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Rosemary Stasek doesn't know what comes next



Rosemary Stasek doesn't know what comes next.

The former Mountain View, Calif. council member and mayor returned to her parents' home in McAdoo the week before Christmas after spending a year in a war zone, Afghanistan.

She went to the city of Kabul to help women in a society that continues to oppress them, using funds from "... a little help," a nonprofit organization she founded to provide just that – a little help.

Stasek had been bouncing back and forth between Mountain View and Kabul since visiting the country as part of an Afghan-American delegation following the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks.

When her council term ended last January, she decided to seize the opportunity to spend more than a couple weeks in Kabul, a city she feels very at home in.

"It's an intense place. It's emotionally intense," she said. "Everything is drama. Joy is extreme. Anger is extreme. Everything operates on an emotional level."

And Stasek, who studied economics at Cornell University and worked as a consultant for Oracle, Netscape and Microsoft, fit right in – not blinking an

eye after a fender bender with another driver, which led to both drivers yelling at each other in Farsi.

“This is what you do,” she said, with a slight shrug of the shoulder.

Her companion, also a foreigner, wasn't as comfortable during the confrontation, she admitted.

After all, Stasek was bucking the male-dominated Afghan society on two counts – driving a car and acting as a man would in the situation, she said.

Her actions cause more than few looks, she said. Some Afghan men don't know how to take her, and in turn, end up treating her as they would another man, she said.

Crossing the gender divide allowed Stasek to get more done on behalf of women, and she knows she's turning the heads of both men and women as she drives down the street.

“They don't know what you are,” she said. “You're an oddity.”

Men often shout “foreign whore” as she passes, but she also catches women smiling at her daring ways, she said.

Being called a whore in Afghanistan isn't just a nasty remark, Stasek explained. Afghan women labeled a whore often kill themselves, because they lost the only thing they have – their reputation, she said.

Stasek doesn't take the men's remarks as seriously. These are the same men who call the numerous, strong and intelligent women elected to Afghanistan's parliament whores as well, she explained.

“You can only call so many women a whore,” Stasek said. “You hope the messages are so mixed that the term, whore, loses the power it has in women's

minds.”

Breaking down those barriers proves difficult, as she is learning – even among her Afghan friends from the States, she said.

The Afghan people who fled the oppression of the Taliban and settled in the United States adapted to western ways, but many return to the old ways upon returning to their native land, Stasek said.

“We have a phrase, it’s not very nice, ‘He’s gone Afghan,’” she said, describing the change in attitudes and customs.

A female friend, a successful real estate agent from Newport Beach, Calif., gave up her Mercedes and a career selling multi-million dollar homes to return to her native Afghanistan recently, Stasek said.

Now, she can’t leave her uncle’s home without permission, and sometimes, when Stasek calls and asks her to go out to dinner, her uncle tells her no, she said.

Her friend wants to return to the States, Stasek said.

And it’s Afghanistan that is losing – losing some of its brightest and most talented people, she said.

Stasek stayed for a year, because she said she wants to show women that they can and should have more in life than the confines of their father’s or husband’s home.

She has even given up wearing the traditional head scarf, and drives out of her way to pass a school for girls in hopes that the young women will see her.

She wants this next generation of young girls to see her, she said.

“I don’t think you can aspire to something that you’ve never seen,” Stasek said.

“Maybe their father or their husband will never let them drive. I just want to let them see it’s possible.”

She began her year away living above and working for the Kabul Beauty School, which teaches women western styles and techniques to market in the international community. It also provides health information and literacy and English classes.

A logistic manager for the school, she drove to remote warehouses and airports in search of bootleg beauty supplies – often resorting to bribes to get the goods.

Based on her experiences, Stasek pitched a book to New York’s top publishers, but said the deal fell through based on rights to the title, Kabul Beauty School. A woman at the school hopes to write her own book with the same title, Stasek said.

Undaunted, she wrote and sold a feature story on the school to fashion magazine Vogue. The story, “Kabul Cut and Color,” appeared in the December issue.

Most recently, Stasek completed a study for the German government on working women in Afghanistan.

She doesn’t know what’s next, or when she will return to Kabul.

Life is so hard there, she said. Stasek bribed the man who provides the electricity to the house she’s now living in because she wanted the luxury of hot water to wash her hair, she said.

Flat tires are common because the roads are so bad, she said. New bomb warnings come every day, closing roads or sections of the city and creating worse traffic.

And a bomb destroyed an Internet café that Stasek frequented, she said.

But she doesn’t worry about the bomb attacks, though. She explained that

they're aimed mainly at military targets and designed to draw the most attention.

"People who are injured were in the wrong place at the wrong time," Stasek said.

It's in God's hands, she said, echoing the familiar phrase of the Afghan people.

No one knows whether or not they're going to die when they venture out, whether they're in Kabul or McAdoo, she explained, but in the United States, people feel safe and believe that nothing will happen.

And war no longer drives the country; drugs do, Stasek said. The young men who gained power as warlords now do so as drug lords, she said, because the Afghan people have rejected the old ways and don't succumb to the terror.

The drug trade in Afghanistan makes up 80 percent of the gross national product, Stasek explained. The terror bombings, she said, only slow down the drug trafficking.

"Former warlords are now the ones who want everything to be stable," she said. "The dynamic is now what is best for the drug trade."

Despite the uncertainty in Kabul, Stasek felt homesick two days after returning to Pennsylvania. Her parents, Patricia and Andrew Stasek, just don't understand, she said.

"It's tough on them, very understandably," she said. "They don't understand the attraction."

The intensity of life in Kabul is one of the draws, Stasek said.

"You live a life there that you could never live," she said. "A friend said, 'You are ruined for civilization.'"

Stasek wonders if it's true, because Kabul

feels like home to her, she explained.

“This is Kabul. This is a place where people find themselves,” Stasek said.

While stateside, she planned to visit friends here and in California, and is hoping that a job will come along before she returns to Kabul.

She sent her resume to several places, including the Office of the President of Afghanistan, she said. Collecting a paycheck has its appeal after living off her savings and credit cards for a year.

Stasek said she hasn't given up on writing a book, either. She even has a working title, *A Single Girl's Guide to Kabul*.

“What is it that keeps me there?” she asked herself. “No matter how aggravating and exhausting, it's always the next thing ... What is the next thing I'm going to be doing?”

She doesn't know where that drive comes from, she admitted.

“It's a really hard life,” Stasek said. “It's so cold, and so dirty, and you get flat tires all the time, and yet there is an intensity to life there.

“I am going back.”

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