

## **Unveiled** | BRINGING HOPE--AND PROPER HAIR CARE-- TO WAR-WEARY AFGHANISTAN

**I**N MAY 2002, JUST MONTHS after the fall of the Taliban, Rosemary Stasek '85 joined a small delegation of Afghan expatriates on a trip to Kabul organized by a San Francisco human rights organization. At the time, Stasek was a Web developer and former mayor of Mountain View, California, a Silicon Valley town of 75,000 with a large Afghan-American community. She'd never been to Afghanistan, spoke no Farsi, and had only the vaguest sense that something very bad had been happening in the beleaguered Central Asian country. Flying into Kabul International on a threadbare Air France jet repurposed for Ariana--the national carrier that white-knuckle passengers (invoking the Arabic expression for "God willing") often call "Insh'allah Air"--she marveled at the burnt-out fuselages of old Soviet aircraft lining the runway. For two weeks she toured a nation reduced to rubble by war, famine, and the Taliban regime. And she couldn't wait to go back. "I fell in love with the place," she says. "I decided, this is what I have to do."



Greetings from Afghanistan: Rosemary Stasek '85 (left), with schoolgirls from her neighborhood in Kabul

A year later, she returned, this time on her own with \$5,000 of donations in hand to help rebuild a women's prison. She made two more visits in 2004 before making the move semi-permanent: in January 2005, after her term on the city council expired, she started her new job--logistics manager for the Kabul Beauty School, a hair salon and cosmetology college that helps train Afghan women to run their own home businesses. Stasek is now one of a handful of Americans--outside of security contractors and the military personnel largely restricted to nearby Bagram Air Base--living and working in the chaotic work-in-progress that is post-Taliban Kabul.

Stasek admits she's an odd fit for a beauty school--"I don't even wear lipstick," she says. As logistics manager, her duties involve scrounging supplies from the city's bazaars and navigating the labyrinthine Afghan bureaucracy. Odder still, perhaps, is the notion of hairdressers as nation-builders. But in a city where many women were literally imprisoned in their homes for the five years of Taliban rule, a beauty school makes both an economic and political statement. Glamour is an important cottage industry in Kabul: hundreds of women run salons out of their homes, and there is tremendous pent-up demand for beauticians who can duplicate the elaborate hair and makeup styles popularized in fashion magazines from Iran and Dubai. "Women used to be whipped for using nail polish," says Stasek. "Still, even under the Taliban they were wearing lipstick underneath their burkas. They never forgot."

The burka is an increasingly rare sight on Kabul streets. Stasek estimates that perhaps 15 percent of the city's women still wear the billowing head-to-toe coverings that have become a symbol of fundamentalist Islam. Despite a recent wave of anti-U.S. rioting and the bombing of the Internet cafe Stasek once frequented, she says that the city is safer than it once was, as a flood of returning refugees--and Western NGOs--has turned Kabul into a boom town. "It's less Mad Max, more Wild West," Stasek says. "There are restaurants and traffic and new buildings going up. If you really need a box of Frosted Flakes, you can probably find it."

But cultural norms are slower to change. Many men frown on the school and its empowering mission, in part because a hairdresser can easily out-earn her husband. "There's a lot of resentment of the idea that women are making a lot of money," says Stasek, who claims that 90 percent of the school's graduates land jobs, either running their own home salons or working in shops that cater to the thousands of international aid workers in the city. In a country where the average wage hovers around \$2 per day, the prospect of earning

\$10 per haircut is worth the risk. "The women who come to us are the gutsy ones. But they can make amazing money."

The three-month cosmetology course covers more than just perms and manicures: there are language classes in English and written Farsi, and the students receive instruction in basic women's health issues. "We're trying to cram in as much sedition as we can in three months," jokes Stasek, who sees her work as an extension of her activism on women's issues: she's also founded a nonprofit charitable organization to help raise funds. Additional money comes from the Oasis Salon in Kabul, a private parlor staffed by the school's graduates, some of whom go on to teach incoming classes.

The beauty school has faced a number of challenges in its brief existence. Founded in 2002, the project was initially bankrolled by donations from the cosmetics industry and headquartered in the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs, with a faculty of American and Afghan-American stylists. (A recent documentary film, *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*, chronicled the first class of students.) Debbie Rodriguez, a Michigan hairdresser and former relief worker, took the helm after the film crew left, and the struggling beauty school temporarily relocated to rented quarters. In May, Stasek and Rodriguez signed the papers for a new facility that the school would own outright for \$30,000. "We don't exactly have all that money at the moment," Stasek writes via e-mail, "but I did some creative accounting and outright borrowing, and I'm hoping it will all work out."

Stasek seems to thrive on such adversity. An economics major and varsity football team manager at Cornell, she grew up in a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania and moved to California to work in the computer industry after graduation. Politics and activism have been ongoing pursuits--she co-founded California Catholics for Free Choice, a reproductive rights organization, in 1989 and traveled to Cuba with a women's group in 1998-- but the move to Kabul still shocked her family. "They all had a stroke," she says. High technology brings a modicum of normalcy to daily life. Her rented quarters now boast an Internet hookup so she can update her blog ([www.stasek.com/afghanistan/blog](http://www.stasek.com/afghanistan/blog)) and continue her career as a Web developer; she still administers several websites for various clients, even though electricity flows for a only few hours in the evening. Mail service is even less reliable. "My Economist subscription still hasn't found me," she says.

Stasek plans to stay on in Afghanistan at least until late summer, when the beauty school begins classes in its new home. And despite the recent unrest, she's cautiously optimistic about the future. This spring, the long-dry Kabul River flowed for the first time in decades, the result of heavy winter snows that broke a persistent drought. To long-suffering Kabulites, Stasek says, it seemed a hopeful sign. "The people say it's God's blessing for peace."

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--David Dudley