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AFGHAN PROJECT

By Jessica Portner
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Term limits were the best thing that could have happened to former Mountain View mayor and city councilwoman Rosemary Stasek. Now, instead of battling over the city's finances, Stasek is managing the Kabul Beauty School, dating Afghan politicians and munching on her favorite delicacy: sheep rump kebabs.

"I just fell in love with the place," said Stasek, 42, who recently returned to the Bay Area for a visit. She moved to Kabul two weeks after her term on the council ended in January.

"It was like the 'Mad Max' movies over there," she said. "Everything was rubble. I knew I had to be involved."

The self-described "radical feminist" first went to Afghanistan after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, accompanying a delegation of Afghan-Americans who wanted to help women who had few rights under the repressive Taliban government.

For the next three years during city council breaks, Stasek ferried medical supplies like forceps and pain medications to Kabul's understocked maternity hospitals. She delivered soap and food for female prisoners who she said were incarcerated for offenses such as running away from a husband or marrying into the wrong household.

"In the prison, during and after the Taliban, women were brought by their families for committing what a Western justice system would not recognize as a crime," she said. "They suffered serious physical abuse from their families."

Stasek is currently spending her time managing and fundraising for the Kabul Beauty School, which trains women in Western beauty techniques so they can market their skills to the city's international clientele. More than 400 women applied for the 25 spots in the school's first class two years ago. To raise money for the project, Stasek founded the non-profit "a little help."

Nibbling on angel-hair pasta at a Palo Alto restaurant recently, she admitted she is now paying for her Kabul kebabs using her own credit cards. "Salary is overrated," she said. "My poor parents and their feckless daughter. I just bounce around the world and they scratch their head."

Stasek was born Aug. 10, 1963, in the coal-mining town of McAdoo, Pa., to a father who was a traffic consultant and a mother who worked in a garment factory. The first in her family to go to college, Stasek earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Cornell University while procuring equipment for the college's football team in her spare time.

She moved to California in 1985 for a job at Bank of America, then moved to the Bay Area in 1992 to work as a network engineering consultant for tech companies, including Oracle, Netscape and Microsoft.

With the drive to go to "every ribbon-cutting ceremony," Stasek won a council seat in 1996, served as mayor in 2000, and then stayed on the council for five more years until being termed out.

Mountain View City Manager Kevin C. Duggan, who worked with Stasek, said he was always impressed by her intellect and fearless nature. He noted that she lobbied for -- and won -- domestic-partner benefits for city employees despite some opposition.

"She was really willing to advocate for what she thought best for the community even if that position was not popular," Duggan said. "That took courage."

In a similar vein, Stasek was one of the council members who kept luxury-box concert tickets to Mountain View's Shoreline Amphitheatre even after some raised questions about whether the perk was a conflict of interest. "The reason members got tickets is because we needed access to the facility to see how it was run," she said recently of the controversy.

In Kabul, Stasek says, she is just as daring as she was on the dais.

In a city where women don't get behind the wheel, Stasek eschews a driver. The redhead ditched her head scarf long ago and runs around the bazaars in jeans. And the ratio of men to woman, she said sheepishly, works in her favor.

She said she might ponder a future in politics. But right now, her Afghanistan tour is open-ended.

"I will be there until I am done with it," she said, "or it is done with me."

ROSEMARY STASEK

AGE: 42.

HOMETOWN: McAdoo, Pa.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degree in economics from Cornell University.

BUSINESS

EXPERIENCE:

Network engineering consultant for companies including

Oracle, Netscape and

Microsoft.

POLITICAL

EXPERIENCE:

Mountain View City Council member from 1997-2005, including stints as mayor and vice mayor.

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