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Paula Nirschel:

Providing a Future

By Jacklyn P. Boice

Have you ever sat in your comfortable chair at home, watching television, when something really caught your attention and made you say, "Gee, I wish I could do something to help"? However, later you probably forgot all about the program or documentary. You're not Paula Nirschel.

"After the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, I was watching TV shows about the people in Afghanistan," Nirschel explains. "Night after night I watched the news and was haunted by the images of the Afghan women in burkhas and their lack of everything that is so important to me—sports, being able to go out and especially education. It got to the point where I couldn't just send a check."

Instead, she wrote letters to 4,500 universities and colleges throughout the country asking for their support. Replies were not exactly encouraging: "Why are you asking us for $100,000?" "Tell us again why you want us to do this for a totally unestablished program?" and "Who in heaven's name are you?"

Those were minor discouragements compared to dealing with the government of Afghanistan. "You have to start wherever you can start," Nirschel explains. She did what any resourceful person would do, calling a person who knew someone who knew someone who then put her in touch with someone else. Almost a year later, she was talking with people in the U.S. State Department who could really get things done.

Using email, Nirschel orchestrated the screening for the best candidates for a U.S. education with the help of the chancellor of Kabul University and the State Department in Kabul. And so began The Initiative to Educate Afghan Women.

Paula Nirschel (left) with the Afghan women attending Roger Williams University. Pictured with Nirschel are sophomore Nadima Sahar, freshman Arezo Kohistani, Ginny Prichett and sophomore Mahbuba Babrakzai. Prichett, a strong supporter, organized a fundraiser in Newport, R.I.

In August 2002, four women students came to America, two of whom would attend Roger Williams University in Bristol, R.I. (Nirschel's husband, Dr. Roy Nirschel, is president of the university.) This year, the program includes 11 students—four returning sophomores and seven freshmen—at seven universities. Three women attend Roger Williams and others attend Montclair State University in New Jersey, Juniata College and Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, Notre Dame College in Ohio, the University of Montana and Kennesaw State University in Georgia.

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—Paula Nirschel

Each college sponsors the $100,000-per-student scholarships.

When the women arrive they attend an "America 101" orientation at Roger Williams University with the sponsors from their host institutions to get a brief overview of college life in the United States. However, there is one condition to the women's acceptance of a scholarship: They must return to Afghanistan each summer "so they don't become too immersed in the U.S. culture," Nirschel says. And, after graduation, the women must return permanently to their homeland to share their newfound knowledge and help rebuild their country and

Person-to-Person Giving

A native of Hartford, Conn., Paula Nirschel earned a bachelor of arts in social work from Southern Connecticut State University and a master's degree in social work from the University of Pittsburgh. She then worked as a community mental health worker for many years. She and her husband of 22 years, Dr. Roy J. Nirschel, president of Roger Williams University in Bristol, R.I., have three children.

Q: What has surprised you most about your Initiative to Educate Afghan Women?

A: Working on this project has opened my eyes to what an individual citizen can do and how one person can help inspire others. It's pretty interesting how much power an individual has. I never imagined I could do something like this.

Q: Why is philanthropy important to you?

A: I think, for myself, when I decide to support causes, I want to help the world in my little way. Philanthropists are an example to others. They are able to have hands-on relationships and see for themselves where the money is going. This program is run on many degrees of individual donations, and it's the person-to-person financial bond that keeps it afloat.

Q: Who or what got you started in philanthropy?

A: My husband and I are interested in the people of the world and that brought on our interest to helping in our small way.

Q: What aspect of charitable giving appeals to you the most?

A: The person-to-person giving and meeting the Afghan women. It's all about people helping people.

Q: What do you think is the secret of philanthropy?

A: When my husband and I give, we both like to know that the money goes to the people who need it most. When I ask people to give to help the Afghan women, I tell them where the money is going. They can support a specific part of the program—health and wellness, room and board expenses, for example—depending on how much they can give.

Q: What advice would you give to other individuals who want to begin a charitable project?

A: Perhaps they shouldn't know how many hours it requires because otherwise they might not want to do it! It was a shock when I realized the hours and energy needed. You hear "no" a lot and deal with suspicious people who have been burned before. You need to be as realistic as possible about what you're getting into.

Q: Other than the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women, are you currently involved in other charitable projects?

A: (A hearty laugh) I work 50 hours a week on this! I wake up on Kabul time and answer my Kabul emails first. Plus, I have responsibilities on campus in connection with my husband's job. I put my heart in my husband, my family and the university.

strengthen other women there.

Educating the women requires more than funds for tuition. There are also expenses for medical and dental attention, since they received little or no treatment in Afghanistan. In addition, they need funds for food, clothing, books and other school supplies, phone cards and travel to and from Afghanistan. And this is where the "people-to-people" aspect of the program really comes into play. It involves a different kind of philanthropy than merely sending a check.

For example, Ginny Prichett was inspired by Nirschel's efforts and contacted other women to help. They formed the Rhode Island Women for Afghan Women and hosted a fundraising event that not only raised money for the students' expenses, but also raised greater awareness about the program and the Afghan women themselves.

"This program continues on a person-to-person interaction," Nirschel says. "I'm ready to go to a fundraiser in any state. We just had a big fundraiser in Newport [R.I.], and there will be others in Connecticut, Manhattan, New Jersey and Boston."

The Afghan women attend the fundraisers, giving donors the chance to meet them and hear firsthand about their lives in Afghanistan. "It's heartwarming," Nirschel admits. "There's not a dry eye in the house."

Donors also see exactly where their contributions will go. "People meet the women and they see how legitimate the program is. The personal contact makes them want to give," Nirschel says.

In some Afghan provinces, fewer than 3 percent of the girls attend school, compared to 98 percent of the boys. "The voices of the women have not been present for so many years," Nirschel notes. "It's wonderful having them here, mothering them, offering them an education and strengthening their feelings as women. They come here as oppressed women with their heads down. They are serious and submissive. But they go back with their heads up and with smiles on their faces."