

Afghans cared for aid workers

May 7, 2002

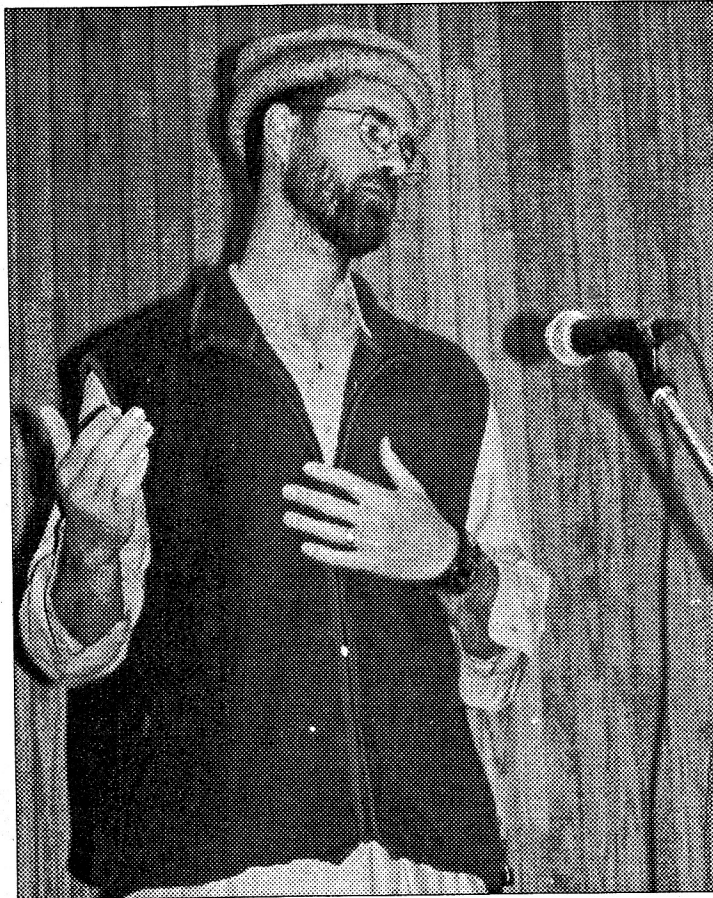
Long before there was a sniff of Sept. 11, Canadians Kirsti and David Haugen were already serving in war-torn Afghanistan. And long after the soldiers are gone, they will be there again.

For now, however, the Haugens are back in their home province, Saskatchewan (their home base is in Outlook), talking about the development work they've been doing since the mid-1990s, and about a hurting people whom they've come to love.

"We weep when we hear what happened (on Sept. 11)," David Haugen said during a stop in La Ronge on April 28, as he briefly played the part of a young Afghan man. "In Afghanistan, there is not one person who does not have someone killed.... We know what it is like, to wait and have your husband, your children not come home."

Since 1995, David has been working with the International Assistance Mission (IAM), a Christian aid and development agency dedicated to helping the Afghan people. His wife, Kirsti, joined him in 1999. IAM's work, which began approximately 35 years ago, has included providing medical care for the blind and those maimed by landmines, and helping villages with infrastructure development, such as creating a source of electricity.

The nation has suffered centuries of violence; in fact, there is an old saying that "he who returns with wealth from India or his head from Afghanistan is



David Haugen role played the part of a young Afghan during a visit by he and wife Kristi to La Ronge. The two aid workers spent years in Afghanistan before the war, and plan to return this fall.

a lucky man." Whether it be the hordes of Genghis Khan or the Soviet army, conquerors have always been drawn to Afghanistan, and generations have known only war and bloodshed. At one point in the late 1990s, the Haugens recalled, 600 rockets an hour were flying overhead in Kabul, and even now, 25 people a day are killed or injured by landmines in the region.

The Haugens, however, saw the other side of Afghanistan:

the ordinary, generous working people, who showed immense compassion both for one another and for the "foreigners" from Canada.

"Some of them are in desperate straits... (but) they were ready to give us their last chicken if we showed up," David said.

The Afghans are somewhat baffled by their guests — "They want to leave Afghanistan. Why on earth are we coming there?" — but also in-

tensely interested in them, Kirsti added. For example, during her first pregnancy, a lot of the older women were advising her to swaddle her baby very tightly, the belief being that this will make a child "grow up straighter". She ignored this well-meant advice, and was intrigued to later learn that some of the Afghan women had decided to stop binding their children, having noticed that her daughter's posture was just fine.

"They were just beautiful ladies," Kirsti said as she recalled, sometimes laughing, sometimes near tears, the women in her Afghan neighbourhood. Learning that Kirsti was far from her mother and siblings, the women's response came quickly: "You come over here and let us be your family."

"That's part of the heart of the Afghan people," Kirsti said. "They're dealing with generations and generations of bloodshed.... But each person individually is a good person."

After colleagues from another Christian organization were arrested by the Taliban for handing out Christian literature, the Haugens and the rest of the IAM group left Afghanistan in late August. However, IAM staff are gradually returning, this time with the protection of the interim government.

"(Government officials said), 'Yes, we know about IAM. Please ask them to come back,'" David said.

The Haugens will return to Afghanistan this September.

Carmen Pauls

Staff