

'Women are treated so bad . . . I had to do something'

A Muslim reaches out to Afghans, and finds herself

By Jenifer Goodwin
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Fary Moini spent nearly 20 years outfitting high school seniors for proms at the tuxedo rental business she owned in Mira Mesa. The money was decent, but somehow the work wasn't satisfying. She joined a Rotary Club hoping that doing charity projects would give her a sense of purpose.

Then came 9/11 and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan.

As Moini watched TV, she was horrified at the conditions women and girls endured under the Taliban. A Muslim and native of Iran who had seen her country taken over by religious fundamentalists, she had no tolerance for the abuse of women under the guise of religion.

Suddenly, renting tuxedos seemed frivolous. With her background in nursing and her knowledge of Farsi, Moini thought she could help.

"It bothered me. It still bothers me. These young people are so naive. They have no idea how these religious leaders are using them, manipulating them," said Moini, now 56. "Women are treated so bad in that part of the world. It's sickening. I just felt I had to do something."

Four months later, on a journey arranged by the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club and a Rotarian in Pakistan, Moini helped deliver a baby in a refugee camp for Afghans who had fled to Pakistan.

The conditions were deplorable. No electricity. No pain medication. No heat in the bitter cold.

The sewage system was backed up, and she had only thin, dirty blankets to swaddle the baby. "I started to cry," she said. "I felt sick."

Moini's two-month stay in the camp was the first of six extended trips to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"I knew it was crazy. I argued with myself," she said. "But I thought, if you don't do this, your life is a



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Fary Moini has found fulfillment with her volunteer work in Afghanistan, where she has overseen construction of a 20-room school complete with a science lab and a library.

total waste.”

Using \$250,000 raised by fellow Rotarians and from a private foundation, Moini oversaw construction of a 20-room school complete with a science lab, library and computer lab in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. The school, which accommodates 2,000 boys and girls, opened in 2003.

“Imagine these girls. They never, ever sit in a chair before. It's the first time they ever learn and giggle and be a child,” she said. “It's unbelievable.”

Moini's devotion to Afghanistan's children has cost her, financially and personally. She neglected her business, and it began to lose money. She sold it in 2004.

Her frequent travels led to the end of her already strained marriage, she said. She and her husband of 21 years divorced last year. It was painful, but she has no regrets.

“This is my life,” she said of her work in Afghanistan. “Telling me not to do it is like telling somebody not to drink water.”

Moini, a U.S. citizen, sold her condo and is now getting by on support from her ex-husband and savings. She lives with a friend who was recently widowed.

In the past months, she's been working on finalizing an agreement between San Diego State University and Nangarhar University in Jalalabad to send teachers to SDSU for English language training. The program would be funded by a World Bank grant, and Moini would have a paying job again, as liaison between the two universities.

During her travels, she works hard to gain the support of local tribal leaders and education officials in Jalalabad. Still, she refuses to wear a veil.

“It's a symbol of repressing women,” she said. “I wanted to make them respect me, like me, love me, because I wanted to help them. I wanted them to know me the way I am.”

Moini's next project, which she'll tackle during an October trip, is addressing the shortage of female teachers in Afghanistan. At the school she established, all the girls drop out by seventh grade because most parents don't allow men to teach girls past sixth grade.

Moini discovered that one reason women don't become teachers is that there isn't enough housing for them at universities that offer teaching degrees. So now, with the help of Rotarian Stephen Brown of La Jolla, she's trying to raise \$150,000 to build a women's dormitory at Nangarhar University.

“I'm living for this work,” she said. “I've found the reason I'm here in the world.”

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