

Farmers' Forum

Farm Section

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Fostering entrepreneurial spirit in a war zone

NDSU professor served with National Guard team helping Afghans improve agribusiness

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Fargo

Cheryl Wachenheim's first session to mentor an Afghan woman about her dreams to start a dairy enterprise happened amid unusual circumstances for a business meeting.

Wachenheim wore 70 pounds of body armor and carried an automatic rifle and handgun – both standard issue for a member of the Minnesota National Guard.

The woman, Zuhra, wore the blue burqa customary for a Muslim in Zabul province, a Taliban stronghold near the border with Pakistan, the reason for the security precautions.

Wachenheim, a professor of agribusiness at North Dakota State University with a specialty in livestock, recently served as a member of an Army National Guard team to help Afghans develop their rural economy.

“Our job was to help them improve their agriculture and agribusiness,” Wachenheim said.

During her deployment, from October 2011 to September 2012, she met with Afghans to help them with agricultural ventures including small dairy operations, beekeeping and grape growing.

Her team was the third that worked with Afghans to implement better farming methods to grow the economy in a war-torn country where only one in 10 citizens can read and write.

“We introduced a lot of beehives and worked with the equivalent of their Extension Service,” said Wachenheim, who was born on a farm near Rogers, Minn., and now has a family farm near Mora, Minn.

Bees are important not only as a source of honey but to pollinate crops, including wheat, a benefit that is not commonly known in rural Afghanistan.

“The yield potential of introducing bees is enormous,”

Wachenheim said, adding it is an

example of the simple methods that can boost farm productivity.

Experts at NDSU helped provide assistance, often by interpreting photographs of crop diseases or pests and offering advice, she said.

During her 11-month assignment, she worked with Zuhra, who she will not identify by her complete



Special to The Forum

Cheryl Wachenheim, a professor of agribusiness at North Dakota State University, recently served with a Minnesota Army National Guard team helping Afghan farmers. Here she's shown in a clay hut used to dry grapes into raisins.

name because of concerns for her safety.

The woman, in her mid-20s, first planned to make yogurt from goat's milk. Then she shifted her entrepreneurial interest to supervising a network of women who sew ornamental beads on garments and blankets.

It turned out that was a crowded market, however, so now Zuhra is back working on a small dairy operation, Wachenheim said.

Freedom of movement for women in that area of Afghanistan is extremely limited, restricted to the family compound or running escorted errands with a male family member.

Despite the limitations, Zuhra and others Wachenheim worked with are enthusiastic and determined.

“The entrepreneurial spirit in Afghanistan in general is fantastic,” she said.

Zuhra was able to travel to Arizona to participate in a two-week entrepreneurial skills workshop through the auspices of Project Artemis.

The two women still maintain contact through phone conversations with help from an interpreter located in Kabul, and will keep in touch for at least two years.

“I talk to her quite a bit,” Wachenheim said.

Although Wachenheim has been an agribusiness educator for more than 20 years, 15 of them at NDSU, she learned a fundamental lesson in the importance of education while in Afghanistan.

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