In late summer of 2009, I was online looking for dental jobs when a pop-up ad asking for dental assistant volunteers for Kabul, Afghanistan appeared on my screen. I was a busy mother of three and the world as I knew it was in Maine. My two daughters had since grown and married, leaving me with my son, Joseph. However, that pop-up made me aware of an array of needy people who had long been forgotten by the world.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, any Afghans who could possibly leave Afghanistan did so. Those who left were largely the elite: educators, business owners, financiers, manufacturers, scientists, doctors and dentists. The people who left took the technological heart out of Afghanistan and the infrastructure fell apart. Thirty years of war then followed, further decimating the country. It has never fully recovered. Afghans continue to struggle, with over three million orphans, an expected lifespan in the low forties, and no accessible dental care for ninety percent of the population. As of 2012, there is one dentist for every two hundred and fifty thousand potential patients.

A dentist in California started a free dental clinic in Afghanistan and was operating a dental technical school for underprivileged Afghans to become dental technicians at no cost. The clinic was treating about forty patients a day and teaching one dental assistant class. Other classes for dental hygienists and laboratory technicians were offered as well.

My first contact with Dr. James Rolfe, founder and CEO of the Afghanistan Dental Relief Project (ADRP), began with a few inquisitive e-mails that later turned into a phone call. I remember talking with him and sensing the compassion in his voice as he told me that he cried every day when he first went to an orphanage in Afghanistan to do some volunteer work for the children there. For once I felt like I had something to contribute and eagerly signed on for a two week teaching assignment, completing a class that was already in progress and that needed a few finishing touches.
As I prepared for my journey, my mind was full of concerns, but once I began teaching in Afghanistan, I found my class of five students very forgiving. Ramin was the only young man in the class, and the rest consisted of four women ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-five. They were very eager to learn. I could not believe the amount of gratitude these students showed as I taught them X-ray techniques, impressions and model pour-ups, and the many instrument names and their uses. The language barrier wasn’t as much of an issue as I had thought.

The ADRP site is set up as a compound. There is a guest house which is used to lodge teachers and volunteers, complete with a housekeeper, groundkeeper, day and night guard and a cook. Between the guest house and the clinic is an organic garden that supplied us with our vegetables prepared by Sema the cook. The actual clinic is ingeniously designed, built from a standard shipping container turned into a three–operatory dental clinic. It houses one of the few digital X-ray machines in all of Afghanistan. A new addition to the project is a hygiene room in which three graduates of the dental hygienist class work. The fully functioning lab produces dentures and partials, and will soon be equipped to be able to make crowns.

The philosophy of the project is to be self–sufficient. ADRP grows its own food; it makes in–house dentures and partials at a low cost; it trains students and where possible, employs them. The rest of the services are free to the Afghan widows, children and orphans who can barely afford a loaf of bread, let alone dental care. The ADRP relies solely on donations, and the love and dedication of Dr. Rolfe.

My two weeks were over before I knew it. I kept in touch with my students, one very kind hearted Afghan doctor, and Dr. Rolfe, who always kept me informed of the goings on in the clinic. Two years passed as I pined away for my new Afghan family and the opportunity to set the bar a little higher. I wanted to teach a class from beginning to end.

In December of 2010, I got laid off again, but saw this as my golden opportunity. I booked a flight and packed my bags for Kabul. Fear of the unknown was gone. I studied my dental assistant book, prepared my lessons and embarked on a three–month journey I will never forget.

My first task was to recruit students and screen them for potential competency as dental assistants. I was surprised when fifteen students applied compared to the five I had in 2009. Being over–whelmed was an understatement as I interviewed all and could turn away none. This was the fifth class taught by the ADRP and by far the largest.

To be in a foreign land alone is formidable, but to be an American woman in a foreign land we are at war with was quite another story. Much to my surprise and delight, I experienced no prejudice, nor was there any disrespect on the part of my students toward me. The cooperation I experienced, the enthusiasm of my students, and the help of my two wonderful translators was wonderful. As class progressed, I was sorry to lose three students, which now brought my class size down to twelve.

“ADRP is now responsible for treating over sixty patients a day, with seven operatories and three dentists working each day. We now have our own hygiene clinic, staffed by graduates of our own dental hygiene program. Our full–service dental laboratory is also staffed by ADRP graduates, making dentures and crowns for our clinic. Other students are expanding the ability of local dentists to see more patients and provide better treatment. We recently opened a clinic to treat non–Afghan patients for a fee, which helps to fund the free clinic and school.

Some graduates have remained as employees in our clinic or have gone into other educational programs. I feel that we owe a debt to Afghanistan, and this work is what I can do to right that debt. Please join with Jodi and me to help the people of Afghanistan recover their infrastructure and go on to live their lives in peace. To find out more about ADRP, go to the website www.adrpinc.org or e–mail me at adrp@verizon.net.

We are currently looking for teacher volunteers, assistants and others from the dental profession to both work in the clinic and teach in the schools, as a short–term or long–term commitment. Volunteers pay their own expenses. Please ensure that this valuable work will go on by supporting ADRP with your charitable gift contribution, and by donating useable supplies or volunteering to serve on a committee. ADRP, Inc. is a 501C3–registered charitable corporation and an accepted Afghanistan Non–Government Organization. All donations are applied directly to the project, as all corporate officers are volunteers. Send donations to: ADRP, PO Box 734, Santa Barbara, CA 93102.

—James Rolfe, DDS, founder and president of the ADRP
During my stay I met a young man named Rafi, who would often greet me with a friendly kiss on the cheek and ask me about the class. Five weeks after the class had begun, Rafi asked me if he could join. I told him to wait awhile and there would be another class he could join. I didn’t know how he could catch up with the rest of the students. He then told me that, at the age of twenty, he had “no hope for his future in Afghanistan.” I sensed the despair in him, so how could I pretend not to hear? After a month of one-on-one tutoring, Rafi merged with the morning class. He was brilliant, dedicated and ended up coming in third in a class that now consisted of 13.

Rafi’s hard work and good grades were rewarded. He was hired by one of the ADRP’s staff doctors as a personal assistant in the doctor’s private practice. When I told Rafi and his family the good news, his mother cried and I was treated to a wonderful Afghan meal in their home. A few days later, Rafi’s father, a shoemaker, gifted me with a new pair of shoes he had personally designed for me. I had no idea that ninety days taken out of my life could have such an impact. This was just one awe-inspiring experience in many of the ways these students and their families truly appreciated the job I was doing for them and their children.

There are so many more stories that I would like to share with you but the truth of the matter is this: I benefitted from being there. I have confidence in myself that I never had before. I also have an extended family that is full of love and gratitude for what I was able to do for them. I have friends in that far away land who I will never forget. There will always be recessions. There will always be wars and uprisings. What will always remain the same is the humble spirit and love these beautiful people have for those who help them and have not forgotten them.

[Editor’s Note: The Journal’s original profile of the ADRP and interview with Dr. Rolfe, “A Matter of Conscience,” was published in the January/February 2009 issue.]

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