

WORKING IN AFGHANISTAN

2008-2009



Imagine living in a country for almost two years and never walking one of its streets, never going into any shop, buying local food or clothes, and never visiting anyone's home. This describes my life working as the Justice Advisor at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. I saw Afghanistan primarily from inside armored vehicles, looking through double pane windows, often dirty, at Afghans in their battered cars or intricately-painted trucks, bicyclists and pedestrians, many of whom are women hidden beneath their blue burqa.

Wearing a flack jacket and sometimes a helmet, I went to meetings in Kabul's governmental buildings protected by men with M-4s, and flew over the countryside to attend events with armed guards as the flight attendants.



My freedom was confined to the heavily-fortified U.S. Embassy compound. I lived where I worked and that's in an area no more than ½ square mile. My office was in a bomb-proof building with doors so heavy they forced me to use the strength of my legs to open. Steel panels blocked access to my office in the event of an attack; emergency drills were not for fire, but for bombs and missiles. As Afghanistan is not conducive to tourism today, my only visitor was Flat Stanley, seen posing in front of the U.S. Embassy seal.

My home was my hooch, a 10 x 12 shipping container, furnished with a single bed, desk, TV, small refrigerator, microwave, portable closet, and an indoor bathroom. When the piercing “duck and cover” siren sounded warning of an impending attack, I was required to first get under my bed and then later race to the bomb shelter.



I ate all my meals in a cafeteria that served deeply fried or overly-sauced food, fresh salads, and an occasional perfectly-cooked vegetarian dish. Desserts were rare and cheap wine expensive.

Why, you ask, would I endure the lack of freedom and leave behind the comforts of an American home?

Because Afghanistan has been the victim of a tragic past, of vicious marauders, first foreigners invading, then locals battling each other for power and later exerting an oppressive sectarian agenda. Peace and security have eluded Afghans for over thirty years. Today, many Afghans still live in mud homes and take their water from a well. Illiteracy runs high; food and human rights are scarce. Women are forbidden from being seen publicly and underage girls are forced by their families to marry.

Working in Afghanistan has given me an extraordinary opportunity to enhance the lives of the Afghan legal community. Prosecutors and judges in some provinces are illiterate, while others have the equivalent of a high-school education. With the assistance of other American attorneys, we have developed, through comprehensive training, a skilled cadre of justice sector professionals who are committed to serving Afghanistan. I enjoyed attending graduations of prosecutors who were proud to receive their certificate.



I worked with American correction officers to ensure the humane, safe and secure treatment of all Afghan inmates, some of whom serve lengthy terms for minor crimes, while others languish in prison beyond their release date due to inefficient record-keeping. Although they are in cramped conditions and heavily guarded, the inmates in many prisons I visited are polite and eager to take their picture with me.



Women can also suffer at the hands of the criminal justice system in Afghanistan. Some are incarcerated for running away from home (often to go to school), while others who were raped are found guilty of adultery. Interestingly, women are allowed to have their children under the age of seven accompany them in prison.



On our one day off, Fridays, I would go to Camp Eggers, a military base, to buy Afghan gifts....



and to see my favorite jewelry vendor, Najim, a 12-year old boy, who received an American gift from me.



To cheer up my mornings, my sister sent me a birdfeeder, which I hung outside the only window of my hooch. Although birds were flying all around the compound, none visited the bird feeder. I threw sunflower seeds on the ground and the stacked sandbags in front of my hooch to guide the birds to the feeder, and eagerly awaited a sweet reveille of birds chirping outside my window. There was silence. Not one bird ever came to the birdfeeder. To my surprise, the sunflower seeds germinated and a forest of sunflowers grew, some even sprouting from the sandbags. Before going to work, I spent each morning sipping my home-made cappuccino on what became affectionately known as “sunflower alley”.

Birdfeeder



The road to justice and equality is, indeed, long, but Afghans are no different from American citizens. They dream of a better future for themselves, their children and their country. They dream of education and health care, of the comforts of home and of a society that flourishes from legal enterprises, not illicit drugs. They dream the same dream as Americans, that one day, equal opportunity will become more than a concept, but a reality for all.



This little Afghan girl hidden behind her red scarf? She and the others are orphans. But, like the sunflower seeds taking root in a surprising way, with the right kind of international assistance she may become the first Afghan woman President.

And that is why I worked in Afghanistan.