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Seeing Afghanistan, up close and darkly

Women's rights advocate gives students stark picture

By Paul Westmoore - NEWS NIAGARA BUREAU

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Charles Lewis/Buffalo News
Rosemary Stasek has been living and working in Afghanistan for most of the last five years.

LEWISTON — The Taliban is gaining more and more control of southern Afghanistan and has great influence within 30 miles of Kabul, the country's capital.

Explosive devices such as rockets are launched into that city at night, “but fortunately they aren't very accurate,” said Rosemary Stasek, former mayor of Mountain View, Calif., who has spent most of the last five years living in Kabul.

Stasek spent Tuesday at Niagara University. She is a friend of Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini, whose 2003 novel, “The Kite Runner,” was required summer reading for incoming Niagara freshmen.

Her appearance at Niagara came amid controversy over the book — which deals in part with a young boy in Afghanistan being raped by a man in view of a friend who does nothing to stop it.

Stasek, who works with organizations devoted to promoting the rights of women around the globe, appeared locally as families of Afghan child actors expressed dismay over how the rape

scene will be portrayed in a film, based on the book, that will premiere in November. They fear reprisals for their children.

It also comes after remarks made by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in New York City this week maintaining that there is no homosexuality in his country. American audiences who heard the remarks greeted them with laughs or derision.

Overseas, such a denial is no laughing matter.

In America, Stasek said, “we have a clear sense that this novel is a work of fiction, but that’s not so in Afghanistan. There, anything that’s said is reality to them. They don’t have an appreciation for the fact that there is fantasy in literature,” especially one that deals with such a taboo subject as sexual abuse that has long existed in the southern part of the country.

In one case she recalled, when the movie “The Kabul Express” was made, it was so inaccurate as to be too foolish to insult anyone. “But the Afghan National Assembly took the time to demand the execution of the man who produced the movie. They said he should be hauled out of India and executed.”

In Afghanistan, she said, “you don’t talk about issues within a community because it’s airing dirty laundry. . . . Even telling the truth is wrong when it comes to things like that. Telling the truth in Afghanistan is usually the shortest distance between you and trouble, . . . so [people] have a legitimate reason for concern.”

Afghanistan has few good roads, she told NU students, and the ones that are in good shape are dangerous in spite of an American and international military presence.

Women have no rights and can only do what the males in their families allow them to do, she said, and 40- and 50-year-old men can marry girls as young as 8, and consummate those marriages.

“Sexual abuse is endemic,” Stasek said. “Domestic violence is endemic. Violence and sexual abuse against women is endemic. So is sexual abuse against girls, if you consider underage marriage sexual abuse. I do. Also, the sexual abuse of young boys is endemic.”

Most of the influential people who run things are corrupted by the immense amount of money brought in through the country’s heroin trade, she said. Those people live in “monstrous homes they have built in Kabul. They’re called Narco Villas because they’re built with drug money.”

There is no freedom of religion, she said: “If you aren’t a Muslim, don’t talk about it.”

Stasek said she has spent most of her time in Afghanistan opening schools for girls, improving the availability of medical treatment for them, teaching women leadership skills and how to speak in front of men. She runs a beauty business to help Afghan women look good and feel good about themselves — even if it’s beneath their burkas. Their beauty emerged from slides that Stasek showed at Niagara.

Stasek said she is devoted to Afghanistan because she has found a way to do something significant for women there, preparing them to take on leadership roles and survive the perils of childbirth. She said Afghanistan has the second-worst mortality rate in the world, ahead of only Sierra Leone.

She arranges to have female police officers and soldiers deliver babies since many women are not allowed to see male doctors. There are very few female physicians.

A Catholic, Stasek said she discreetly attends Mass at the Italian Embassy in Kabul. Last Easter, she said, the chapel was packed and people had to wait after the service to leave the embassy a couple at a time under armed guard and protected by Italian snipers.

“There had been a fundamentalist Muslim threat to blow up the chapel and kill everyone who attended the service,” she said.

Stasek said she plans to stay in Afghanistan, even if she sometimes has to hide beneath a burka, and to drive in the capital, even though she is one of very few women to do so.

What the young women of the country need, she said, are role models.

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