

HOW I GOT THERE | *Tales From the Career Ladder*

A Well-Traveled Life Leads to Kabul

BY TODDI GUTNER

Jonathan Bartolozzi spent his childhood in Italy, Britain and Brazil—and now calls Afghanistan home. He started a career in international aid work as a Peace Corps volunteer after college. Now 28 years old, he runs the Afghanistan relief efforts for Umcors, the humanitarian aid organization of the United Methodist Church.

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Q: You had a very international upbringing.

A: My mother is American, my father is Italian, so I have dual citizenship.

He worked for the Italian company Fiat and sought out international postings. We moved to London after elementary school, then to Brazil where I finished high school.

Q: How did you get interested in nonprofit relief work?

A: I had studied abroad in Chile and had gone to high school in Brazil, which exposed me to some of the challenges that people in developing countries face. I was determined to work in a developing country and be part of the change taking place there.

Q: How did you end up in the Peace Corps, and where were you sent?

A: After I graduated from college, I knew I wanted to get into the nonprofit sector internationally. I found out about Peace Corps and decided that it was my ticket to gaining some more experience in the field. I stayed in Kyrgyzstan [in Central Asia] as a Peace Corps volunteer for three years and haven't looked back since.

Q: How did you end up in Kabul?

A: I actually volunteered to come to Kabul. Not only did I [come] voluntarily, I proactively sought out job opportunities in Afghanistan.



Jonathan Bartolozzi in Kabul

Q: When did you start working at Umcors, and how did you get the job?

A: I began working for Umcors-Afghanistan in July of 2008 as program manager. The job was posted online. After a phone interview and an in-person interview I was offered the job. I was in charge of a program where I met with the local leaders, made sure that the work went smoothly and that nobody was unhappy with the work.

After a couple months the head of mission left Afghanistan and I was asked to step into the position in an interim role. Six months later I was asked to stay on as head of mission.

Q: What do you do?

A: I manage the programs, make sure that we are doing what we told our donors we would do and that we are doing it well. I also write new proposals for future programs and manage the day-to-day office headaches. I meet with donors and partners to see what direction things are going and plan for the future.

Q: How does your family feel about your decision to

work in a place that many people consider dangerous?

A: When I first came to Kabul they were all terribly worried. I have tried to reassure them that Kabul is not a very dangerous place.

Q: Do you feel safe in Kabul?

A: When I first arrived there were a few high-profile events targeting foreigners that had me wondering about how safe life in Kabul really was, but I have learned where the risks lie. Now that I have spent almost a year living in Kabul, I can safely say that I feel safe. Not 100% safe of course, but neither did I feel 100% safe living in Washington, D.C.

Q: Do you ever get overwhelmed by the nature of your work?

A: I chose this field because it brings me personal satisfaction and I enjoy it. Of course, sometimes things don't work out the way you plan... that is the nature of work in countries like Afghanistan or Sudan where you are not sure what will happen tomorrow. But I think the great challenges are what makes it fun and rewarding.

Q: Are there any other locations or non-profits where you would like to work?

A: For me there is something special about Afghanistan and Central Asia, so I am certain that I will keep returning here. That being said, changing location and being able to take your experience in one country to another context is invaluable in this field.

Q: How often do you get back home to visit your family?

A: My parents are in Italy, my sister is in Boston. I usually try to see them twice a year... for our family that's normal and it's been happening since I was 18 and went off to university.