

4/30/07

My Day with Heroes

The past two days have been a great introduction to the work that my mom really does here. Having grown up with my mother's work surrounding me, I learned to insulate myself from the depressing details of her world. From the work that she used to do with youth at risk and welfare women, to homeless and mentally ill; I think I actually became habituated to the myriad of problems that people face. There's always been someone that needs her help more than I do. From a very early age I had to share my mother's attention with a lot of other people, sometimes feeling that her priorities lay in helping others more than her own family. This is truly not the case, but it's hard to feel differently when you are young and cannot see the whole picture. I've always recognized that she does great work, and it is born of a profound dedication to improving the lives of those surrounding her. However, I don't know that I have ever felt more proud of my mother than I did today. But I'll get to that a little later.

Yesterday morning we went to the Marastoon compound where PARSA is located. I'd been there previously, but as it was a holiday, there was no work being done. I met the Afghans that comprise her core staff, Yasin, the country director for PARSA I had already met, and I like very much. He is intelligent, dedicated to his people, loves my mother as his mentor and is practically a family member. Palwasha, is an Afghan woman who is Yasin's "right hand man" and seems incredibly intelligent and competent. There are many others that I met, and I like them all. She has a staff of about 81 at PARSA. cooks, drivers, and gardeners included, beyond their many different project managers. She has essentially created an Afghan version of Washington Works, an organization that she founded back in the 1990's that dealt primarily with female welfare recipients, but as necessary in this environment takes an even more holistic approach to like the problems of poverty. I really do think it will be a remarkable organization. I had a short Farsi/dari lesson with a young man that I think just graduated from high school, and am starting to get a hold of the basics that one needs to get around in a country; greetings, numbers etc.. I'll have several more the next few days, and would to continue to learn. It's not actually that hard of a language to learn, and in many ways my



Some of the children at Maristoon

understanding of Spanish is helpful, especially because of similarities in syntax. I'm not saying it's easy, but it isn't as bad as trying to learn something like Japanese or some African tribal language. After this lesson I went up to the orphanage that is in the same compound and further formulated a plan I have for building a new playfield for the children. My first night in the country we went to the compound and in wandering around we came across the "soccer field" that the children use. It has no goals, is covered in large rocks, not even close to level and has holes and trenches all around it. I decided that wouldn't do, and I asked Yasin to help me talk to some people about what it would take to make a proper soccer field. Labor is cheap here, it costs about 4 dollar a day to hire a good laborer, so I decided that I could

probably afford the costs of the project. I talked to the head gardener at PARSA, and he is finding me a man with a bulldozer to do the initial leveling (at the whopping rate of 8 dollars an hour), and then a few other men to finish picking out rocks and smoothing out the dirt. I have no illusions that grass will take hold, let alone survive the dry summer months, so I'll be happy with just smooth dirt. I'm then hiring a metal worker to make some movable goals and will try to find some sort of netting (might be difficult, but I'll find something). Things are moving quickly on the project, and they will start bulldozing tomorrow, the field should be smooth by the end of the week. I haven't told the children what I'm doing yet, but I'm sure they'll love not having to play soccer on hard rocks in bare feet. Real goals in place of the stacked rocks presently in use will be a novelty I'm sure. I know its not really much in the scheme of things, and there might be more pressing needs, but this was something I could do for the children that I understand and feel competent to take on as a project. It's also something that I can afford to fund myself, and can see to completion in my short month here. I might try and get some equipment donated by some companies back home, but even if I don't, they'll be able to make use of the field for a lot of different games beyond just soccer, and they won't ruin their bare feet on the rocks. Hopefully it'll turn out how I have envisioned it. We'll see, this is my first attempt at getting something important done in the Third World, and there are bound to be hang ups, but its' simple enough that it'll probably turn out just fine. I'll go rake the whole damn thing myself if I have to.



The children of Marastoon and their soccer field

In the afternoon I went shopping and ran some errands around town with mom and Aziz (her favorite and best driver), who doesn't speak a lick of English but seems to take great care of my mother. I like him a lot and trust him to watch out for us. The drivers for PARSA are all trained to be on the look out for bad situations and kidnapping attempts, and what to do in the case of the latter (i.e. If s someone tries to block you in from the front and the back, get the hell out, regardless of the damage to cars, buildings or anything else). It is truly worth having good drivers that you can trust around here, they keep you out of trouble and could possibly save your life.

We had dinner that evening with Yasin, his second wife Salia, her brother Asef (who speaks a little English and I am coming to like very much), Dawn (mom's childhood friend from her time in Kabul) and her husband Jim. It was enjoyable, and I love the Afghan family that Mom and Norm have created for themselves.

Today we had a very important meeting to attend at the ministry regarding a report that mom put out regarding appalling conditions found at a local Kabul orphanage run by the afghan government. Mom had written an unofficial report on the conditions of the



Alluhoddin orphanage that PARSA staff and she had witnessed this winter when they were allowed access to the compound. The offenses are extensive, but I will touch on a few of the highlights. There were children running around with sandals and no socks, clothes falling apart and threadbare in the winter. Children would be given money for bathing and then have it taken away, there were boys that hadn't been allowed to bathe for 3 months. In one instance, it was brought to the attention of orphanage staff that a girl had lice; she was slapped on the head and sent to have her hair shaved off. The girls have no access to feminine hygiene products and are not even taught about the change that occurs as they grow older. In one instance a girl was seen berated for hiding rags. There is inadequate staffing. Often the children were found with no adult supervision on the premise and these are hundreds of children. There was no female staff member set up to stay with the girls at night, just think of the terrible abuses that could occur in this scenario.

I could go on for quite a bit longer, but I think the picture has been painted adequately. The meeting with the ministry of social affairs in charge of orphanages had been forced by pressure my mother garnered from international and domestic NGO's, by the circulation of her unofficial report. This had brought out other anecdotes from other organizations that had witnessed similar problems in orphanages throughout the country, and at least 7 different organizations representatives were present. The presiding ministry representative was the deputy minister of social affairs, previously the minister of martyred and disabled, until a merger brought him under the control of another man. I think he's of a slime ball that is only interested in preserving his position of power.

The meeting started off fairly well, with my mother and Mabouba (her work partner here) presenting their findings to those present, and calling for an investigation into the conditions of the orphanages of Afghanistan. Their request was simple. They did not want anything to come out of the meeting other than a formation of a committee of NGO representatives that will oversee an official investigation into the matter, and design policies that will bring about systemic, long lasting changes for the sake of the children affected. They did not try to defend the veracity of the report, even under

questioning by several of the people present (most likely implants by the minister), but stood by their simple request for an investigation, and then action based on the official report. Several other NGO representatives voiced their support of this initiative and it appeared that the meeting would be concluded successfully.

Then what we feared would happen, did. The minister said that he had formed a committee of 5 different NGO's to oversee an investigation (good). However, he then launched into an extensive defense of the work done by the ministry and the conditions of the Allahoudin orphanage. He slammed the report my mother had presented, as well as her organization. He said that as PARSA had only been allowed a month and a half of official access to the orphanage, the entirety of the report should not be taken into consideration, only those allegations pertaining to that time period. He made claims to refute the report presented. He made such claims of a 1:2 staff to child ratio (bullshit!), and that the lack of female attendants overnight was a cultural problem that could not be solved (women are not allowed to live on their own away from either their husband or a male member of their family). This last claim especially demonstrates a lack of true interest in solving the problems and making changes. For example, I'm sure there would be no lack of international volunteers to help little orphan girls for a few months at a time, or a family could be living on the compound so that a woman would always be present at night. It was apparent to me that the minister was trying very hard to save face in front of the international NGO's, but I believe that in the process harmed his reputation with them (I hope). The request was simple, have an official investigation on the problems that not only PARSA, but many other organizations had witnessed and could attest to. The meeting did not need to go in the direction that the minister took it. The man went on and on about how much had been done already, defending his position and the actions that had been taken so far. As far as PARSA and the other NGO's were concerned none of this matters, if the orphanages are not running well, something needs to be done to change it. End of story! My mother was

After, listening to this monologue for about 20 minutes, my mother found her chance, stood up, and addressed the meeting one last time. She thanked the minister for the formation of the committee, said she expected the ministry to follow up on their promise to initiate changes based on the official investigation and the committee's recommendations. She said that now the discussion had turned defensive and she was done with it. The PARSA staff then got up and walked out of the meeting. Mom was not interested in listening to a bullshit defense, nor was she going to listen to someone slam her organization's integrity.

As I walked out with my mother, I couldn't help but feel immensely proud. She has such presence and courage in front of people. She is a great speaker and is not afraid to take a stand on important issues, even under very adverse circumstances. I gained even more respect for her than I already had. She takes on so many projects and issues and always puts everything she has into her work. It's been so long since I've really seen her in action. Having grown up watching her work (she never was into day care for my brother and I so we were drug around with her for years), I think I forgot how great she is at what she does. She is absolutely my hero.

It is unclear whether the minister we met with will really bring about any substantial change, however at least what my mother wanted will happen. There will be an investigative committee on the conditions of the orphanages. Hopefully there will be

a policy of minimum standards made and followed through with. Mom has her doubts, but we shall see.

Later that evening Mabouba and her husband Hassan came over for dinner. I made fresh pasta salad and cooked hot dogs (sort of). It was explained to me that Hassan was once a Mujahadeen general. He was in charge of 4 or 5 major generals, had thousands of fighters under his command and was responsible for kicking the Russians out of Jalalabad during the Afghan-Russian war. He is revered as a hero and practically a saint given his family background. He is a soft-spoken, unassuming man whom I like very much. When asked about his experiences he merely said that he never wanted to be a soldier, but his country needed him. He doesn't really talk much about his experiences. Once the fighting dissolved into Afghans fighting Afghans he left the country for America, just recently having returned.

The day was a good one, especially seeing my mom in action here. I was so proud of her, at several points throughout the meeting at the ministry that I was almost moved to tears. The world is a better place for my mother's presence.



The day ends with a rainbow over Kabul