

An initiative to help Afghan women

By Paula Nirschel

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A couple of weeks ago, I found myself sitting around a table, in Sea Island, Ga., with Laura Bush, British first lady Cherie Blair, French first lady Bernadette Chirac, Russian first lady Lyudmila Putin and Turkish first lady Amine Erdogan. I had been invited to speak to the wives of some of the world's most powerful leaders about how we could further the well-being of women in Afghanistan and Iraq, especially through health and education initiatives.

Mrs. Bush, who had seen me on the Today Show two weeks before, had asked that I come to share my experiences and ideas with these women, as part of the second gathering of the Group of Eight spouses in the history of the international conference.

Only 2 1/2 years before, I had been sitting in my home, in Bristol, R.I., glued to the TV screen as I watched the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11. My attention was not on the bombs but, rather, on the Afghan women, huddled in their burkhas, walking barefoot behind their male relatives, prohibited from going to school or holding jobs -- even if they had no other means of support.

I became haunted by the images -- unable to sleep -- and knew that I would have to find a way to help these women.

I decided to start a program that would offer full college scholarships in the United States to women from Afghanistan. They would receive the power of an American higher education, which they could take back to Afghanistan to help their country.

I went first to my husband, Roy Nirschel, and asked him for his help. Roy is president of Roger Williams University. He offered the first full scholarship, and helped me write to the 3,500 other college presidents across America, encouraging them, too, to give the gift of education. Four scholarships emerged that first year, from three very committed institutions: Roger Williams, the University of Montana, and Notre Dame College, in Manchester, N.H.

But there was much more to do to make this dream a reality. I needed to educate myself about Afghanistan, U.S. State Department rules and procedures, how to find and select students, and hundreds of other details. During that first year, I called anyone who would talk with me about my idea, and many referred me to important people, both here and in Kabul.

I had no doubt that this program would get going. I was on a mission and willing to spend all the time necessary to start this initiative. I wanted a group of students who would go back to Afghanistan to spread the word that women should not be hidden and that their voices should be heard.

This second year, we welcomed seven more students, for a total of 11 highly qualified young Afghan women.

Hearing the stories of these women's lives only reinforces the belief that we are doing the right thing. As one student said soon after arriving in the United States: "Finally, Americans are providing education, not just military." Many of the women were in extremely dangerous personal and professional situations during the Taliban regime. One had been schooled in a basement; she and her fellow students would have been killed if they had been discovered. Several of these young women had spent most of the past five years inside their homes.

You do not guess any of this when you meet the students. They are joyous, much impressed by America, and very approachable. Even the one who kept her eyes cast down for the first couple of months has now told television's Katie Couric that she might run for president upon her return home!

It has been a gift to have these Afghan women be a part of our American campuses and towns.

All of this, and more, I shared at Sea Island with Laura Bush and the other G-8 spouses who had been gathered to discuss ways to improve the lives of Afghan and Iraqi women.

Arriving a day before our meeting, I watched a seemingly endless stream of dignitaries' cars thread their way along Sea Island's manicured roads. The island's luxurious houses were swarming with security and military patrols.

I don't think I'd had a full night's sleep for a week before traveling to Georgia. Yet Laura Bush helped put all of us at ease. She was gracious and professional, as were all of the women at the meeting.

Moderating the discussion was Paula Dobriansky, U.S. undersecretary of state for global affairs. The other speakers were Habiba Sarabi, Afghanistan's minister of women's affairs, Sorya Isho, Iraqi minister of migration and displacement, an Iraqi Fulbright scholar attending school in Indiana, and I. We presented our materials and had a dialogue for 1 1/2 hours, which continued over lunch.

The ministers had to join other groups during the lunch hour, so our table then consisted of just eight. The camaraderie was strong.

We talked about world affairs, but also about more personal matters. At times I could not believe that I was there. I think we all enjoyed each other's company.

Lunch was followed by a press conference, at which Laura Bush addressed a large crowd of reporters, with us by her side. She spoke at length about the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women, started by one woman just wanting to make a difference in our world.

This summer I will go to Kabul and meet with my students and their families. I have learned that Afghanistan's head of state, Hamid Karzai, and U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad plan to meet with me.

It will be my pleasure to touch on Afghan soil and meet my students' families. I feel sure that I will have wonderful stories to tell when I return.

Although the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women continues on a shoestring, it has the support of many Americans, who offer encouragement and love to these deserving Afghan women. There are many of us here in the United States who have been touched by these young people from Afghanistan.

Paula Nirrschel is the founder of the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women.