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MV councilwoman back from Afghanistan, advocates support

By Christian Mignot

Special to the Town Crier

When Mountain View City Councilwoman Rosemary Stasek took a two-week break from work in late May to travel, she didn't exactly pack her suitcases to go to the world's most sought after tropical destination.

Instead, she joined a reconstruction delegation of 15 Afghan-Americans and traveled to Afghanistan, where she met with officials of the new government and worked to provide assistance in schools and hospitals in Kabul.

In a presentation last Tuesday night at Mountain View City Hall, she was back among her constituents to recount her experiences and share her insights on the state of political and social affairs in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

According to Stasek, the United States is still technically at war with Afghanistan, so the government cannot provide aid dollars to help rebuild essential systems, such as education and health care.

As a result, the only Americans providing assistance in the country battered for decades are parties sent by non-profit organizations, such as the councilwoman's delegation.

"Primarily we were working on providing schools with supplies, such as blackboards, rugs, books and other materials to help," she said. "The schools are full with children eager to learn every day, but they don't have any resources to be effective, so providing direct material aid was important."

Some of the harder moments of her trip involved visits to the hospitals, Stasek said.

"When you go to the children's ward in a hospital in the United States, you know that the children are getting the best medical attention they can possibly get," she said. "But going to hospitals there, it was heartbreaking to look at all the children knowing that there was nothing that could be done for them at all."

Despite the ravaged state of the country, Stasek said, an overwhelming feeling of optimism was present among the Afghans, who were anxious to return to a peaceful life.

"Just being in Kabul meant a constant seesawing of emotions," she said.

"I would look at the city buildings reduced to rubble and feel great despair, but immediately I would be pulled back by the optimism of the people, who

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were living their lives with great gusto despite all the troubles they had gone through."

The signs of rebirth were abundant, with the most obvious ones for Stasek relating to the newfound freedom of women.

The Taliban was notorious for its poor treatment of women, shutting down all schools for girls, forbidding them to work, depriving them of medical help, and handing out brutal punishment if strict dress codes were violated.

"As a feminist, I felt great joy every time I saw a woman on the street with her face uncovered, or a classroom full of girls determined to catch up on the five years of education they were deprived of under Taliban rule," she said.

Despite almost one year of U.S. bombing over Afghanistan, Stasek said, she was overcome by the warmth of all the Afghans she encountered.

"As an American, I felt prepared for a wide range of reactions to my being in Kabul," she said. "But when we got there, there was a complete lack of hostility. The first words out of the mouths of everyone we met were, 'Thank you for being here'."

As for U.S.-Afghan political relations, Stasek was keen to provide a word of caution.

"When the Soviets left Afghanistan in the early '90s, all Afghans felt that the United States no longer had any interest in them, and indeed they were right," she said. "It is to our peril as a nation to walk away from Afghanistan this time around when we are finished with our mission.

"It is in our interest, both from a humanitarian and a national security standpoint, to provide support and ensure that the country becomes a stable and prosperous ally."

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