

AFGHANISTAN

Education key to mentorship program

KERRY BENJOE
LEADER-POST

Saskatchewan has made an Afghan connection.

A small group of Afghan women are in the province to learn more about Saskatchewan's health and education systems in hopes of improving things in their own country.

Betty-Ann Heggie, president of Canadians in support of Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), is hosting a group of Afghan women for a few weeks, including AIL founder Sakena Yacoobi.

Heggie first met Yacoobi two years ago while the pair were in Italy speaking at a conference. Both women were on a panel called gender equity for greater world harmony.

"She spoke about the importance of education and I spoke about the importance of mentorship," said Heggie, who founded the Womentorship Program at the University of Saskatchewan.

The two began talking and came up with an idea to bring Canadian and Afghan women together in a type of mentorship program.

"I said OK," said Heggie. "I thought it would be kind of easy. I thought I would

raise the money and that I would assign some people to help me with programming and we would just apply for visas and we would get them."

After two years of hard work, Heggie and Yacoobi were finally able to make the program possible.

"We spent a lot of time lobbying the government telling them how important our program is and how it tied into the objectives for rebuilding Afghanistan, for educating the people there and that mentorship is a hand up not a hand out," said Heggie. "If we want Afghanistan to rebuild and find peace, then they need to find ways to do that themselves, but they need ... other successful behaviour and that is what we can offer them."

On Sept 26, Yacoobi, along with an interpreter and four Afghan women, endured a 40-hour plane trip and landed in Canada, where they attended the Women for Afghanistan conference in Oakville, Ont.

"They were able to meet a lot of Canadians who are influential in Canadian policy in Afghanistan," said Heggie. "I think it was very moving for them to see how many people in Canada are

concerned and care about what's happening in Afghanistan and who really want the country to move forward."

On Sunday, the group arrived in Saskatchewan and are touring education and health facilities in Saskatoon and Regina.

"So they can take things back to Afghanistan to help rebuild their country," said Heggie.

She said the Afghan women arrived eager and ready to learn.

While in Regina, they participated in a round table discussion at the legislature on women and leadership with cabinet ministers, deputy ministers and chiefs of staff.

Yacoobi, a Nobel Peace Prize nominee founded the AIL in 1995, which is an Afghan women-led non-governmental organization.

"Our objective is that we believe education is the key issue that will bring peace in Afghanistan," she said.

She believes education will help to empower women.

Yacoobi was happy for the opportunity to be able to connect women from Afghanistan with Saskatchewan mentors.

kbenjoe@leaderpost.com