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Building in Afghanistan

Friday, Feb. 20, 2009 | Retired attorney Steve Brown's Rotary Club business card looks like the sort of card most middle-aged businessmen carry. There's a nice photo of Brown and his wife, Susan, a Rotary Club logo and contact information.

But look a little closer and you'll see that Brown's card, in addition to listing an e-mail address, website and cell and business telephone numbers, also lists another number -- an Afghan cell phone number. That's because, for the better part of this decade, Brown and his colleagues at the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club have spent much of their time and energy building and funding projects in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

Unperturbed by the ongoing war in the country, and not stymied by such obstacles as having to send \$10,000 bundles of cash through the Khyber Pass with couriers, Brown and other Rotary volunteers have had numerous successes in Afghanistan, and their efforts have brought international acclaim and media coverage.

A school built by the Rotary Club in Jalalabad now houses more than 4,000 children and the club has arranged numerous visits to the country to develop other capital projects, including a dormitory for female students at a local university.

We sat down to talk to Brown about culture shock, making Rotary more accessible to younger people and how to avoid paying bribes in a war-torn country.

The first time you visited Afghanistan, in 2002, it wasn't long after the American invasion and the ouster of the Taliban. What were your first impressions of the country?

Well, we flew into Peshawar, Pakistan. There were some Pakistani Rotarians who actually had done a little bit of groundwork for us to go into Afghanistan to see if our efforts would be welcomed, and they were in Peshawar.

They were Pashtuns, and if you go through the Khyber Pass, the first major city in Afghanistan is Jalalabad, where they are also Pashtuns, so the Pakistani Rotarians had gone in and made some preliminary inquiries and the governor of that province, Nangarhar Province, had said yes, our efforts would be welcomed.

So, we flew into Peshawar, Pakistan. We needed to get special documentation to go through the tribal areas of Pakistan that the federal government doesn't control. We got that documentation and we got an armed guard and we got to the border and walked through the no-mans-land, where there are lot of checkpoints, and ended up on the other side where we got a car and a driver and said "Take us to Jalalabad."

Now, we were with Pakistani Rotarians that spoke the language and had made this trip several times, so we were comfortable. We were also with Flourian Wali, a San Diegan of Afghan descent. She was in her early 30s and hadn't been in Afghanistan since she was 7

years old.

The very day we arrived, we went straight to the governor's palace and met with the governor. He told us that he would welcome our efforts and he made some suggestions about who we might want to work with over there, and by the time that evening came around, we were meeting with local Afghans that said they could help us do a school project.

So things happened at a pretty fast pace, and because it was rather businesslike, there wasn't too much time for looking about. We just got down to business and said what we wanted to accomplish.

You must have been some of the only Westerners in that part of the world who weren't in uniform?

In Jalalabad, that's right. Most of the attention was going to Kabul. That's where the NGOs (non-governmental organizations) were set up, that's where most of the relationships with the West were. In Jalalabad, on that first trip, the only Westerners we saw were U.S. military.

No backpackers? No adventurous travelers?

No, there were no tourists.

Your school is for both boys and girls. Was that a concern for you at the time, considering that the Taliban had only just been deposed and the way the Taliban feel about the education of women?

Well, originally, we were going to do a girls school because people here knew about the lack of education for girls under the Taliban. Then we thought that might be a little too much in-your-face, so we decided to have a school for both boys and girls.

We designed it so that it would have two different wings, separated by administrative offices, one wing for boys, one for girls. And that's how it's been until recently, but recently the school has so many students that they're running it in shifts, with the boys in one shift and girls in another.

The school was designed for 1,000 students at any one time and it has more than 4,000 now -- 1,500 girls and about 3,000 boys. We've set up some tents outside it for classrooms and we have a big multi-purpose room where they run three classrooms at once.

Have you had any trouble with corruption at all?

We've had no trouble with corruption, and there would be plenty of opportunity to take advantage of what we've done.

First of all, we deal with all volunteers ourselves, so we have zero overheads. When people go over there, they pay their own way, so every dollar that we receive by way of donation hits the street as a dollar that hasn't been reduced by any amount.

Starting out, there was no banking system in Afghanistan. So we would wire money to a trusted Rotarian in Pakistan and he'd convert it into dollars or Pakistan rupees, and send a runner through the Khyber Pass with \$10,000 per satchel. Then they would go over there and would meet with the Afghan person we've come to know and trust -- Mohamed Ishak, and he would deal out the money to the different people who performed on the job.

We were told that the school would cost a total of about \$240,000. It's a beautiful school and I can't say that someone hasn't taken advantage of us at some point, but we got what we thought we would get, for the price we were told we would pay, and the price seems

reasonable for us.

Also, government officials weren't really involved in this school project, apart from approving it, so we didn't have to pay people for permits and things like that.

How is the school funded, day-to-day?

It's a government school, so we don't influence curriculum. We have set up a computer lab and provided some curriculum for the computer lab, but it's a government school, and the government pays for the teachers.

Now, at one point, we were over there meeting with some 6th grade girls and they told us this would be their last year of school. We said "Why is that?" They told us that after 6th grade they need to have a female teacher and that there aren't any female teachers.

So we met with the director of education at that time who told us they didn't have a budget for female teachers. We asked if we could find a female teacher, and pay for them, would they be accepted into the program? He said certainly.

Well, we learned that a female teacher costs \$600 a year, so we raised money here to pay for eight female teachers over a two-year period of time for the school. Since that time, the director of education told us they have put money in the budget for female teachers.

The Los Angeles Times reported that you've never had to pay any bribes in Afghanistan. I find that hard to believe. You've really never paid a bribe to anybody?No. In fact, I would say we've never been asked to pay a bribe.

I know corruption is a huge problem in Afghanistan because the Afghan people tell me that. I'm not negating that, I'm just saying that it hasn't come up. In part I think that's because maybe they know this is private donors' money that we raise and we have to be pretty careful stewards of it, so maybe they respect the fact that these are donations from individuals, rather than big companies

What's the first thing you do when you get back to the United States after a long trip to Afghanistan?

Well, the first thing I do is to go through all the notations we made with all the meetings we've had. There's a very large follow-up list of things that needs to be done. It's not like I come back and have a milkshake and a hamburger.

We have it such now that our accommodations are reasonably comfortable. We built a guesthouse at the university campus for visiting faculty and it's pretty much Western standards. Our meals are adequate. It's kind of a good weight-loss program, I usually lose about 10 to 15 pounds for every three weeks I'm over there.

Do you think that Rotary needs to do more to attract young people?I think that's fair.

Rotary, historically, has been geared towards the more seasoned business people. Historically, to be a Rotarian, you should be the owner of a business or in a profession. The rules have been relaxed on that. You still need to be a person of good quality and integrity, but in the United States, certainly, things have changed a lot.

In the United States, we still have the aging issue, but members don't have to be in as prestigious a position as they used to be. In many other countries, it's still a prestige-based organization, but in the U.S. it's become more of a worker-based organization -- worker in

the humanitarian sense.

In San Diego, there's a new generations Rotary club that meets after work that's made up of younger people, and we're looking at doing a second one in the North County.

It's a matter of how people want to spend their discretionary time and their discretionary money. Rotary needs to offer something to younger people -- business contacts are not a sufficient reason to join Rotary at this point.

Do you think the opportunity to do the sort of work you're doing in places like Afghanistan would appeal to civic-minded 20-somethings and 30-somethings?

Yes. It offers an entree to something that you can't do as an individual.

Rotary has perhaps the strongest international element to its volunteer activities. Rotary's a menu. At any one time, Rotary in general can have 100 different things a person can get involved in, and every club might have anywhere from 10 to 50 things. Our club is particularly focused on international service. In any one year, our club is probably involved in 30 international-related activities.

So for people looking for a way to become involved internationally and collectively, Rotary is unique in that regard.

Do you think that the fact that Rotary is a non-religious organization has helped you succeed in Afghanistan?

Oh yeah. I think it's a mistake for any church group, particularly a Western church group, to go into Afghanistan with any type of mission to help promote their own religion.

There could be churches who just want to do humanitarian work. We received a donation from a Presbyterian church in San Diego that helped pay for the female education and we've made it real clear that we appreciate the donation and it will go to good use, but that it would hurt what we're trying to accomplish if we tried to pass on any Christian literature or any Christian way of thinking.

I think you're asking for making your job more difficult if you attach a religious component to it, and we have zero desire to do that. Our attitude is that we'll work within a culture, even if there's something that we don't like, rather than trying to change it, because then it's going to make our objectives more difficult to accomplish.

Have you had any push back at all from your members because you are flowing money and education into a Muslim country?

Well, within Rotary, there are some people who believe that charity begins and ends at home, and because we have all kinds of needs here, why are we helping people thousands of miles away?

I think 9/11 gave a pretty sharp example of what happens if we simply ignore failed states. And I also personally believe that the United States has multiple safety nets, and that if somebody hits rock bottom, they've had to use a pair of scissors to get there. Also, your money goes a lot further over there.

-- Interview by [WILL CARLESS](#)



Steve Brown has helped build schools and other capital projects in Afghanistan through his work with Rotary International. Photo: Sam Hodgson

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