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ROSEMARY STASEK/Special to the Standard-Speaker Rosemary Stasek, above, stands with Afghanistan's interim leader Hamed Karzai at the Presidential Palace in Kabul. After touring Afghanistan with a delegation from California, Stasek, a McAdoo native, thinks Karzai is the leader best equipped to maintain peace in Afghanistan.

## Afghanistan: Up close and personal

By KELLY MONITZ

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Hazleton, PA, May 29 - McAdoo native Rosemary V. Stasek returned from a 15-day trip to Afghanistan, a country that has known its first months of peace in three decades.

She joined a contingent from Mountain View, Calif., where she serves on city council. The region boasts the largest population of Afghan people outside Afghanistan.

They went to make connections with people there and help them as they work to reconstruct their war-ravaged country, she said.

But the first step toward long-term peace begins with Afghanistan's leaders, who meet in a month to re-establish the government, Stasek said.

For the California group's part, they visited what remains of hospitals and schools, talked with professionals and community leaders, and established

contacts for the future.

And they brought back images that few Americans could fathom, she said.

Rubble dominates a landscape where homes, offices, businesses, schools and hospitals, once stood. Some buildings remain, but without windows and doors. Others stand gutted by fire or otherwise marred by the blasts.

Stasek and the contingent climbed into the ruins of a bombed school to visit classrooms still in use, she said. It's not uncommon for the Afghan people to live and work within the ruins, she explained.

Stasek remembers the smiling faces of the children packed into those classrooms well, especially the girls who were not allowed to continue their education under the rule of the Taliban.

"They were so happy," she said. "They had no desks, no books, no pens, no pencils, no paper, but they were so happy to be in school."

Young girls lost a lot of school time and they're taking accelerated classes to catch up, while college-age women went back to high school to earn their diplomas, she said.

Makeshift schools aren't the only obstacle. The country lacks transportation and communication systems as well, she said.

"It's easier to call someone in the United States, than it is to call across town. The lines aren't there," she said.

But the people, like the girls returning to the classrooms, are happy. Stasek photographed their smiles again and again, and witnessed several wedding celebrations in her two weeks there, she said.

"Your emotions keep going back and forth," Stasek said. "You're devastated by the destruction and the tragedy. Then, you run into someone who is so full of life and optimism."

Stasek hopes the optimism will prevail as the grand council of hundreds of Afghan leaders convenes in the upcoming weeks.

"My prayer is that the peace holds and the grand council can bring people together," she said. "There is too much at stake."

The international community committed more than

\$4 billion to rebuilding Afghanistan, but no aid will go in until peace can be assured, Stasek said.

She and the others who want to help in the reconstruction must wait in hope and prayer, she said.

"The hardest part is to wait," Stasek said. "We can't do anything until the Afghan people make the choice themselves to hold the peace."

But an entire generation has known nothing but war; and young, ambitious men who might have led in business or law, built careers as warlords instead, she said. They continue to fight to keep those careers, she said.

"Everyone has got a gun. Everyone is in fatigues," she said. "There's no police force. There's no army. Everyone is in a holding pattern."

Stasek believes the country's best hope is its interim leader, Hamed Karzai, whom she met during her stay.

"The ball is really in their court. They have to make the tough choice for peace," she said. "Compared to that, rebuilding the country is easy."

Stasek plans to pray, hope and keep the lines of communication open with the people she met in Afghanistan, and make some new connections here on their behalf.

"My job for the rest of the year is to use my job as an elected official to help the folks there . to be their liaison in the states," she said. "This is why I wanted to be an elected official.

Stasek, 38, is the daughter of Patricia and Andrew Stasek, McAdoo, and the granddaughter of Francis Stasek and Theresa Tomaino.