

Berlin man finds allure in helping others overseas

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Afghanistan has not fallen off Jonathan Hoffman's radar screen.

If anything, it looms ever larger in his daily consciousness. The Berlin resident is now preparing for his fourth deployment to the rugged country, one of the poorest on earth.

Hoffman previously served four brief tours of duty in Kosovo, as well. But he's not a member of the military.

A chef instructor at Essex Technical Center, Hoffman has set aside a portion of his life to helping the less fortunate in war-torn parts of the globe. Time and time again, he has set off with donations collected largely from Vermonters to dive into projects such as delivering firewood to shivering families in Kosovo, or building a school in Afghanistan for girls who had only a shade tree under which to take classes.



Hoffman, a thin, fit 46-year-old with longish dark hair, fair skin, pale blue eyes, and ever-present stubble, relishes the chance to talk about his experiences. Even when seated for an interview, he leans forward, then back, then forward again, often motioning with both hands, looking ready at any moment to spring from his seat into action.

As he prepares to leave again for Afghanistan, Hoffman worries that Americans are forgetting the desperate, long-term needs in that country, as other, new humanitarian crises arising across the globe – especially the Southeast Asia tsunami and earthquakes. A trip earlier this week by First Lady Laura Bush to Afghanistan may help put Afghanistan back on the map temporarily, but Hoffman worries about Americans' short attention span and "donor fatigue."

Hoffman is doing all he can to keep his focus. A benefit bake Friday at American Flatbread in Waitsfield for Direct Aid International will help Hoffman raise some of the additional \$6,000 he needs to add to \$4,000 already raised to build another

school in Afghanistan.

"I want to build another girls school because girls there have been at such a disadvantage," said Hoffman. "Until recently they couldn't attend school."

Hoffman began his humanitarian efforts in 1999 by working for nonprofits like the Balkan Sunflowers in Kosovo, and later the Swedish Commission for Afghanistan. In 2004, Hoffman formed his own nonprofit, Direct Aid International, in order to have more control over his projects. Since 1999, he has raised and disbursed more than \$40,000 in humanitarian aid, and spent about \$15,000 of his own for in travel and other logistical expenses.

Typically, he partners with one or two other individuals from other organizations on projects that are often solidified only after he has arrived in-country and has put his ear to the ground. With limited time, he sometimes sets up projects, signs contracts, begins work, then leaves the work to be finished under the supervision of others.

Hoffman's methods may be unconventional and seat-of-the-pants, but they get results. A well, a freshwater pipeline, a school, and a library serving communities in Afghanistan all are recent proof. Pictures, videos and diary entries from his trips can be viewed at his organization's Web site, directaidinternational.org.

Hoffman first felt the call to service some five years ago while watching television news coverage of nearly two million Croats and Kosovar Albanians fleeing persecution by the Serbs. At the time, Hoffman had several friends from that part of the world, including a girlfriend, who all got along famously even though back in their home countries, their different ethnic and religious backgrounds would have caused strife.

"My Slavic friends were all dating and marrying when, back home, they'd be fighting or even killing each other," says Hoffman. "I asked them, 'Why are you fighting each other over there, and not here?' And they said, 'Why do you think we're here, and not there?'"

Hoffman says their comment made him realize that there really was no inseparable chasm among his foreign friends that should cause them to fight. Instead, he says, throughout history, power-hungry political and religious leaders had magnified and exploited small differences to cause divisions that would benefit their agendas.

"Some of these people were reaching back 700 years into their history to find excuses to fight," says Hoffman, who has also found ancient grudges and grievances causing conflict in the Middle East.

Hoffman determined to find a way to help salve wounds and mend fences in war-

torn regions of the world, even if it meant just serving in a food line at a refugee camp in Macedonia. Searching the web for humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGO's), a group called Balkan Sunflowers caught Hoffman's eye, and he applied and was accepted as a volunteer. Hoffman was asked to report to a children's refugee camp in Tirana, Albania and he quickly scraped up about \$2,000 for airfare and expenses and set off for Albania.

One of Hoffman's first assignments in Albania was to accompany a British military unit for one day, clearing minefields near Pristina. Hoffman even helped British soldiers string wire and detonate unexploded ordinance. He was shocked to see that farmers and their families were haying in known minefields because they had no choice in order to survive.

Hoffman enjoyed meeting government officials, military personnel, and staff from other NGO's and struck up partnerships with them for projects such as a neighborhood cleanup he organized in Pristina, and his networking skills pleased his managers at the Balkan Sunflowers. He was asked to come back, and made three more visits to Kosovo under the auspices of the Balkan Sunflowers, each time paying his own airfare, and progressively exercising more independence in carrying out projects using funds raised from a network of friends back in the states.

Among Hoffman's more faithful donors have been the members of the United Church of Christ in Northfield. Hoffman was a long-time Northfield resident, and although not a church member, the church's pastor, Ed DeLong, championed Hoffman's cause after reading about Hoffman's works in the Northfield News. Hoffman does not proselytize on his trips, and he's not a fan of essential relief aid paired with religious overtures.

In December, 1999, Hoffman spent ten days in Kosovo, hiring a truck and driver and delivering firewood to needy families on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The roughly 50 people in the eight families had missed out on a larger United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) firewood distribution.

Hoffman was operating on a shoestring and scoring some success – with a little bit of failure mixed in. In a project in the summer of 2000, he bought and delivered two goats and one sheep to each of eight families in Kosovo with the goal of allowing the families to start raising livestock of their own. On a subsequent visit, the next year, he found that most of the sheep had died. But the goats were thriving, and multiplying.

"You learn to go with the flow," says Hoffman, shrugging and smiling.

While so many of Hoffman's experiences in Kosovo were positive, he became frustrated dealing with the inflexibility of some NGO's. Hoffman also became disgusted with the number of highly-paid, cloistered managers at NGO's

operating in impoverished countries.

By 2001, Hoffman was feeling as if his Kosovo work was done. International aid had been flowing into the region for years, the people of Kosovo were beginning to stand on their own feet again, and donor interest back in the states was waning.

Hoffman was busy summarizing his projects to donors when the 9/11 attacks happened.

"By November, the bells started ringing again," said Hoffman. "We sent troops into Afghanistan, but the U.N.'s World Food Program trucks were not being allowed into certain areas because of safety concerns... reporters riding donkeys were going into villages and finding no food – people were literally eating grass. My juices started flowing again. I thought this was a situation where I could be effective. I talked to friends and family about it, and by January I had started the process again. My Kosovo NGO contacts were making contacts for me in Afghanistan. Through the UNHCR, I sent project proposals to five districts in Afghanistan. Four of them mailed me back, saying, in effect, 'You've got to be kidding!' They thought it was way too risky."

One district, Ghazni, located between the capital, Kabul, and the big city to the south, Kandahar, said yes to Hoffman's proposals for a water or agriculture project. Hoffman raised \$7,500 in aid and planned to stay a month in Ghazni.

Hoffman landed in Kabul in July 2002 and was told that the UNHCR currently was not leaving the city limits due to security concerns. Instead, the UNHCR connected Hoffman with a private driver. An older gentleman in a dusty white Corolla offered to take him to Ghazni for \$100, and six hours later, after playing chicken with cargo trucks from Pakistan and dodging camel herds on an unmarked strip of dirt, Hoffman arrived safely in the city of Ghazni and was greeted warmly by strangers on the street.

"People would cross the street just to shake my hand and thank me just because it was obvious I was an American," said Hoffman. "The average person on the street appreciates what America is doing there."

U.N. officials Jeddy Numphu, a Tanzanian man, and Bettina Goislard, a French woman, helped Hoffman make crucial contacts with Afghan military officers and warlords and the Afghan intelligence agency who would provide Hoffman with bodyguards, interpreters and access to local officials. Less than two years later, Goislard was dead, murdered in Ghazni in a drive-by-shooting while she sat in her marked UNHCR vehicle.

Hoffman is well aware of the risks as he ventures into areas that larger NGOs refuse to enter over security concerns. As a single man with summers off,

Hoffman can claim more freedom to take on such risks than many men his age. He considers himself fortunate.

"Why do I do this?" says Hoffman. "I can never quite nail it down. It's not ego, and I cringe at the words 'missionary' and 'humanitarian.' It's simply, if no one else is going to do it...why not me? By comparison, I have so much, Americans have so much."

Hoffman also admits enjoying a challenge, and he likes finding creative solutions.

He also finds some unexpected rewards.

In July, 2002, in the central mountains of Afghanistan, Hoffman contracted to build a three-room girls school for \$3,500 in the village of Yakhshi, located at about 10,000 feet elevation in a rugged, arid region that looks more like Mars than Earth. When he returned the following year to Yakhshi, in a surprise welcoming ceremony for Hoffman, the 63 girls of the Yakhshi Girls School met him in front of the school and sang traditional songs through a bullhorn as several girls walked up and handed him a bouquet of flowers.

Hoffman was overwhelmed, and moved.

"You can't imagine," he says. "This kind of gesture for a foreigner, a man, by girls, in a country where traditionally contact was not even allowed in public between men and women..." Hoffman trails off, taken with emotion, and for a brief moment is at a loss for words as he stares at his hands in front of him.

Reference:

<http://www.timesargus.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2005504020372>