

OU student helps with project to send medicine to Afghan mothers

By Christy Kronberg
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Ibuprofen and condoms are hard to come by in Afghanistan. In the rural province of Bamian, donations of those two products are improving the quality of life for Afghan women. Thanks to a tiny non-profit called International Midwife Assistance (IMA), an American midwife flies there every month with a large suitcase full of pain relievers and birth control.

"We are a supply line," said Jennifer Braun, the only employee of IMA and a veteran midwife. "The things that we bring are things that you cannot get over there."

Ohio University junior Jasmine Bascom is getting the community of Athens involved in that mission by coordinating supply drives at local businesses this month. Bascom is from Boulder, Colo., where IMA is based stateside.

"While I was home over break, I saw that IMA needed a list of supplies, and I thought Athens would be a good place for a drive," Bascom said. She brought her idea back to Athens, and found people were interested in her call for help.

"Under the Taliban, these women couldn't be seen by a male doctor and women couldn't be doctors," Bascom explained.

To make matters worse, women were hardly educated. The CIA's World Factbook shows that only 21 percent of Afghan females can read and write. That culture has made female health-care options bleak, a situation underlined by statistics. According to the World Factbook, the infant mortality rate there is 163 deaths per 1,000 live births. The American rate is 6.5 per 1,000.

IMA's main function is to address these issues by training Afghan women as midwives. The organization started in 2004, when villages nominated women for IMA's first



18-month training program. That class graduates this spring with 22 government-certified midwives. In April, the second class will begin.

Braun said she hopes to secure hand-held ultrasound devices to send to each of her graduates, a gift that will be invaluable for the mobile midwives. Most of the care these graduates give will be in homes, not at medical facilities.

The homes in Bamian, one of the areas most repressed by the Taliban, have no plumbing or electricity, Braun said. Cooking is done over fires. Most homes are made of adobe and straw, and some people live in caves.

"Smells are intense, and it's cold and dark," Braun said. "It's a remote Himalayan location. I got frostbite when I was there in December at an Internet café."

Braun said she plans to spend four months of each year in Afghanistan and the rest of her time managing midwives and money. She has set up a rotation of American midwives who travel to Bamian, with each staying for eight to 12 weeks at a time before being relieved by another midwife. In this way, IMA always has two professionals present to teach.

Other organizations are also training mid-

wives in Afghanistan, but Braun said what's different about IMA is their grassroots nature. "Many of the NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are unwieldy – very administration heavy," said Braun. "We deliver very direct aid, and that's unusual."

Bascom was familiar with Braun's career as a midwife, which began around the time Bascom was born, an event for which Braun was present. Braun was active professionally, serving as president of the Colorado Midwives Association for seven years and authoring

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certification programs. Though Braun has spearheaded IMA from the beginning, she only recently began receiving a full-time salary.

"I think it's a fantastic cause," said Bascom. "I'm definitely concerned about women's rights worldwide and women's health."

She's rallied a few friends to help out, including OU sophomore Natalie Lombardi, who hit the pavement to find businesses to participate.

Lombardi said her current list includes Kroger, CVS Pharmacy and Save-A-Lot, all on East State Street; Seaman's grocery store on West Union Street; and Pangaea Tea, inside the Athens Book Center. Each participating business will

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host a bin to accept donated supplies and post information on IMA.

Lombardi, who studies biology with Bascom at OU, said she plans to join the Peace Corps after college. "I was involved in a lot of volunteer projects in high school," she said, but added that she hasn't found much to get involved in since then. "This is something that I really feel strongly about."

Bascom and Lombardi are also working with the Women's Studies Feminist Underground Network (WSFUN), which will drum up support for IMA during their Ladyfest event the first weekend in March.

Once the month-long drive is through, they will ship the donations to Colorado to be packed up in suitcases, ready for the next overseas flight.

Bascom said that financial donations are also welcome. IMA relies on donations to fly the American midwives to Afghanistan and buy discounted supplies for their clinic. Financial donations should be sent to P.O. Box 916, Boulder, CO 80306-0916.