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NATIVE DRESS: Karen Zak of Mill Valley and Zaniab Salbi, founder of Women For Women, pose in Afghan dress.

Reaching across the continents

Aid group helps women of Afghanistan recover

By Beth Ashley

IJ senior feature writer

LAST SPRING, at a talk by Barbara Kingsolver at Dominican University, Karen Zak of Mill Valley heard about the work of Women For Women International, an organization helping women in war-torn Afghanistan.

Inspired, she called the founder of Women For Women, Zainab Salbi, in Washington, D.C., and asked how she could help.

Well, Salbi said, she hoped someday to open a West Coast office of her organization, but could they talk later? At the moment she was leaving for Afghanistan.

Zak, a writer, persisted. Who, she asked, was handling publicity for Women For Women?

"We don't have anyone," Salbi replied.

"Maybe I could help you," Zak said.

The upshot was that, soon afterward, Zak herself was en route to Kabul for a two-week trip she calls "the adventure of a lifetime."

She went there with Salbi to write articles for Vogue and Oprah magazines about the plight of women in Afghanistan, and how — thanks to Women For Women — Western women are helping them.

Zak returned home late last month with tales of a city in rubble and families living in horrendous conditions,



FASHIONING NEW LIVES: Women and children struggle to make new lives in a Kabul refugee camp.

"There is no crime in Kabul at the moment, because there is nothing to steal."

— Karen Zak of Mill Valley

HOW TO HELP

For further information about Women For Women, and how you can become a sponsor, visit the Web site at www.womenforwomen.org, or call the organization's information number, 888-501-3247.

in tent camps swept by dust. "The people have nothing. Kabul is totally gone," Zak says.

She also brought tales of transformation — how women, with \$25 a month from sponsors in this country, and through twice-a-month consultations with female leaders in Afghanistan, are gaining the confidence and skills to become self-supporting members of society.

Zak visited a group of 18 women at the foot of the Hindu Kush mountains who are learning to become mid-

wives.

Other women are becoming carpenters, bread-makers and seamstresses.

Five dollars of their monthly stipend is placed in a fund that they will receive at the end of their year-long training. Groups of women, working together, are using that money to buy equipment for whatever businesses they choose to start.

Zak saw crowds of women gather outside the Women For Women offices in Kabul, responding to word in

the refugee camps that the organization was ready to help them. "We went to the camps to give them a shred of hope," Zak says.

Most of the women were clad in burkas, the head-to-toe coverings that were required by the Taliban. "They are reluctant to take them off," Zak says, "because this has been their culture for so long. They don't know who is looking, or who will be in control in the months to come. The warlords are still there."

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Karen Zak photos

RUINS: Rubble on a once-busy street shows the extent of the destruction recent wars have wrought in Kabul.

