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Thursday, Jun 05, 2003

Local News

Posted on Wed, Jun. 04, 2003

The Mercury News

Councilwoman to return to Afghanistan

MOUNTAIN VIEW VOLUNTEER HOPING TO AID

RECONSTRUCTION EFFORT

By Joshua L. Kwan
Mercury News

The first time Rosemary Stasek went to Afghanistan, she knew it wouldn't be her last.

On Friday, the Mountain View City Council member will be making a return trip to Kabul, where she will spend part of her 17-day journey teaching Afghan women how to make and market jams, jellies and preserves.

Stasek first felt a tug to help women in Afghanistan when she heard about the Taliban's oppressive policies against educating girls and its tacit endorsement of "honor killings," in which a family goes unpunished for killing female relatives for breaking certain Islamic laws.

After the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Stasek made connections with several Bay Area Afghan and Pakistani women. When some of them made a trip in May 2002 to help with reconstruction efforts, Stasek went, too.

Stasek had just lost a primary election for a seat in the Assembly, and she said it seemed a good time to step away from politics and explore working in international relief. Her second term on the city council expires next year, and she is barred from running again because of term limits.

Early volunteer efforts

Stasek, 39, grew up in McAdoo, Pa., a one-time coal-mining town of 2,500. An only child, she threw herself into a range

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of activities, from the Girl Scouts to the football team (as a manager) to the debate team. In her volunteer efforts, she often drafted her parents and anyone else she thought could help.

“I guess it comes from growing up in a small town,” said Andy Stasek, her father. “It doesn't occur to you that you don't help out when a neighbor needs something.”

Stasek will fly from New York to Paris to Baku, Azerbaijan, and then to Kabul. Stasek said she planned the trip so she could attend the public hearings on Tuesday and Thursday about the city budget, but she will miss next week's vote, as well as a possible study session on June 17.

Her trip has drawn mixed reactions from fellow council members, some of whom questioned the wisdom of skipping the budget vote.

“It's always important for people who take on responsibilities for the council to be available for both the deliberation and the voting on issues as they develop,” said council member Greg Perry. “Since I don't know exactly what's involved in the trip, I can't speak to the decision she made.”

Hands-on trip

Although Stasek visited Kabul largely as an observer last year, this trip promises to be more hands-on. The goal is to teach women a skill that might generate income, or at least save money that would otherwise be spent buying jams and jellies from a store.

She will also be meeting with local prosecutors in Kabul, trying to persuade them to release some inmates from the women's jail to the care of a shelter started by an aid worker she met during her previous trip.

“Some women are held because they had married boys their families didn't approve of, and there's a problem of them getting released,” said Stasek. “But some have nowhere to be released to. If it's to their families, they could be a victim of an honor killing.

“They are so deserving of our help.”



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For more information, visit www.stasek.com/alittlehelp on the Web.

Contact Joshua L. Kwan at jkwan@mercurynews.com or (650) 688-7580.



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