



Natalie on a rooftop in Kabul with her ΑΣΑ letters.

## She learns as much as she taught during summer in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan: the country brings many thoughts to mind, but it will always have a special place in my heart. I was lucky enough to spend a month of my summer vacation doing humanitarian work in Kabul and Herat, teaching women, children and university students skills that I have been taught all of my life.

Being a history and government major at Missouri Western State University, the trip definitely fit into my field of study, as well as preparing me for graduate school in student affairs. However, it was not just education that pushed me to pursue this goal. I have friends that have visited and lived there, and their stories of the people really touched me. I felt as though I could really do some good with the Afghan people and learn a great deal about myself as well.

Deciding to go was the easy part, but finding a way to get there presented the

real challenge. Luckily I had the support of family, friends and my chapter. I obtained a position with Morning Star Development, a non-profit community and economic development organization working in Afghanistan. Then the real adventure began.

My first impression of Afghanistan was varied. I was very excited to be there and yet nervous too. When Afghanistan is reported in the news, it is usually just the bad things: bombers, oppression and war. But I saw a different Afghanistan,

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Natalie and Hannah in Chador Namez's in Herat, the third largest city in Afghanistan.



Natalie with Afghan children on the Fourth of July.



Fourth of July celebration with Afghan family and team members.

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one of beauty, wonderful people and peace.

### Teaching English

My daily activities were never the same, but usually consisted of teaching and visiting with as many people as possible. I taught elementary-aged children at the International School of Kabul, college-aged students at the Institute of Leadership Development in Herat and English to a variety of people.

The most exciting part for me was teaching at ILD, mainly because I got to use my leadership training from Missouri Western and pass on those skills to future leaders of Afghanistan. My team also visited orphanages, elementary schools, hospitals and community centers. Most of these were supported by various non-governmental organizations, including Morning Star Development.

Teaching the children was wonderful. Any foreigners are “celebrities” there, and they could not get enough out of learning from us. There was one special day in particular for me: my birthday. I taught the kids art class in summer school, and I had told them it was going to be my

birthday. Each class sang me happy birthday, and they were so excited to get to celebrate with me. Children were the best people to discuss differences in culture, and I had a great time talking about how they celebrate their own birthdays and other holidays we have in common.

The kids thought it was hilarious when I tried to speak Dari, their primary language. For the most part, they were all proficient in English, and I really wanted to learn as much as I could from them. In the end, I learned enough to be polite, but I still had a great time learning from them and sharing in part of their culture. I formed a special relationship with each of the kids, and it was hard for me to leave them all, knowing there was a good chance I would never see them again.

### A woman in an Islamic country

The biggest change and challenge while in Afghanistan was dealing with being a woman. In the news, it always appears that women are treated horribly, and they can be, however, women are also treated very chivalrously and are highly respected. Doors were always opened for me, I was always given a seat on the bus,

and men always wanted to make sure I was safe and comfortable.

Wearing the chador (a head scarf) was difficult at times (especially in the 120 degree heat!), but once I understood the purpose behind it, it was OK. A woman’s hair is special and should only be seen by her immediate family. It is part of their culture, and I was happy to be respectful of it. I am not saying that there are not problems with how women are treated, but initially, the customs came about out of respect and love.

### Returning home

Coming home created a mix of emotions for me. I was so happy to be back, to see my family and friends and be back among all of the conveniences (and air conditioning) that I was used to. But I was changed. I had seen a new world, a world not cluttered by all of the distractions Westerners deal with everyday.

Even now, less than a year later, I still do not wear a watch. Time is not important in Afghanistan. They are not schedule-based people, but relationship based.

I learned so much from the Afghan people. I went there with the goal of teaching the Afghans, but in the end, I was taught. I only wish more people could have the experience I had.

When speaking with the Afghan people, there was one thing they wanted us to bring back to the States: they wanted us to tell everyone that they love us, they are not all terrorists, and they are happy U.S. citizens are coming to their country to help them rebuild after 30+ years of war.

It was a humbling experience for me. I was looked up to there, and yet, they are my heroes. The Afghan people have survived and persevered, and in spite of all the awful things that have happened to them, they are still a loving people. It just amazes me, everyday.

View of soccer fields in Kabul.

