

FROM CALIFORNIA TO KABUL

to being accosted by the media. Now TV trucks were suddenly rolling down Fremont Boulevard and sticking microphones in the face of kabob-sellers whose English wasn't great, asking them inane questions about Osama bin Laden.

As someone whose heart was in community involvement and who served on a number of regional boards, I had always prided myself on my familiarity with the diverse populations I lived among. But here was an extraordinary group of people I knew nothing about. Their stories were intriguing and poignant. Some had come here 20 years ago as adults, their careers interrupted, and set about rebuilding their lives. Others had arrived as young children and were in some ways as American as any local 20-somethings, in others utterly Afghan. I was impressed by their ability to move seamlessly between these two worlds.

I attended meetings and hosted a panel discussion in order to help the community learn more about the issues Muslim women were facing after September 11.

Afghans are incredibly social people. As I got to know many of them, there was always an event to attend—a family celebration, someone visiting from the East Coast—with food, friends, and conversation. Even after many years in America, I discovered, they still held Afghanistan close to their hearts and were often filled with nostalgia for the life that had been so abruptly taken from them. Many longed to return. By the time the Taliban fell that winter, they were talking about going back to their country for the first time in two decades, and I was begging them to take me, too.

My chance came in early 2002, when I was part of a delegation going to Kabul to investigate reconstruction needs after 22 years of war—the Soviet invasion, the civil war, Taliban rule, and the American invasion—that had utterly destroyed the city physically and politically. One of the few non-Afghans on the trip, I should have been able to see the country from a detached, objective perspective, but it didn't happen that way. I was immediately overwhelmed by a feeling of belonging: This was a place I was supposed to be. In his memoir *An Unexpected Light*, Jason Elliot writes of Afghanistan: "I was not the only outsider to have felt so at home among strangers, or so at peace amidst the curious exigencies of war. . . . Once snared, one never fully leaves; a portion of one's heart is forever woven into the fabric of that place."

It was an unforgettable time in Afghanistan. Entire generations had never seen or felt peace and were now overcome with high

**POLITICALLY
MINDED**
STASEK WITH FORMER
PRESIDENT BILL
CLINTON DURING A
VISIT TO THE WHITE
HOUSE, JANUARY 2000.



As my term as mayor was drawing to a close, Debbie lured me into moving to Kabul full-time with the promise of marriage to her husband's gorgeous cousin

emotion and incredible optimism. You could feel the passion of the people. Although I was still in office in Mountain View, I was so moved by the women I met on my trip—Afghan and Afghan-American—that I started my own small nonprofit and spent the next two years going back and forth to Kabul on city-council breaks. I was most interested in the women who had slipped between the cracks. My first project was in the Kabul women's prison, where inmates were being held for things we wouldn't consider a

crime, such as running away from home either to avoid an arranged marriage or to marry someone they had chosen against their family's wishes. There was no functioning justice system at the time, and when we first arrived, most of the prisoners had never even been before a judge to be charged, much less tried.

These women were important to me because they were considered outside the approval of society and not deserving of help. We spent \$5,000 rebuilding the rooms they lived in—plastering and painting, fixing windows, hanging curtains to

provide privacy from male guards. It was nothing next to the millions of international funds that were being spent every day on reconstruction, but just that little bit made a difference in their lives.

On subsequent trips I worked in maternity hospitals helping to identify needed medicines and surgical equipment and buying them with money raised in the States, and even taught jam-making. This was an old hobby of mine and a traditional part of the culture here, where the usual breakfast is flatbread with jam—but after generations of war and migration, many women had lost the knowledge normally passed on from their mothers. Though jam-making is a fun weekend diversion for many in the States, for women in Afghanistan, many of whom are not allowed to work outside the home, making a product in their kitchen they could sell to neighbors provided a much-needed boost to their income.

It was during a break from making vats of mulberry jam in the kitchen classroom at a local community center in June 2004 that a friend took me to see the Kabul Beauty School—and get a salon service. The school, which originated in the women's ministry and has since moved to a small, lovely house in the Qalla-e-Fatullah neighborhood, teaches women to become Western-trained beauticians. It also provides literacy training, English lessons, and sorely needed health information. It was started three years ago by aid worker Mary MacMakin with the help of *Vogue* and major beauty-industry players like Clairol, M.A.C., and Paul Mitchell, which donated money and products and sent American salon professionals to teach the first class. Since then, more than 100 students have graduated, opening their own

up front > 158