

SANTA PAULA TIMES
FREELANCE ARTICLE
Annette Donner

On their own dime. On their own time.

He's your local Santa Paula doctor...everyone knows him. Cedric Emery.
She's a nurse. Norma. Same...many many friends in and around Santa Paula from the thirty plus years living and working here. They live right down the street. Raised two boys. Are community oriented. They care, their friends say.

And in their spare time they go to Afghanistan.

For a tourist jaunt? Nope.

These people mean business. Health business. Saving lives in a war torn country.
Saving the people they had come to love, respect and admire. One person at a time.
One heart at a time.

"Well, it's one bladder at a time," chuckles Cedric, referring to his medical specialty, urology. In Kabul, Afghanistan, Cedric is beginning to build a training program for the urology department at the Ali Abad Hospital.

It began 36 years ago— or 14 months ago depending on how you look at it - when he and Norma decided to revisit the land they had come to love in the 60s. She then 24, was serving in the Peace Corps vaccinating against smallpox in remote villages. She since became a nurse. He then 28, serving as a U.S. Public Health Service doctor in Kabul. "Once you meet an Afghan, you know the true meaning of friendship and hospitality," says Norma. "They were in our hearts all these years."

"We went this time without knowing what to expect, says Cedric. "We knew the country," but that was during the "Golden Years" as people now call those years prior to the Russian invasion in 1979 and the rise of the Taliban in the 90s and the post- 9/11 war. "We knew it was bad, but we had lost all our contacts due to the wars. So we just went."

They flew half way around the world, got through customs, made their way in a taxi past familiar but now war damaged buildings to the main downtown hotel. They found they were the only guests. The next day Cedric found the Ali Abad Hospital, the only one with a urology wing, and Dr. Hassan Manawi, the only doctor who had an inkling of urology procedures. "He was the only English-speaking doctor and was foreign-trained, in Ireland," says Cedric. He was doing his best to teach the other doctors urology procedures and teach at the medical school.

"He doesn't lack skill and dedication. He lacks tools," says Cedric. The western doctor watched with admiration as Dr. Manawi and Dr. S. Zaman performed complicated surgery with instruments resembling those in a wild west museum surgery exhibit. "The instruments were archaic and corroded. Sometimes the doctors had no gloves. "They don't have the little but necessary things we have to insure procedures go well" says Cedric. "It was awesome to watch."

And the Afghans did it without complaining...and the patients were grateful to have any operation at all. Cedric watched each patient walk to the operating table, lie down, be prepped, then operated on – the hospital did have anesthesia - then be taken out on a gurney and parked in the hallway, the hospital lacking a recovery room. "Then the staff just wiped down the operating

table with a rag and beckoned the next patient in.”

The hospital functions, though with family members supplying the patients' food, sometimes even donating blood on the spot. If needed, that relative would be sat next to the patient in the operating room, the blood transfused directly into the person on the table. There was little post-op pain medication. Doctors say the Taliban ransacked the hospital just for sport.

“The Afghans are incredible in their ability to tolerate discomfort.”

Emery was soon doing surgery with the doctors. He had instruments in his hand he would have considered unusable at home. "I learned a long time ago from the Afghans how to make do," he said with a grin. And grimly he added, “It’s really a war situation...you do what needs to be done with whatever you have.”

What he was lacking besides the basics was endoscopy equipment that can look into the bladder, prostate and urethra to detect cancer, stones and other major problems. So after his trip, Emery’s letters to manufacturers resulted in \$300,000 worth of equipment donations from German company Storz.

So he went back to Kabul to show the Afghans how to use it. “We weren’t sure the officials would allow the equipment through customs. Again, we just went with open hearts and a desire to help.” And doors opened...that is, customs let it all through without a hitch and, amazingly without demanding bakhshish, the customary bribe.

With the help of the volunteer services of Dr. Samir Rai from India, who was the only person to respond to Cedric’s Internet query to the American Urology Association, Cedric set up the equipment and began teaching procedures. Dr. Manawi translated and medical doctors eagerly attended the sessions that took place at the patient bedside. “The only way to learn to use an endoscopic instrument is on a real patient,” says Cedric. “So we did.”

Cedric is actively searching for western urology residents and Fellows who would consider donating time teaching in Kabul.

And what did Norma do? Besides teaching instrument care and sterilization procedures to the urology nurses and doctors?

Norma brought life to one of the 25 orphanages in Kabul. As she tells the story, the staff did not know what to do with her when she wandered over one day asking how she could help. “They sent me to sit with the doctor, thinking that was the right thing to do,” says Norma. But sitting idly by as an observer is not Norma’s style, so she began working with the pharmacist and nursing aide and was slowly able to observe the orphanages needs. “Basic cleanliness”, she says.

So she offered to wash hair, clean, teach tooth brushing – anything. When they responded to her suggestions with “dele shuma”, that it was “up to her heart,” she rushed to the bazaar and bought hundreds of toothbrushes and tubes of toothpaste. And that was the beginning of the tooth brushing game, Norma squatting with groups of 10-14 children, each proudly holding their new toothbrush, diligently practicing what Norma demonstrated. Her Farsi language ability, retained from her Peace Corps training, proved invaluable with the children, all craving love and attention.

And clothing,

And food.
And activities.

And she discovered there was no separate room for the sick children. “The sick ones were simply left among the healthy ones and the risk of mass contagion was very great,” she says. Norma learned the only time the sick children were sent to the hospital is if they were going to die. “Not any more,” she says with a twinkle in her eye.

It was Norma who convinced the director that a storage room could be converted into a room where the sick children could be kept separate and treated there for their illnesses. A master at bazaar shopping from her Peace Corps years, Norma - using about \$1000 of the money donated by Emery’s Ventura patients and friends – headed to the bazaar with an Afghan orphanage staffer. There they contracted for the construction of bed frames at the bed bazaar, mattresses and pillows sewn and stuffed at the mattress bazaar, (a big pillow stuffed with cotton batting) and for a locking medicine cabinet at the cabinet bazaar. They found material for window curtains and paint to freshen up the room.

While Norma would like to see more doctors available for the orphans – right now there are only two doctors to take care of two orphanages, one with 850 children plus staff and one with 1200 children plus staff – she nonetheless considers her time spent there a true success story. She is anxious to return to continue her successes.

Documenting the most recent trip was a Ventura resident intrigued by the Afghanistan photos in Cedric’s office who insisted on going along once he heard of the Emery’s adventure. Jed Harris, director of operations at Pure Tech Inc, Ventura, documented the trip, organized the creation of a CD and DVD by Brooks Institute of Photography student Ryan Reeves, to promote the Emery’s work, and created a web site – www.helpafghanistan.org.

Before flying to Afghanistan, Jed connected with a Bay Area organization Roots For Peace (www.rootsofpeace.org), an organization that raises money to remove land mines and help communities implement a sustainable agricultural program. He traveled on their behalf to take photos in the minefields as well as for the UN land mine survivor assistance program in Ghazni that needed pictures as well.

Jed says much time was spent roaming the minefields in full armor, “with the occasional rocket attack from the old Taliban and the occasional thump of mines being detonated.” He says the heart grueling time he spent was at the land mine victim assistance clinic, seeing the maimed adults and children learning to use their new, oftentimes crude, prosthesis. “An average of 8-10 people a day, mostly women and children, fall victim to landmines in Afghanistan.”

Officials estimate that there are upwards of 10 million landmines in the soil (in a country about the size of Texas). He goes on to explain that land mines are meant to maim, not kill, so the lasting effects on the individual and the community are devastating. “Anytime you step off the pavement in Afghanistan, you are at serious risk of losing life or limb!”

Jed observed how the assistance clinic operates with a lack of tools or the raw materials (polypropylene plastics - 3mm and 5mm) used for making prosthetics. Then there is the challenge of housing for patients that travel days by donkey cart or on foot to the clinic and require food and shelter for their stay. And then, most importantly, says Jed, “most of the Afghans have no formal training in ortho technology. They simply make a prosthetic from scratch and fit it accordingly. For example, the only tool they may have is a shard of glass for shaping a leg! Imagine how much

time and patience this takes!” Jed says he came away with admiration of the Afghan’s excellent craftsmanship.

Did a war atmosphere surround them in Kabul? Yes. Its ravages within the hospital let alone outside its walls, the ongoing danger of landmines, snipers, the lack of basic living supplies for the people let alone medical supplies for the doctors, medicine for the people. Did we mention the rocket explosions in the distance while they worked? Then there is the unspoken, non-tangible simmering anger of the ousted Taliban rumored to be plotting against in-country westerners to discredit the international outreach programs trying to help rebuild the country. More than one NGO or foreign aid worker has been shot to death in the past few months. And not by being caught in cross fire.

The Emerys go anyway. Because they can. And they want to. They have something to give. They consider their gift nothing compared to Dr. Manawi’s sacrifice of sending his children to Germany when the Russians invaded in 1979. “It was safer,” says Cedric of his colleague’s decision. And later, with the rise of the Taliban, doctors were not their favorite people and families were often also targeted. But Dr. Manawi stayed...to help his people. “And we can go home to comfort,” says Norma. “The Afghans, they can’t leave. This is their life. Why not make it a little easier?”

Of their own motives, the Emery’s wave off the question. “When you’ve got something someone else doesn’t have, you have a choice. Our choice is to share it,” says Cedric.

In April the Emery’s will return for the third time since November 2002. On their own dime. On their own time.

THE FOLLOWING IS
TENTATIVE INFORMATION TO GO INTO A BOX WITH THE STORY.
HOWEVER, IT IS NOT TO BE PRINTED UNTIL FINAL GO-AHEAD IS RECEIVED FROM
ME.

(BOX)
When pressed, the Emery’s said they would accept donations and stressed none of the donations go to their expenses. All monies go to supplies only and are tax deductible under the Kathleen Rhodes Foundation. Checks can be made out to The Kathleen Rhodes Foundation XXXX address)