

Hairdressing 101

Beauty Shop in a Box project aims to make a big difference in women's lives.

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE, FREELANCE JOURNALIST



KEEP IT SIMPLE, STUPID. THE “KISS” theory sums up Debbie Rodriguez’s disaster relief and peace-keeping philosophy. Rodriguez is well known for her *New York Times* best-selling book *The Kabul Beauty School* about her adventures in post-9/11 Afghanistan teaching hairdressing to Afghan women. After five years in-country watching billion-dollar funding projects that were either duplicative, doomed or impractical (or just plain dumb), keeping it simple, stupid, is sometimes the most effective strategy, she believes.

Which is what she has done with her new charity Beauty Shop in a Box. This three-tiered setup aims to make women in developing, war-torn or post-conflict countries either self-reliant or at least able to contribute to the family’s much needed income.

“I always tell people hairdressing is the second-oldest profession,” said Rodriguez, a former hairdresser and now a California resident, during a recent trip to London. “Hairdressing gives them

an alternative to prostitution because sometimes that’s the stark choice.”

The germ of the idea started to grow a few years ago after then First Lady Laura Bush and her delegation visited the Kabul Beauty School. They looked at what hairdressers call “the kit” and one exclaimed: “It’s a beauty shop in a box.” The name stuck. And it has moved from nametag to reality. The concept has taken form since Rodriguez left Kabul just over two years ago. Beauty Shop in a Box aims to provide women with skills they can use in ways that suit their conservative cultures and lifestyles. This allows them to work from home while still looking after children and husbands, with the added benefit that it can bring self-esteem and a certain sense of normality. “Hairdressing offers options to women in countries where security is in the toilet,” she said. “Hairdressing is the gift that keeps on giving.”

Hairdressers, according to the Michigan-born redhead, never go hungry because women inevitably get dolled

up for parties, weddings, births and funerals, no matter where they are, and most have the need to feel beautiful. “They don’t stop living because there is a war,” she said, and added (referring to reported spending on a U.S. military mess hall in Iraq), “and unlike our military, it doesn’t cost \$30 million.”

It was this kind of profligacy that turned her off big-ticket projects. “What happens in post-conflict areas is that large international NGOs come in the name of peace and spend millions and millions of dollars, but what do the people get? I know in my organization 70 percent went on the rent for the building and paying for the electricity. The women got 30 percent. That wasn’t either a workable or finally acceptable formula.

“Meanwhile international staff members are paid huge salaries. They have drivers who drive big cars. They have cooks, people to open the door, people to clean. Expats live lives they could never afford in real life. The Afghans see others getting rich at their country’s expense, compounded by the fact that nothing much trickles down to them. No wonder there is resentment.”

With Beauty Shop in a Box, 90 percent of the money will go directly to the women. There are no overheads incurring costs. A local NGO that already has the needed infrastructure will distribute the kits and monitor the project. The monitor will get paid local wages. No one gets rich. “I’m amazed no one has come up with this idea, but then these kind of projects can get overlooked because they don’t ask for a million dollars.”

Several months ago the idea was tested in an Iraqi refugee camp in Jordan, and proved successful. The project involves three stages and three boxes. The first one (now available) contains dozens of essentials from scissors and curling clips to shampoo capes—a huge hit with the women—and mannequins. In the future, there will also be a training videos dubbed in either Arabic, Farsi, Dari or Pashto teaching the most basic level of cutting and styling along with a solar-powered DVD player. The cost is around \$500—all covered through charitable donations.

Instead of importing expensive and difficult to obtain products, the box ▶

teaches the women how to use what they have in their country: how they can go to the market to find combs; how to make wax mixing sugar, lemon and water; and how to do hair without electricity. “Do you know how easy it is to blow a generator with a hair dryer?” asked Rodriguez.

If the woman shows interest, has kept her tools and not sold them on the black market, she will progress to box two and then box three. If she shows promise and initiative, Beauty Shop in a Box will help the successful candidate to get a microfinance loan to set up her own shop—possibly and probably in her home.

In the five years that Rodriguez lived in Kabul, she trained 200 women. Her goal is to train 200 women a year. Rodriguez wants the women involved ultimately to be responsible for themselves, a lesson learned from experience in Afghanistan.

In male-dominated cultures women tread a very fine line. With this project women can work from home, eliminating the need for them to travel outside,


which can often be dangerous if there are riots and can put them at risk of opposition if they live in extremely conservative areas where being employed can also make them targets. If a man is “shamed” because he cannot provide for the family and a woman in the family has to work as a result, he can cover it up by saying his wife only does one or two haircuts for friends. “A lot of men felt shamed by having to depend on women,” said Rodriguez.

One lesson she taught the women at the school in Kabul was to always keep a little money for themselves to give them a little room to maneuver, for example, if they wanted to buy a present for their children and their husbands said no. The Afghan women at the salon would often tell the men that Debbie had bought them something—like an electric fan they had wanted—so that the men then couldn’t say anything or take the gift away.

In Afghanistan, one reason the Taliban can successfully recruit young men is because they offer jobs. Men need an income to support their fam-

ily. “They don’t always join the Taliban because they are fanatics, but for economic reasons. If women can earn money so that their children don’t have to go onto the streets and beg or sell cheap plastic bags and they can stay in school instead, because education is key to improving society, if that happens, the men too might have an option, and we may move another step in the right direction.”

“I tried to fill my school with Uzbeks, Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras, as well as with women from all walks of life because it reflected society,” said Rodriguez. “The same problems we had in the schools—the Hazaras felt walked all over, the Uzbeks and the Pashtuns fought one another—were the ones mirrored in the country as a whole. Yet regardless of where the women came from, they are the anchors of their families, and giving them a small opportunity like this could cause a trickle-down effect that helps children stay in school, keeps men from turning to fundamentalism and slowly builds a bridge. If the women are happy, the men are happy too.” **MD**



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