. Lunch was real good. We also had lunch, a bunch of us, at Salma's house, thanks to her family. Fatima and Anwar had the unusual amazing dinners with dignitaries, allowing me to mingle with Dr. Kretschmer, Head of the European Union, Chris Alexander, VP United Nations, Dr. Zalmay, Minister of Security, and Dr. Pashtun, Minister of Rural Development.

One of the highlights of this visit was the day I hiked the Kabul Wall with Chris Alexander and some of his colleagues. Fortunately I did not know what I was getting into, so I accepted the invitation to go hiking with them! Couple hours straight up and down the wall, all rocks, with a cliff to our side the entire way. The sites were indescribable showing Babar Gardens, the mountains and so much more beauty that Kabul is known for. Not to sound dramatic but I kissed the ground at the end of the hike since it was a bit treacherous!

The last part of my trip that I will tell you about in this letter was my visit to the Shah M Book Co, home of the famed Bookseller of Kabul! The owner has maintained this excellent bookstore for the last 35 years. We had some nice words together.

I am happy to be home, but honestly I am missing Kabul. Hope you can all go with me sometime.