

The StarPhoenix

Power about equality: Afghan visitors Education tour includes Sask. stops

BY RORY MACLEAN, THE STARPHOENIX OCTOBER 11, 2011



Afghanistan teachers in Saskatoon include, from left, Zakia, Asiyah, Sabera and Shakofa.

Photograph by: Gord Waldner, The Starphoenix, The StarPhoenix

The promotion of education in Afghanistan is a struggle hitting Saskatchewan soil this month, owing to the work of a Nobel-nominated Afghan woman and her friends.

A group of four Afghan teacher trainers is touring the province for the next few weeks learning about Saskatchewan's health and education systems. They're on a mission to learn everything they can and bring it back to train teachers at the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), a non-profit group founded by renowned Afghan educator Sakena Yacoobi to train teachers in Afghanistan.

Yacoobi has taught more than 19,000 educators in Afghanistan through AIL.

Efforts to bring Afghan teacher trainers in to be mentored by Saskatchewan educators and health-care providers started two years ago when Betty-Ann Heggie, former senior vice-president of Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan Inc., met Yacoobi at a gender equity conference in Italy.

After facing many obstacles, Heggie got the project off the ground and the four Afghan women landed in Canada last week. They attended a women's conference in Toronto before heading to Saskatchewan, spending time at the legislature before driving to Saskatoon.

The women, who converse with the help of translators, said they never thought Canadians would be so courteous and respectful.

"Everyone has been so kind. We never even thought we could get this kind of respect. The way Canadians feel for Afghan people, even if they're not helping they're eager to understand," said Asiyah, one of the more talkative of the group (the women have requested their last names not be used as it may put their lives in danger upon their return to Afghanistan).

They say the trip has given them a new perspective on the use of power.

"One thing they've learned is that power is not always from the top; it's sharing," said Qudsia, a translator the group recruited while at the conference in Toronto.

"People work harder when they feel like an equal."

So far in Saskatoon the women have attended midwifery and art education programs, toured the farmer's market and visited the YWCA women's shelter and the Saskatoon Mobile Health Bus.

At the farmer's market on Saturday, the women were pleased to see a young man selling baked goods. They took his picture to take back home, proof that baking was not just an activity for women.

They were also very interested in how the health bus operated.

Don Ragush, a licensed nurse practitioner on the Health Bus, told the women his main focus on the health bus is to get people to take control of their own health.

"Here my focus is people are responsible for their own health," he said. "Like here in Canada, people eat really, really badly, even though they have all the choices. We'll treat them, but we tell them you're not going to get better unless you change."

The women were curious who was eligible for treatment there, and whether they kept medicine on the bus. Ragush told them he could write prescriptions for people, and said he treated everyone, even if the person could not produce a health card or chose not to provide a name.

"What do people do if they need help before the bus arrives?" asked Shakofa.

She was told they likely went to the emergency room at St. Paul's Hospital, mere blocks away from the bus's Saturday location on Appleby Drive.

There is currently a mobile health centre in their community of Herat, the women said, but it is just medical supplies transported on foot. They hope one day to have a bus like this, said Shakofa, and just seeing how Saskatoon's health bus worked gave them many ideas.

"We are going to have a bus like this, and here we see the model. The use of space in the bus is so important, every space is used," she said.

Touring the brief detox in Saskatoon was also a cultural eye-opener.

The Afghan government has asked AIL to establish a detox in the city of Herat, the country's third-largest city, located in the northwestern part of the country.

"There are so many drug addicts now in Herat. Recently it has grown so big," said Shakofa.

It is mostly men and young boys who fall victim to drug addiction, but the problem has even begun spreading among women and children, the women say.

Qudisia said the women couldn't understand why there is a drug problem in a city like Saskatoon. In Afghanistan, people turn to drugs to escape the harsh realities of the war, so they asked, "Why is there addiction in Canada? There is no war."

The first step once the women get back is to pass on what they've learned to the 480 teacher trainers currently operating in the country.

"There are so many simple ways to help people that don't cost anything that we had never seen," said Sabera, who took meticulous notes throughout the tour.

"Here we get an idea how we can adjust it and bring it back to Afghanistan."

They are encouraged by the fact that Canadians care what happens in Afghanistan.

"Our only wish is that we have peace in our country ... that we can eat our bread in peace. I feel that if this peace comes back to our country, (Canadians) will be happier too because they have tried to understand us."

Qudsia says the women are worried what will happen when NATO pulls out of the country

"They fear women's blood will be shed first because they are the ones who have been trying to get education. We do not want them to stay forever, but we do want them to stay for a while and keep training the military and the police," she said.

Sabera used a maternal metaphor to describe the state of her country.

"We are like a baby who was just born 10 years ago, and that baby was democracy. We don't want you to leave before we have grown up enough."

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