

Islander visits Afghanistan to evaluate schools

By Eileen M. Daly

Jamestown resident Sharon Rallis hadn't planned to become involved in Afghanistan's educational concerns.

Rallis is a Dwight W. Allen Distinguished Professor in Education Policy and Reform at the University of Massachusetts. She works with educational policy, research and evaluation, not international education. But when Habibullah Wajdi, one of her Afghani doctoral students, suggested she visit Afghanistan to work with its Ministry of Education, Rallis agreed to go.

Initially, Rallis said, she didn't see the trip as a real possibility.

"He approached me after class one day and said, 'I'd love you to come to Afghanistan and work with the Ministry of Education,' and I just said sure," Rallis said.

Later, Wajdi informed her that he had secured funds for the trip through the World Bank.

Suddenly, she found herself preparing for a trip to Afghanistan.

Rallis participated in discussions with the Ministry of Education in Kabul during her recent 10-day trip to Afghanistan, a trip that allowed her to see the devastating results that 30 years of war have had on this city, once the economic and cultural center of the nation.

Respect the culture

As part of her preparations, Rallis needed appropriate attire.

"I wore a lot of my own things: long-sleeved shirts, pants and scarves, and I also borrowed some things from my Afghani students," Rallis said. The borrowed gar-

ments included camises – tunic-like garments that come down to the knee.

It was important, Rallis said, for her to be respectful of traditional Muslim customs, particularly regarding women and attire. Rallis said she considers the wearing of appropriate attire (defined for women in Afghanistan as completely covered from head to ankle) both respectful and pragmatic.

"It has to do with understanding the culture and with considering how I wished to be perceived," Rallis said. By respecting Muslim cultural values, Rallis said she was able to get on with the real purpose of her visit without unnecessary barriers to communication.

The challenges involved in improving the educational system in Afghanistan are complicated and diverse, Rallis said.

"Development institutions like the World Bank are pouring money into the country, but often little attention is paid to how this money is used — and whether it is used for the intended purposes. The minister of education is a forward thinking, intelligent and educated man who wants to be sure that the money will actually be directed toward improving education in Afghanistan, so my efforts were aimed at supporting their emergent evaluation system," Rallis said.

A focus on monitoring and evaluation involves asking questions such as: Where are schools going to be built? Who will attend these schools? Did teacher training occur? Who attended these trainings? Were the trainings valuable?



Sharon Rallis (front row, right) of Jamestown recently traveled to Kabul, Afghanistan, to meet with that country's ministry of education.

Photo courtesy of Sharon Rallis

'Apples to eggs'

Although Rallis said that comparing schools in Afghanistan to schools in Jamestown would be like comparing "apples and eggs," she nonetheless emphasized the commonality of people.

"I found myself sitting in meetings and thinking, 'This could easily be a meeting of the Rhode Island Department of Education or the Massachusetts Department of Education,'" Rallis said. "Except for the green tea, of course. They always serve green tea and little dishes of sweets and nuts."

She described Farooq Wardak, Afghanistan's minister of education, as a visionary, but emphasized the devastating effect that 30 years of war has had on Afghanistan and on Kabul.

"The biggest message is that this extremely civilized city has been absolutely destroyed by war," she said.

Rallis' travel within Afghanistan was strictly controlled.

"Everywhere we went, we were driven in armored SUVs and there were many places we were not allowed to go," she said.

Travel itself was perilous, she added. "There are no stop signs, no red lights. I don't know how they do it," she said.

Rallis described other devastating effects of war on the country.

"In many places, there is no electricity," she said. "While we were there, Wajdi's sister called to tell him they had just gotten electricity for the first time in seven years."

All of this makes educational initiatives that much harder to implement, Rallis said.

"For instance, participants in the provinces may have to walk 20 miles in order to attend a teacher training because there is no other way for them to get there. So they may not come," she said.

Still, she said, the people are committed to improving the situation.

"There is a real emphasis on increasing the number of women teachers in Afghanistan," Rallis said. This plan reflects the cultural belief that women are natural teachers to their children. "The minister of education said to me, 'Women need to be educated so that they can pass it on to their children.'"

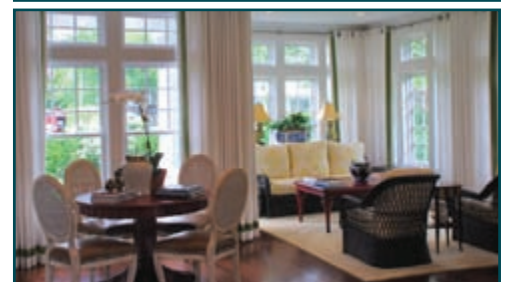
This emphasis on educating women might be surprising to Americans, Rallis said.

"I had two drivers while I was in Afghanistan. One was an administrative assistant at the World Bank. Both had put off their own education in order to put their sisters through school," she said.

The administrative assistant gave this reason: My father always said it was more important for a woman to be educated because if she wasn't, she would have to work at subservient jobs where she might be abused. Men, on the other hand, can always get an honorable job, he said.

"I think there are a lot of families like that in Afghanistan," Rallis said. "I'd like to shout that message."

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