

City women extend hand to Afghans

Tara Campbell
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Reaching out far beyond the borders of the province and the country, the compassion and innovation among a group of Saskatoon women is shining through; all the way to Afghanistan. Six female Afghan teachers are expected to land on Saskatchewan soil this September to learn firsthand all that is possible through the power of education.

The idea was born two years ago in Italy when Betty-Ann Heggie, former senior vice-president at PotashCorp and a member of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women Hall of Fame, spoke at an international conference on gender equality.

Heggie was describing her 'Womentorship' program at the Edwards School of Business and caught the attention of fellow speaker Dr. Sakena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning; an organization that has been training women teachers in Afghanistan for more than 20 years in more than 80 schools across the country. With the common goal of empowering women through education and mentorship a partnership emerged.

"Sakena made a bee line for me (after speaking) and said, 'I want you to mentor some of my women . . . I want to expose them to the western world, I want them to see women asking questions of men, I want them to see what's possible. They'll be able to see programs you run and they will be able to . . . say I know this can work, I have seen it happen,'" Heggie described of her conversation with Dr. Yacoobi two years ago in Italy.

She recalls thinking at the time "this is a tall order", but she was inspired. Heggie returned to Canada and started to commit the money she earned through her speaking engagements to bringing the teachers here. She raised the funds and was making progress in working out the details of the project, but over time it became evident that it would be best to work with Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, a non-profit organization designed to provide Afghan women with the education and resources necessary to improve their lives.

"The Saskatoon women were in contact with Sakena and they found out about us," explained Lauryn Oates, Project Director for Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan. "(They) came to our annual conference in Kelowna last year and decided to start a Saskatoon chapter, as well as support the work Sakena is doing. They're trying to merge all this together, which is great because we (Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan) need Sakena to help with our teacher training . . . we're all coming together to make this happen."

And so far the women have had success, but there is still a major barrier standing in the way: visas. They are asking to bring the Afghan teachers here for three weeks, but it is a long and complicated process. Despite the obstacles the women are remaining optimistic and lobbying hard. They have got the attention of Rob Norris, the province's



Dr. Sakena Yacoobi during her visit to Saskatoon

Photo by Tara Campbell

Minister of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration, and are looking to him to put pressure on the federal government.

"We'll be offering our voice of support to say, 'listen this is important. This is legitimate and we will be adding our voice to those in the community to make our request to the federal government. We'll be doing that via letter,'" said Norris.

As Canada's combat mission winds down this year in Afghanistan the focus will shift to training the Afghan military and more emphasis will put on education, which could play in favour of getting the teachers their visas. Dr. Yacoobi explains it as an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the two countries.

"We have a wonderful relationship . . . Afghan with Canadian government. I think to build this bridge stronger - if they speed up the process of visa - it would really help," said Dr. Yacoobi. "We do have a relationship, we do have a strong relationship and to build this relationship . . . I think

it would be fantastic."

Whatever the key ends up being to getting the visas the hope is it happens soon, as the Afghan women are expected to land in Canada this September.

Their schedule will start with a stop in Ontario for the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan annual Conference. Then they will travel to Saskatchewan where they will participate in Heggie's Womentorship program; spend time with post-secondary educators and have exposure to local and provincial health programs. The women will also learn about local elementary school programming - all with the intention of taking these program structures back to Afghanistan where they will reach hundreds of thousands of women and children.

With so much on the line Heggie is clear: "I'm saying we're going to get visas this year because I'm bound and determined to get them and I'm not going to think negatively."

Sometimes we wonder who we really are



Betty-Ann Heggie

At the YWCA Women of Distinction Awards, I was overwhelmed with the wonderful things that women are doing in our community. We should stop more often and celebrate everything women are.

One minute we are dropping cookies off for the school for the preschooler's class treat, the next we are rushing off to the office to meet management's request for a department budget cut.

Sometimes the duality of roles can leave us wondering who which one we really are. Being a different person at home and at the office can leave us feeling confused and inauthentic.

But rather than being "either" a career

woman "or" a mom, we should connect those two existences with the word "and" because in fact, we are both.

Hollywood likes to present us with polarized images of women. Well-known writer and film critic Eleanor Ringel Carter points out that this linear view of women has been a recurring theme in movies for the last 60 years.

She points to Katherine Hepburn as she strides onto the screen in 1942 in Woman of the Year. She's a big city reporter, but she lacks the ability to make a simple breakfast while her sportswriter friend Spencer Tracy looks on.

Apparently successful women can't cook. In the movie Hanging Up, Diane Keaton is magazine mogul who doesn't know how to stuff a turkey. In Baby Boom, Keaton is an anti-baby workaholic. Ringel Carter points to role after role where career women are cruel, heartless, psychos with no family values like Glenn Close in Fatal attraction and Meryl Streep in the Devil Wears Prada.

But despite of what Hollywood puts out, women who work are not domestic nightmares. We live with one foot in each life and weave back and forth between them, in most cases, with ease and grace. In fact, the skills

we learn in one part of our lives make us better and stronger in the other.

There is lots of evidence to show that organizations with more women at the decision-making table get better results. Learning to handle growing and evolving lives of our children puts us in good stead to build relationships that benefit our companies.

I would argue that being a mother even teaches us to be strong, committed leaders.

Moms are the first leaders we encounter in life. When she smiles, we smile back and learn to follow her lead as she teaches us the art of survival and the art of caring.

Eventually mothers shift roles from parent to mentor, and many successful women say the biggest influence in life was their mother. She was their first CEO.

And men say it, too. In fact, some of our most powerful and significant leaders were raised almost entirely by their mothers. Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama have been quoted that they credit much of their success to the mothers who reared them in the absence of a father.

The strength of these remarkable leaders, I believe, is their ability to access the feminine in themselves that comes from being

exposed to female role models from such a young age. They integrated their masculine and feminine energies.

They learned how to be empathetic, to be concerned about the collective, how to listen, and how to be inspired by diverse opinions. In short, they learned to nurture others, which is the basis of service.

As women we are constantly weaving a tapestry. We are part mother and part of the world of work. We are most successful when we realize that home and the office are all part of the same and there is no reason to feel divided. There is no "either or", there is only "and".

Betty-Ann Heggie is a former Senior Vice-President at PotashCorp. Since retiring in 2007 she shares lessons learned from her 26 years at the company with other women and with men so that we may all make progress together in the modern workplace. A member of Canada's "Top 100 Most Powerful Women Hall of Fame" she continues to reside in Saskatoon where she works as a speaker, author and mentor. Betty-Ann is also this year's Lifetime Achievement winner in the YWCA Women of Distinction Awards. Follow her blog at www.stillettochick.com.