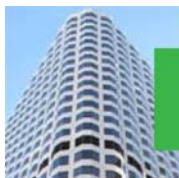


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PEOPLE

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Devadasan/Gulf News

I have always followed my heart. I do not have children or a family or a husband. It is easy for me to just pick up my bags and leave, says Rosemary Stasek.

Little big deeds

By Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary, Staff Writer

What is an ex-mayor of Mount View, California, doing in Kabul, Afghanistan? A lot. Rosemary Stasek runs a non-profit organisation called Little Help which aims to empower women in Afghanistan. And in pursuit of her goal, she does not mind taking risks if it means she can help them improve their lot. Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary met her in Dubai recently

To some, the never-ending strife and turmoil in Afghanistan may seem like a Homeric reprisal of Odyssey where every new chapter opens with a new adventure, more killings and tragedies that seem to follow a skewed logic of their own.

Post 9/11, several organisations and individuals have volunteered to go to Kabul to be part of the rebuilding and reconstruction process.

Many, frustrated by the stark ground reality, have returned to their home countries after a few months or a year or two. The few who have stayed back are trudging on the rocky path of rebuilding, helping people who have been affected by the violence to reconstruct their lives.

One such person is Rosemary Stasek, a Czech American. She is determined to offer all that she has to help rebuild Kabul, her adopted home for five years.

In a city where few women dare to venture into the open without wearing the traditional attire, Stasek bravely strides out in her casual dress.

She works tirelessly with her non-profit organisation 'Little Help' on projects for women in prison, providing tents for schools for girls, training women police officers in emergency obstetrics for women prisoners, running beauty training schools, making jams and preserves, teaching new recipes to women and raising money for her charity among other things.

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Dubai road toll

Stasek was in Dubai recently to raise funds for her projects. Before giving her the microphone, here's a brief backgrounder on her:

Prior to 2000, Stasek had a fairly successful career in politics. An economics graduate from Cornell University, she was elected Mayor of Mountview, California, a post she held for four years. She was vice-mayor for one term and was in the process of running for the State Assembly when 9/11 happened.

"All of a sudden ... we discovered that we [in Mount View] had the largest Afghan-American expat community. They had purposely led a very quiet existence for 20 years and now, all of a sudden, they were thrust into the spotlight."

That winter, she started working with the Afghan American women in the community, raising awareness about their problems and trying to re-educate people on various issues. "By spring, they were talking about going back and looking at what was happening back home in the area of reconstruction. They invited me to join a delegation [to Kabul] and I was very honoured."

Stasek did not expect to immediately fall in love with Afghanistan.

"My impression of Kabul was that it would have one of the two immediate effects on you – either you would be back on the plane vowing never to return or it would embed itself somewhere in your mind and you can never quite get rid of it. I think what happened to me was the latter (experience)."

She was there for three weeks, meeting different people helping rebuild the government network ... "When I returned [to the US], I wanted to be involved in the reconstruction [work in Kabul]. I started looking around at what organisations would be working there and what projects were going on. All the big players were talking about reconstruction, the US aid and the usual things. But everything was moving so slowly and no one was talking about things that really 'pulled' me."

So she did the inevitable. "I started my own non-profit, called Little Help. I had just lost my State Assembly race and so I was not going to be moving on to the State Legislature. So I spent the next two years, raising small amounts of money going over [to Kabul] for a few weeks during our legislative breaks, working on a project, coming back, raising money, running back to do some more projects ..."

She did this for two years. "Finally at the end of 2004, my eight years in office were done and I couldn't run for office any more. I could sit around and be the grumpy ex-mayor who complains about how much better things were when I was the mayor or I could take some time off, go back to Kabul and work on things which I never had the time to do."

What do you think Stasek did?

No guesses.

She gave up her home, packed her furniture, deposited it in a storage unit and decided to "go to Kabul for just a few months. Five years later, my stuff is still in the storage unit."

The luggage bins were opening up midflight!

"The first trip we were to make was initially planned by a UN charter flight. However, Ariana Airlines had restarted services and we took the first Ariana flight out of the US to Kabul on a plane leased from Air France. The aircraft was so awful that the seats would fold forward and the luggage bins often opened up mid-flight.

"I remember the sight of the airport as the plane began its landing in Kabul. Parked on either side of the runway were the former fleet of Ariana that had been bombed by the US military, the very first attack after September 11. Every single aircraft had been so perfectly bombed in the middle that there were gaping holes in place of the roof and all you could see were the folded over noses of these planes pointing at the runway."

After three weeks when she had to return to the US, she had her first epiphany. "I was climbing the stairs of the plane and sobbing uncontrollably. That was when I realised I had fallen in love with the place."

Stasek knew she would be coming back soon. She did.

"Kabul has been home ever since ... and one feels you have a front row seat while watching the rebirth of a country."

Initially, the optimism was exhilarating. The fact that she was involved in some way in rebuilding the place helped her continue with the good work. "It is really an addictive feeling," she says.

"I got [to Kabul] at the fall of the Taliban. [The place] was rubble ... it had no government. The city at the time had a 9.30 pm curfew and the militia was in charge. Throughout that time, the militia had all sorts of tribal chieftains and warlords trying to flex their muscles and run their areas as their fiefdoms."

For those who left the country 25 years ago, the sight must have been devastating, she says. The Kabul they remembered was one that was beautiful, civilised, sophisticated. A city where folks led a very charming life. "And to come back now to both physical and cultural changes must have been shocking.

"In the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini (a book soon to be made into a Hollywood film), you get a taste of those days – of how the author lived when he was a boy ..."

Stasek and her team were originally housed in "the most posh part of Kabul, the Wazir Akbar Khan area". Though the area has a fading look to it, it boasts palatial mansions and was/is the only area that hasn't been bombed

as every person who took over Kabul aspired to live in one of those mansions built by the Soviets, the Taliban or now, by the militiamen.

"We lived in a crumbling old place which had a generator, a water pump and a faucet out of which water would occasionally trickle. As we moved around the city on our first rounds, we had to pass through several checkpoints set up by different warring groups. There were numerous checkpoints to pass and if one had missed the 9.30 pm checkpoint, there was a particular password you had to give at the checkpoint. In our case, it was Naumishal (the essence of the night).

"Once when our delegation was returning beyond curfew time, our driver, who was stopped at the checkpoint, was so intimidated that he forgot the password. The men immediately surrounded us, their guns pointed at the guard, ready to shoot. We broke out into a sweat and were yelling the password on top of our voices before they let us off!

"To people who ask me if Kabul was like the Wild West I say no, it was more like Mad Max then and now it's like the Wild West!"

Unglamorous projects

Stasek belongs to that breed of volunteers who relentlessly work on projects others do not want to get their hands dirty with, so to speak. Her volunteer work encompasses the less glamorised, lesser-known projects which did not, and still do not, earn international media coverage. Yet she remains undaunted. She works her feet off, raising funds for her projects, trying to draw the attention of international agencies to fields that need help but have been overlooked. One of the main reasons why she has managed to garner so much respect and support in the Afghan community. It is also the reason why she is able to live alone, without a night guard, drive her own car and walk around without a headscarf.

That said, Stasek does not believe in defying convention and tradition just for the sake of it. She simply believes her work should speak for itself. "I do not say that I don't care if people in Kabul don't respect me. That would be like having an attitude.

Because in a country like Afghanistan, respect is all you have. How you get people to work with you is based entirely on your reputation.

So, truly, respect is the most valuable currency you have. What I don't obsess about is superficial respect. The kind of respect foreigners think they'll get just by wearing the right clothes ... I don't want people to respect me because I cover my hair. Of course, I am respectful and cover my hair when I'm in the provinces and meeting with leaders. But I want them to respect me (too) because I do what I say I'm going to do and the people they respect will introduce me to them as such."

Stasek knew that education for girls in Afghanistan was an agenda that was top-of-the-mind for everyone from Barbara Bush to the UN officials. And the media found it an attractive theme to follow. But what no one wanted to do was to work for the uplift of women in prison.

"These were women who were falling through the cracks and they deserved to be helped. So my non-profit organisation took up this project. After September 11, raising funds for women in Afghanistan was no problem in the US. I raised \$5,000 in two weeks and began on an initial build-up. I pulled out all the stops and approached a young police officer at the Kabul jail which housed 20 women and their eight children (most infants have no choice but to accompany their mothers in prison).

"We worked out how much we could do with the funds we had, what to paint and repair ... We eventually managed to rehabilitate five rooms – painted, plastered, curtained, with beds, heaters and windows in place ... We also began training women police officers in emergency obstetrics."

Among the places she worked was the infamous Pol-e-Charkhi prison that housed 100 women prisoners and their 50 children. It was during this time that Christiane Amanpour, the well-known TV journalist, entered the picture. "That embarrassed a lot of the big international organisations who had let themselves be intimidated into not reaching out to these women. After that came the Mercy Corps., the UN ... all with funds to help in vocational training, medical expenses, etc. I compelled them to look at these women who were pushed to the back of the beyond because they were in prison."

Despite her relentless optimism, Stasek doesn't harbour wild optimism of ushering in sweeping changes. She remains realistic.

"I know that whatever I do is little ... but my focus is to help these women because once the international organisations and the military leave, what would be left behind are these women. I want them to have the opportunities, to be in a better position to lead a better life. I only provide them with that hope and that is how I prevent myself from falling into despair or getting burnt out. I cannot change the society but I can make a difference."

Even in the matter of educating girls, Stasek chooses to focus on the less observed areas. She is aware of the rebuilding work being done by many international organisations. But the newly-constructed schools are being bombed and destroyed, reducing the efforts of all agencies to nought, she says. Her argument is that instead of investing in big buildings that take time and money to be constructed, why not invest in tents for schools?

"A tent costs \$500, houses 50 students, is easy to set up and pretty much immune from being bombed. If things are destroyed, you can be back on your feet immediately. In the

last two years, nearly 356 schools have been bombed and destroyed as the destroyers see schools as easy targets. But whenever I approach big organisations to fund the tents, they are not keen as their agenda is 'reconstruction of schools' and they are only interested in building permanent structures."

Recently while touring the interiors of Afghanistan, she came across members of the Lithuanian military who are part of the UN forces, keen to offer their help in villages where they were posted. They helped finance 40 such tents. But as it turned out, they were all for boys' schools. "These military men were very enthusiastic about helping but were completely fooled by the village elders who led them to believe that only the boys needed these tents."

In her five years in Afghanistan, Stasek has gotten used to this kind of stonewalling but believes in pushing forward despite everything.

"I believe in going and doing things myself. I choose to do things others don't want to get into. I ask for help, express my intentions, explain ... if people are not convinced I just go ahead and do [what I think is right].

"I am not there for adulation. I do what I have to do and people understand that. If I am in a village I tell them I am putting up this tent. If you want to pull it down, do that but I will be there the next day with another. Never does a day go by when during a discussion or an argument with a government official, I haven't slammed the door and walked out. But I am always back."

She has made it clear that "I am not going to take bribes or send you 50 dozen letters or indulge in any kind of sycophancy."

People do get out of the way.

Artificially safe

Obviously it has not been smooth sailing for her. There have been instances when she has escaped being carjacked and kidnapped. "But I do not feel personally targeted. Kabul is an artificially safe place with so many heavily-armed military personnel guarding the city 24/7.

"I go into the bazaars right down to places where they sell tools, cement and guns. Earlier the Afghan men used to be incredibly polite, now they are rude and crude. But it doesn't bother me. I just don't hear (those voices). When I drive, I stop traffic. But I am not bothered. I speak functional Dari and manage to negotiate my way.

"My strategy has been, you can never assume people's objections. My job is to sit there and listen and try and think what's behind a thought. In Afghan society, it is very difficult to get the real story. You can get as many as ten versions of the same story." And the reason for that she says is that people live in fear and are reluctant to trust each other or their neighbours and so reveal very little. "You have to learn to see what's between the

layers of half truth."

And amidst all this chaos, what she sees as a very stark picture is the plight of the Afghan woman. "I see a woman who wants security, who wants to live her life, have a husband who has a job, have children and be able to provide food for her family.

"When people say they want the Taliban to come back [to power] what they are really saying is that they want that safety back. At least [during that regime] they could sit in their houses and not be attacked."

Great resilience

"I find most of the Afghan people to be incredibly resilient and at the same time possess a great sense of humour; they are able to laugh at the smallest thing," says Stasek. "The psychological damage done to them is a serious limitation to their future. There are so many students and adults suffering from ADD and severe learning disabilities. When we teach women, we end up repeating the same thing ... they can't remember anything for beyond five minutes. It is a challenge to increase their capacity to absorb and retain."

She thinks her political training has prepared her for any eventuality. "As a mayor, I learnt pretty early on that most people who came to you had only one issue: they wanted you to listen to them and their problems, many of which you anyway could not solve easily. It is the same in Afghanistan.

"For instance, I cannot help the family where the mother-in-law will not allow the girl to go to school but I can listen and share their woes.

"What my political career has taught me is that even if you do not have the knowledge, the most important thing you can do is to give people the feeling that they have some hope in life.

"What I am doing is allowing them to hope for the possibility that things can be theirs. If I do not provide them with that hope these women will never in a million years know that these things exist. You cannot aspire for something you have never seen."

Stasek, who lives close to the Kabul Girls' School, employs an interesting strategy to fire the imagination of girl children: "I can drive very quickly out of the area but I chose to take a two-km detour to drive around the school where hordes of girls are present.

I do this because I want the girls to see a woman driving a car. I don't want them to believe a woman can't drive a car. I want them to see it is a possibility, however remote it may seem to them right now."

I try to figure out where all this optimism resides in her. Stasek leads me to the source. "[My] optimism may have stemmed from the fact that I got dealt a very lucky hand in life", she says.

"I was blessed with a good home, born to

lovely parents in the US who sent me to the best school, went through incredible sacrifices in order for me to have [education] and who told me to do whatever I wanted. I got pushed into politics at a time when the cause of women was being championed.

"I got a job in the Silicon Valley, where it was a blessing to be who I was. Here, I wake up with women who do not even have the prerogative to decide what they will have for breakfast. I think I have to give back something in return for everything I was handed by life."

As the mayor of Mount View, her motto was 'No ribbon goes uncut' and she says she stuck to that ideal seriously. "I kept track of that ... in one year, I actually cut 446 ribbons in 333 days!

"The most common introduction to me in Kabul these days is: 'This is Rosemary, you might want to know her, she knows everybody!'"

In her world which is constantly punctuated by disappointments and failures, defiance is a necessity and she survives the failures only because she has a network of friends to fall back on.

"I have always followed my heart. I do not have children or a family or a husband. It is easy for me to just pick up my bags and leave.

But there are numerous people behind me in the US who cannot come to Kabul. They raise funds for me and organise events and that keeps me going. Even when someone drops me an e-mail to say, 'Thinking of you', to me, living in a war zone, that thought alone can keep me going."

But Stasek has a lot of friends in Kabul as well. "It is a very intense place and the people who live there have varying degrees of intensities. I have a group of friends with a lot of understanding and who act as a support network."

One fallout of living in a war zone under intense public scrutiny is that she has become a recluse when it comes to her private life.

"I have become a compulsively private person. People living in war zones never live alone. They always like to live in groups. That is how the expat community in Afghanistan likes to live. But I have constructed a life where there is private space for me. People come in and help me during the day, but at the end of the day, everybody leaves, not even a night guard is posted outside."

She is not afraid to admit that fear is one of the shades of the night. "It is not as though I am not afraid. I am ashamed to say that I am scared to go into the interiors such as Kandahar or any other place where doing trips and projects is dangerous. In interior provinces where we need to conduct courses, sometimes we have to call the candidates to Kabul because no one wants to go to those places.

"In the last few years, hostility towards foreigners has grown tremendously ...

"But as a civilian American, I have received a lot of love from people because so many Afghans have migrated to America ...

"At the political level, there is incredible hostility. On a personal level, every family has an American connection. So personally, I have always felt welcome."


Stasek is aware that people and situations do not last forever and she might have to move on some day. She is prepared for the time when it comes.


"Five years have come and gone. I have no clue regarding the future. I know that one day there might be that midnight call (which you can expect in a war zone). Then I might be on the next plane home. I have to live day to day, prepared for such an eventuality."

"Or, it could simply be a personal burnout."

*(-Stasek can be contacted on her website
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