



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017

Volume 16
Issue 1 *Spring 2007*

Article 1

Spring 2007

Planting the Seed

David Brown '96

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag>

Recommended Citation

Brown '96, David (2007) "Planting the Seed," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss1/1>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

Planting the Seed

Babylonia Marcus '02 used her talents in international trade, economics, and biology to assist Afghanistan's ailing agricultural sector.

Story by David Brown '96



Babylonia Marcus '02 in Washington, D.C., after returning from Afghanistan. Marcus was involved in a three-year program to help Afghan farmers. (Photo by Hilary Schwab)

an economy.

The landlocked country has suffered from decades of drought and war. Afghanistan's best and brightest fled the country during the 1980s while the Afghans fought the Soviets, and later, after the Taliban took over in 1996. By the time those radicals were driven from power by the U.S. military in 2001, the land was broken, the infrastructure was in tatters, and commodities trading was nearly nonexistent.

When Babylonia Marcus told her parents that her employer was sending her to Afghanistan, their response wasn't what you'd expect.

They wanted to know why she wasn't going to Iraq.

It makes more sense if you know their background. Marcus's parents are Iraqi immigrants, part of the Assyrian minority of that country. She was being sent to Afghanistan to help rebuild its infrastructure and boost its economy. Iraq, they thought, needed her help more than Afghanistan, which had faded in the news by the time she packed for Kabul in the summer of 2005.

"They wanted to know why I would go out of my way when it's my country of ancestry that needs help," says Marcus, 26, a 2002 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University.

But Iraq, for now, will have to wait.

When she called her parents in the summer of 2005, Marcus was working for Chemonics International, a Washington, D.C.-based company that carried out a \$145 million U.S. government contract to breathe life back into Afghanistan's economy, or what passed for

Enter RAMP, or the Rebuilding Afghanistan Markets Program, run by Chemonics. When the three-year program was completed in September 2006, the company — with the help of Marcus, the Afghanistan government, expatriates, and local Afghan workers — took that \$145 million of seed money and ballooned it into \$1.6 billion worth of good for the country.

And to think economics was Marcus' minor. Imagine if she'd majored in it.

Home on the range

Marcus, a Golf, Ill., native who now lives in Washington, D.C., went to Illinois Wesleyan University with plans of becoming a doctor. Biology was a passion, so it became her major.

She stuck with it, quickly taking a shine to behavioral ecology, a kind of mix between science and sociology, with a dash of chaos theory.

Her example: “If the wind blows in a certain way in a certain time of year and there’s a decrease in the population of wolves, what’s going to happen to the rabbits?”

During her junior year, the wind blew her first to D.C., then to South Africa, where, during the spring semester of 2001, she found herself working on a corporate cattle ranch in KwaZulu-Natal, formerly the Northern Province. The trip was supposed to be about science, with a focus on ecology, but economics kept creeping in.

At the ranch, cattle from low altitudes were being bred with ones from high altitudes so that their hybrid offspring could graze in more places. “I was thinking, ‘This is where I’ll see science put to use,’” Marcus says. Instead, her work was “all economics and trade-based.” She helped with feedings and upkeep of the ranch, but most of her work involved bookkeeping tasks, such as keeping track of grain consumption.

This focus on economics also crept up during the Washington, D.C., portion of her semester. While working on the U.S. Senate Committee for Environment and Public Works, she thought she’d be seeing debates on global warming. Instead, the focus of the committee at that time was on how the environment affected business and economics.



Zhari Haji Baqi uses the aid to install a new drip irrigation system for his vineyard. (RAMP/CADG)



A young Afghan boy watches over his family's flock in Parwan. (RAMP/Jason Hagen)

She caught two bugs from the experience: one from the tick-bite fever she contracted in South Africa (it was caught before it did much damage), and the other that showed her how biology could be parlayed into the realm of international trade.

Later that fall, while she was beginning her senior year at Illinois Wesleyan, terrorists' planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. No one woke up on September 12 unchanged, but for Marcus, an Iraqi-American, it crystallized her interest in biology, human behavior, trade, and her knowledge of developing countries.

The international affairs arena was calling, and it was time to move to Washington.

On to Kabul

After graduating from IWU in August 2003, Marcus began graduate school at George Washington University, working toward a master's degree in international economics. She also completed an internship at the State Department.

From there, she was hired by the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. As a desk officer, she worked as a liaison between the State Department in the U.S. and the embassies in North Africa.

It was more diplomacy than science, but the training she received while working toward her master's degree and with the State Department helped build her Middle Eastern bona fides. She studied Arabic at the American University in Beirut, Lebanon, and later passed a fluency exam. Marcus also worked in the U.S. Embassy in Rabat, Morocco.

In January 2005, she started working at Chemonics, which, simply put, "gets contracts to fix the world," Marcus says.

Despite the fact that it didn't involve Iraq, the job with RAMP had it all: Middle Eastern experience, economics and international trade, and biology.

The job was based in Washington but it meant travel to Afghanistan. For Marcus, that meant a three-month stint in RAMP's Kabul office from July to September 2005.

She wasn't too worried for her safety, since "you didn't see Afghanistan in the news too much. There weren't suicide bombings or anything. It had calmed down."

The fact that it was calmer was key. Unlike Iraq, where today's engineering achievement could be tomorrow's pile of rubble, Afghanistan was an area that desperately needed help, yet had the stability to sustain any gains that were made there.

The goal of RAMP, which was paid for by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), was to focus on reconstruction and rehabilitation, rural finance and agricultural production. The main commodities the United States and Afghans were concerned with were livestock, poultry, dried vegetables and fruit, and grapes. This not only helped the economy but provided an alternative to illegal poppy farming in rural areas.



With improved agricultural techniques, many Afghan farmers have doubled their yields of wheat. (RAMP/Jeremy Foster)

The idea was to get these areas up and running, and bring Afghanistan that much closer to taking care of itself.

Beyond that, the USAID's work became one of the top non-military priorities in the war on terrorism, according to a Sept. 22, 2005, article in *Parameters*, a publication put out by the U.S. Army War College.

"USAID is on the front lines of the dominating news stories of the day, whether engaging in reconstruction work in Afghanistan or providing tsunami relief in South Asia. This renewed prominence is not an accident," wrote Andrew S. Natsios. "On the contrary, President George W. Bush's administration has made development work a national security priority."

For Marcus, it meant "keeping the books," much like she did in South Africa. Except this time, it was out of an office in Kabul, which had some 200 workers who were Americans, Afghans, exiles who had come back home, and members of the country's agriculture ministry.

Bookkeeping was crucial as the company doled out subcontracts to local farmers and workers. For starters, they needed to ensure they weren't dealing with frauds, while also providing crystal-clear reports to people back home to show the money was being spent the right way.

The day-to-day work wasn't much different than any other office Marcus had been in. The same went for her home life, which was in a walled-off residence where she lived with three or four people at any given time.



A rural woman sun-dries tomatoes for export to European markets. (RAMP/DWC)

knows everyone.

Because of her college experience, she says, “it was easier to adapt to Kabul than anywhere else I lived. They were very similar.”

After returning from Afghanistan, she continued her work helping rebuild the country’s agricultural markets from Washington. She is now working for the International Resource Group, a D.C.-based firm that manages complex environmental, energy, and reconstruction projects for public- and private-sector clients.

She’s also waiting for her chance to go to Iraq, waiting for stability to take hold in the region so she can go to her family’s home and do some good.

It just can’t happen now.

“It’s been frustrating. The preparation in Arabic, living in a conflict zone, the experience with the State Department and the Hill, the degree in international studies — (going to Iraq) would be the next obvious step,” she says. “But it’s hell there. It would be futile.”

The commute, however, was different. No one walked. No one traveled alone in cars. Trips from home to work and back again were taken in convoys of armored vehicles. Traffic jams — where anyone might have a car bomb — were unnerving. And the landscape Marcus saw on the other side of the protected glass was bullet-ridden and broken.

Her time there included a stay in “lockdown,” which took place during elections. It meant four days staying in a safehouse with other workers, and a good bit of boredom.

“You’re on the Internet a lot. You watch a lot of DVDs. You play ping-pong,” she says. “There’s a lot of camaraderie behind it.”

She compared it to living on an island, and in a strange way, to living at IWU. Her apartment and office building in Kabul were isolated by war and devastation; Bloomington is isolated by corn. In the center is a small, pleasant community, where everyone