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Steve Brown with his wife, Susan, meeting with teachers at the school he helped build in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

Profile: Steve Brown

Helping Afghans becomes 'job' for local attorney

By Joe Tash

Brown has helped build a school that now serves 3,300 boys and girls; established computer centers in four schools; raised money for on-campus housing now being built for female university students; and is involved in new projects such as the construction of a bridge to provide access to schools and doctors for villagers in remote areas.

Along with his time – Brown estimates he spends up to 60 hours a week on his various projects – he has invested some \$150,000 of his own money. His law firm has helped by allowing him to continue to use his office, even though he doesn't handle any cases or see clients.

"The law firm still gives me an office here, they've been very good to me that way," said Brown. "They're supportive of the work I do in Afghanistan and with Rotary in general."

Since 2002, Brown has traveled to Afghanistan seven times, the most recent in March. His next trip is planned for October. On his last trip, his wife, Susan, accompanied him for the first time.

"We both thought it was about time I

Quick Facts

Name: Steve Brown

Distinction: Brown has devoted the past six years to charitable work in Afghanistan, which he has carried out under the auspices of the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club. Brown has helped build a school that now serves 3,300 boys and girls; established computer centers in four schools; raised money for on-campus housing now being built for female university students; and is involved in new projects such as the construction of a bridge to provide access to schools and doctors for villagers in remote areas.

Education: Bachelor's degree, accounting, Washington State University, law degree, Stanford Law School

Professional experience: Attorney, partner, Luce, Forward, Hamilton & Scripps

Family: Wife, Susan, daughters Abigail and Rebecca

popped over to see what was going on with his projects," said Susan Brown. The RSF couple have known each other since they were children in Washington state, and have been married nearly 40 years. They have two grown daughters.

Susan Brown said she was apprehensive about traveling to Afghanistan because of fears for her personal safety. The Rotary School that her husband helped build – as are most of his Afghanistan projects – is in the city of Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province in the eastern part of the country. Among Jalalabad's claims to fame is that it once served as the headquarters of Osama bin Laden, who had a compound there during the rule of the Taliban, before the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

Her husband, said Susan Brown, assured her she would feel safe once she arrived in Jalalabad, and she admits he was right. However, as a reminder of the violence that still plagues the country, a suicide bomber struck near the road to the Kabul airport just a few hours before the Browns traveled that way en route to catch their flight home.

"I was glad we were leaving and that didn't happen when we were arriving," she said.

Susan Brown said the Afghan people she met were hospitable and friendly, curious but not aggressive.

"They were warmer and more open toward us than I thought they would be," she said.

As for her physical surroundings, she said Kabul was a large city with tall buildings and "awful" traffic jams. The ride to Jalalabad took the visitors through a "breathtaking" mountain pass, which opened up to a lush, green valley. As they drove along, she said, she felt like she was witnessing scenes from Biblical times, with villagers in turbans and long robes tending flocks of sheep, and people living in mud huts.

Another thing that took getting used to were the burkas worn by most of the women in Jalalabad, which covered them from head to toe. "It was very eerie, it bothered me, because you couldn't see who it was," she said.

Although the downfall of the Taliban regime has provided opportunities for women and girls, such as the freedom to go to school, in many ways they remain in the fringes of their society. Steve Brown said that in all his dealings in Afghanistan over the past six years, he has never worked directly with a woman.

Fary Moini, a Rotary member who has worked closely with Brown on many projects, said, "It's a men's society controlled by men." A native of Iran, Moini said she refuses on principle to wear a head covering in Afghanistan, as a statement of her own cultural beliefs. "They've never been disrespectful," she said of the men she has encountered during her many trips to Afghanistan.

The two met when Moini approached Brown in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks on New York City and the Pentagon. She had been touched by the plight of Afghan refugees in Pakistan after seeing footage of the camps on TV, and she sought Brown's assistance to get a volunteer position in one of the camps.

Brown's own involvement in overseas charitable work had begun in the 1990s, after he became a Rotary member. At first, he focused on projects in Africa. After helping Moini, he became interested in both the humanitarian issues facing Afghanistan, and the country's central role in the U.S. war on terror.

Food: Prime rib

Movie: "Father of the Bride," starring Steve Martin

TV show: None, except for Fox News and sports

Book: Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History by George Crile.

Getaway: Cabin on Diamond Lake in eastern Washington

Philosophy: Epitomized by "The Station," an essay by Robert J. Hastings, which offers a message of living the journey of life now, each day. (For the full text, log on to www.thestationessay.com)

"9-11 for me was a huge wakeup call," said Brown.

Along with a desire to help the less fortunate, Brown said, is a conviction that opening new channels of communication between Americans and Afghans, and allowing Afghans to experience American generosity first-hand, will lessen the chance of future terrorist attacks.

The idea, he said, is to counter anti-Western propaganda advanced by extremists with hard evidence of who Americans are and what they stand for.

"The more we can do to help people understand that, the less chance there is of bad people trying to raise havoc," he said. "We reduce the chance of bad elements being able to operate there in the future."

Brown helped raise \$240,000 to build the Rotary School in Jalalabad, which now educates a total of 3,300 students in two daily sessions, one for boys and one for girls. The Rotarians have also lined up sponsors who pay the \$600 annual salaries of eight female teachers, since some Afghan parents will not allow their daughters, once they have moved up to older grades, to be taught by male teachers.

In another effort to further the education of girls and women, Brown, Moini and others raised the money to pay for construction of dorms for 72 female education students at Nangarhar University. The lack of such housing, Brown said, was an impediment to women attending the university.

One of Brown and Moini's newer projects will hook up Afghan students with peers in the San Diego, using the Internet. The Global Connections and Exchange Program is sponsored by a \$150,000 grant from the U.S. State Department. The program envisions hooking up hundreds, if not thousands, of students from San Diego area high schools with students in Afghanistan, both for social interaction, and academic projects. "It'll be kids getting to know each other and kids working on projects together," Brown said.

Brown and Moini said they have already seen great progress in Afghanistan since they began working there in 2002. Roads, communication and Internet access are among the improvements. Another is the institution of a banking system.

Initially, said Brown, a Rotary member from Pakistan had to travel over the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan with thousands of dollars in cash to pay for construction projects such as the school. Now, an arrangement with Torrey Pines Bank allows the funds to be transferred electronically.

The Rotarians have also built and furnished a three-bedroom guesthouse on the university campus, where they can stay during their visits to the country. The guesthouse is also used by visiting faculty throughout the year.

A few creature comforts – available to visiting foreigners – have also crept into daily life in Afghanistan. In a travelogue of his latest trip, Brown congratulated Moini for acquiring two cases of Heineken beer in Kabul for \$40 apiece, half the going rate in Jalalabad.

For her part, Susan Brown found the March trip an eye-opening experience. She said she had no idea how all-consuming her husband's charitable work would become, but she welcomed the opportunity to see the fruits of his labors for herself. While she said she has attended many talks he has given to different groups and seen photos of his various projects, it was different to actually stand in the courtyard of the busy Rotary School. "I really felt like I was in a dream when I was there," she said.

Susan Brown, who worked as a schoolteacher to put her husband through law school, said his accomplishments in Afghanistan are mind-boggling.

"I've always been proud of my husband," she said. "He's an amazing man."