

Sharing losses: New York and Afghan survivors

by [Jeff Schogol](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

When she was ten years old, Deora Bodley was in a play called *Compukids* in which she sang a song written by her father: "My daddy always said / when he'd put me down to bed: / Rest easy, little one, and don't you cry. / For there's nothing there, you see, / that can harm you, trust in me." The song, "Ceiling-Sky," with words by Jeff Mooring, appears on a Web site celebrating Deora Bodley's life. She died when United flight 93 crashed in Pennsylvania on September 11. She was 20, and a junior at Santa Clara University.

Her father, Derrill Bodley, had no interest in military retaliation after the attacks. "My first reaction was: I couldn't change what happened. So I had to figure out what would be the right thing to do after that."

In January, Bodley, who teaches music at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, visited Afghanistan on a trip planned to allow Americans who lost loved ones on September 11 to meet Afghans who lost relatives in American bombing raids. The trip was arranged by Global Exchange, a San Francisco-based human-rights advocacy group. Medea Benjamin, founding director of the organization, said in a telephone interview that the trip was designed to show that Americans who lost relatives on September 11 were concerned about Afghan civilians mistakenly killed or hurt in U.S. bombing attacks.

Bodley was joined by his stepdaughter, Eva Rupp, who said her first reaction to the terrorist attacks was "just utter shock at the fact that there was so much hate in the world."

Rupp, who lives in Washington, D.C., had known Deora Bodley since preschool days. She said that after seeing how hate allowed the hijackers to murder thousands of people, she tried to stop the desire for revenge from consuming her. "The only weapon against that type of hate is love."

Deora Bodley had worked with underprivileged children and children afflicted with AIDS, said Rupp, so going to Afghanistan was a way to accomplish something Deora held dear: helping people in a time of need. “I thought by going there, we could honor her memory in a way that made sense to us.”

Rupp said she has had mixed emotions about the U.S. bombing campaign of Afghanistan. On the one hand, it did remove the Taliban from power. On the other hand, she met civilians whose relatives were killed by U.S. bombs.

“There was a woman who lost her five-year-old girl. This woman was incredibly devastated. She couldn’t stop crying.” Still, the woman was grateful that American forces had gotten rid of the Taliban. “It blows my mind,” Rupp said of the encounter. “Did we do the right thing or not?”

A study by the Project on Defense Alternatives claims that 1,000 to 1,300 Afghan civilians have been killed by U.S. bombs. A University of New Hampshire study states that between 3,000 and 3,500 Afghan civilians have died because of U.S. bombardment. Pentagon spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Dave Lapan said there is no way to accurately measure the number of Afghans mistakenly killed by U.S. bombs. “It’s particularly difficult in a country where allegiances shift so quickly,” Lapan said.

Benjamin said it’s not as difficult as the Pentagon claims. “It’s been very obvious in the cases I have seen. I’ve met dozens and dozens of people who were obviously living in residential areas—so the bombs were off-target. I’ve also seen numerous cases of children injured by U.S. cluster bombs.”

Every U.S. cluster bomb contains more than 200 bomblets, which often don’t explode on contact and remain lethal after the shooting stops, she noted.

Benjamin said the dead aren’t the only casualties of the bombing. On the first day of the exchange to Afghanistan, the group went into a neighborhood near the Kabul airport that had been bombed by mistake.

“We met a family which has a six-year-old boy who has stopped talking and walking,” Benjamin recalled. “He had reverted to an infantile state the day the bombs hit. He had to be carried around.”

Kelly Campbell, who lost her brother-in-law in the terrorist attack on the Pentagon, was among those who made the trip to Afghanistan. She says she was struck by the

way Afghans who suffered from the U.S. bombing felt an instant connection with families grieving the loss of loved ones in the September 11 attacks.

“Here were these people who didn’t know how they were going to feed their kids tomorrow expressing so much sympathy for us.” She said the Afghans told the American families, “Your loss is our loss.”

“What really touched me,” said Bodley, “was to look in the eyes of a mother who had lost her 20-year-old son, who was the breadwinner. The father was dead and gone from some other conflict. Now she was without financial resources.” The two knew exactly how the other felt, but they could only connect with their eyes. Gestures of intimacy between men and women who are not married to each other are discouraged in Afghan society. “You can’t hug a woman in that culture.”

Bodley and Campbell say they did not encounter any animosity toward the U.S., but the people they met were expecting the U.S. to help them. So far, Campbell noted, the U.S. has not done very much.

She said one woman who lost her husband and five of her eight children when a bomb went astray had her English-speaking neighbor write a letter to the U.S. Embassy explaining that she knew the bombing was a mistake, and that she needed help. Campbell said the woman was turned away from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul when she tried to deliver the letter.

American families delivered her letter and other requests from Afghans asking for assistance, Campbell said. Benjamin said the Afghans constantly told her they felt the U.S. had abandoned them after the Soviet withdrawal in February of 1989. They pleaded for America not to abandon them again. Added Benjamin: “If nothing else, for our own safety in our war on terrorism, we have to prove to the [Afghan] people that we won’t abandon them. We are committed to making their lives better so the land won’t be a breeding ground for terrorism.”