

U.S. companies offer mentoring to Afghani women

Key Equipment Finance donates laptops, employee to Peace through Business

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SUPERIOR — A dozen women in Afghanistan can thank Key Equipment Finance Inc. for their new laptop computers as well as inspiration and advice from a Key employee who was born their country.

Superior-based Key Equipment Finance participated in the first Peace through Business program by donating 12 laptops and allowing Zuhra Ahadi, vendor support manager for Key Government Finance Inc., to serve as a mentor. The Oklahoma City-based Women Impacting Public Policy Institute Inc. developed the program to promote business, political and economic stability in developing countries.

KeyCorp (NYSE: KEY) employs 300 in Boulder County and 1,100 worldwide in 26 countries. The Superior location is involved in leasing technology and health-care equipment, commercial vehicles and heavy machinery to small- and mid-size companies.

The "Peace through Business" program brought 12 women from Afghanistan to the United States for six weeks of business training this past August and September. The women found out about the program via e-mail from the Afghan-American Chamber of Commerce and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Terry Neese, the institute's chief executive, contacted companies and foundations for support in early 2007. Afghan women started applying for the program in September 2006. Of the 118 women who applied 20 were selected — of the 20, 12 were able to travel and participate. The women applied by answering e-mail questions.

Selection criteria involved owning a business or having a concrete idea of the type of business they wanted to start with funding. The women also had to speak English and have support from their family and business to leave Afghanistan for six weeks.

"Because this was financed through the private sector the help from the corporations and foundations were critical to the program's success," Neese said. "The laptop computers were critical to the success of the program."

Key joined other major donors like General Electric, AT&T Corp. and United Parcel Service Inc. along with several foundations. This was the first time Key donated Dell laptops. In the past the laptops were recycled for parts.

Lori Frasier, senior vice president for human resources and administration for Key National Finance in Superior, said Key could do it again if presented with another opportunity.

"We were breaking ground," she said. "Key, like any company, wants to make sure its assets were used properly."

Donating laptops isn't the only corporate philanthropy Key is involved in. The company also has a partnership with the University of Colorado's Leeds School of Business. Frasier said Key gives grants and donations to the business school and encourages employees to serve as mentors to students.

"Getting our current employees in outreach programs builds engagement between the employee and company," she said. "It's a retention tool. Engaged employees are more productive employees."

Ahadi, who was born in Afghanistan and has been in this country since 1982, served as a cultural liaison before the women arrived. She also mentored a 21-year-old Afghan woman in Chicago. The women received five weeks of business training at Northwood University in Midland, Mich. before staying with women business owners in Chicago, Oklahoma City and Midland. The women spent time with



COURTESY ZUHRA AHADI

Zuhra Ahadi, right, a vendor support manager for Key Government Finance Inc. in Superior, serves as a mentor for women in Afghanistan with the help of her employer through the Peace through Business program. She attended the Women Impacting Public Policy conference in Washington, D.C. with 12 women from Afghanistan including Hasina Rasuli, left, and Saleha Alamyar who sells handmade crafts in Kabul, Afghanistan.

nine mentors in the three cities.

"We taught them about business plans and marketing Web site development," said Terri McNally-Beals, president of Global Capital Ltd. in Illinois. "The idea is that they go back and teach other women. It's a grassroots effort to help women around the world."

McNally-Beals, who is an ambassador for the institute, is a Key Equipment Finance client.

Ahadi worked with McNally-Beals in Chicago. Saleha Alamyar, who received guidance from Ahadi, wanted to expand her seamstress store in Kabul, Afghanistan to include clients in Pakistan and other neighboring countries. "She did have experience with computers," Ahadi said. "I explained how we live here in the United States compared to Kabul."

The Afghan women ranged in age from 21 to 48. They were involved in businesses ranging from tea and beauty shops to a soccer ball factory. After the mentorship part of their stay the women traveled to Washington, D.C. to attend a conference held by the institute's sister organization — Women Impacting Public Policy. Key sponsored Ahadi's trip to Washington, D.C. where the women met Labor Department Secretary Elaine Chao in a White House reception.

The women returned to Afghanistan with their laptops loaded with software from Office Depot Inc. Neese said 20 companies and 15 individuals raised \$250,000 for the program. The money was in addition to in-kind donations like the laptops. The institute will go through the recruiting and fundraising process again in 2008 when another 10 to 15 women will be selected to come to the United States.

Neese believes corporations benefit from a project like "Peace through Business" because it's an opportunity to build democracy, free enterprise and economic development worldwide.