

# Midwifery project helps Afghan women and children

By Mary Butler

Camera Staff Writer

**D**ecorative Tajik lettering on a table at the Dushanbe Tea House drew in Jennifer Braun as she sipped hot chai there on a recent afternoon.

"I can kind of read it. I'm learning Farsi," she said referring to the widely spoken Persian language, a close relation to Tajik.

Since spending four weeks in Afghanistan this spring training women how to safely deliver babies in their homes, Braun said she's been preparing to go back.

A certified professional midwife, Braun plans to return to the war-ravaged country in October or November with another midwife to continue work initiated through a newly formed Boulder-based nonprofit, International Midwife Assistance.

On Saturday, International Midwife Assistance is hosting a free 7 p.m. event at the Boulder Public Library to share a slide show, music and discuss its Afghan Midwifery Project. The event is being held in part to thank local donors, who gave more than \$50,000 in supplies and cash to send the midwives, and to show them the fruits of their generosity.

The timing of the slide show, which marks the third anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist bombings, also stands as a reminder of how the Taliban, and military action against them, affected the Afghan people.

"Under the Taliban, midwives lost access to knowledge, infrastructure, supplies and even running water," Braun said. "Everything's been mortared."

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT** • International Midwife Assistance slide show of work in Afghanistan

**WHEN** • 7 p.m. Saturday

**WHERE** • Boulder Public Library, 1000 Canyon Boulevard, parking at 11th Street and Arapahoe Avenue, in Boulder

**COST** • Free

Braun said.

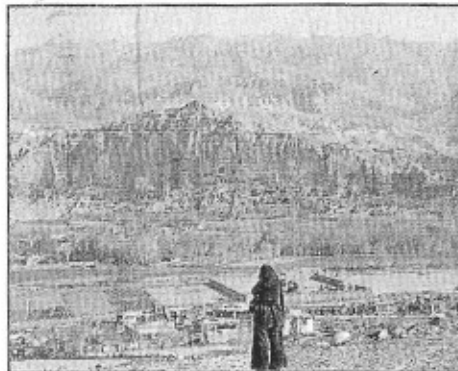
The group, which is currently seeking midwives, recently won a \$20,000 grant to continue its project.

Focusing on women's health was a natural beginning: 90 percent of deaths among women of childbearing age in the nation are caused by preventable childbirth complications.

In Afghanistan, every 30 minutes a woman dies in labor and 25 percent of children don't reach their 5th birthday, according to the World Health Organization.

Such dire facts have inspired the U.S. government to make its own attempt to help educate Afghan women, whom the Taliban kept largely illiterate.

A promise was made in August to distribute



**Carmela Weber** stands on a hill overlooking Bamiyan, Afghanistan.

Photo courtesy Carmela Weber

20,000 talking books that give basic lessons in public health such as how to make water safe to drink and how to give basic care to an infant.

But electronic books aren't quite a replacement for people, activists say.

"No disrespect to the super powers, but there's a lot of need," Braun said. "I'm a strong believer in grassroots organizing."

While not all Afghan women are fully aware of the stark statistics, it's clear they want to do a better job delivering the children of their friends and family members, Braun said.

The women the Boulder-area group visited in Kabul and Bamiyan were hungry for information, as well as clamoring for supplies such as birth control and Advil, said Carmela Weber, International Midwife Assistance's executive director.

Weber, who is a dancer and choreographer by profession, said the Afghan women — often dressed in bright blue burkas and colorful head scarves — called her "doctor," even though she didn't have the answers to their medical questions.

Everywhere the group went, Weber and Braun said, word traveled fast that they were there to help and hoards of women would show up to soak up what information was being dispensed.

The slide show is hoped to illustrate some of the need, they said.

"We want to give people a glimpse of Afghanistan," Weber said. "The photos really give a sense of the beauty of the country, the beauty of the people and of their hospitality and kindness."

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