

Oct. 30 - Dec.1, 2006

Iran

Hello everyone

Here I go with another one of those travelogues. This trip like the trip earlier this year is going to be long; hopefully I will be able to share with you some mental snapshots and impressions of a country few of us will ever have the opportunity to visit, at least for now.

Why Iran?

For those of you who don't know about what is happening here with the Narcotics Anonymous fellowship I will give you a brief synopsis.

NA has been in Iran for a number of years. We knew it was growing but we had no real idea how much, we could see progress in the number of translations of the literature and we knew they had a working service structure in place. Although there's been quite a bit of activity in the Middle East for some reason Iran seemed to be quieter than the rest of the communities.

About 4 years ago the Iranians wrote a letter to WSO asking for some guidance on the traditions, The President of Iran wanted to recognize and give the NA fellowship an award for the best NGO (non governmental organization). The members were concerned that this might violate the traditions. We assured them so long as it was accepted on behalf of Narcotics Anonymous it was ok. But what really got our attention was they said the president was going to do this at one of their conventions and they were expecting 14,000 members to be in attendance. That's bigger than the largest regional convention in the USA. We thought surely they are exaggerating. But shortly after we saw photographs of a sports arena filled to capacity.

Since then the WSO communication with Iran increased and we sent two members of the World board who live in Europe to Tehran to see first hand what was up. They came back with a report and photos that were astonishing, exciting and really pretty mind boggling.

The fellowship has upwards to 80,000 members and new meetings starting every month. Hopefully before this trip is over I will be able to give you some estimates on the number of groups and how many cities have NA meetings.

In order to provide services and distribution of our Literature and merchandize we have opened a branch office of the WSO in Tehran and have hired staff. Fortunately the members in Iran have an abundance of well qualified members who we could choose from to head up the operations..

I am going to be traveling with Anthony and Becky our executive director and assistant executive director, two more members from our world board, Piet from Sweden and Tonia from

Greece will be joining us along the way. It's going to be a fabulous team and from what we understand the fellowship is excited about our visit, we were told our arrival date and time is kept a secret because if it got out there would be several hundred members at the airport to greet us at 2:30 in the morning.

What we will be doing is holding workshops throughout Iran and meeting with as many of the areas as we can, we will be doing some PR work with various government and non-government agencies and completing some of the legal requirements as well as contracts with local vendors etc.

Our schedule is going to be aggressive to say the least, I am sure we are going to be asked to speak a lot; the typical meetings are two to three hundred members. We will be crisscrossing the country for the next 27 days and then fly to Dubai to do another set of workshops after we leave Iran. I should be home by Dec. 1st

Email might be difficult, the Iranian government filters the Internet which will make it hard to just go online and send these updates out. I usually use AOL but will have to use my @gmail.com account to send this off in the future. So keep us in your prayers for the work we will be doing. I have no apprehensions for our safety, I believe we will be well taken care of and very welcomed. It's kind of nice to be able to put a positive spin on Iran, as I said on my last trip "the people the people" and I am so grateful our traditions keep us out of politics and religion. Love Tom

Arrived at 3:00 AM, customs and immigration was pleasant, we were greeted with sincere smiles, Siamak and four other members were there to greet us, bless them they stayed up so late.. Siamak is our office manager in Iran and just a sweet heart of a man. They have been busy, busy, busy, making arrangements for us.

Tehran is huge, the city at 3:00 AM was still bustling, during the day the traffic is as bad as it can get, a cross city trip can take two hours.

The flight was packed; it felt good to get comfortable with the Iranians. I hate to say it but the media crap we get sets us up to be paranoid. Of course the announcements upon arrival that the Iranian government requires all women to cover their heads with scarves upon arrival let me know I am definitely about to enter a new culture with mandatory customs. But this is the world we live in, neither good nor bad and like our traditions we neither endorse nor oppose.

Visiting the new WSO Iran office was fabulous. The atmosphere had a wonderful peaceful orderly energy to it, everyone who works there was just full of smiles and so happy we were there, also so proud. and they should be.

Next we visited the NA central office (RSO) for Iran. The entire Regional service committee was there to greet and hug us, they toured us about the office and eventually we sat down for a

lengthy meeting on some of the real pressing issues that they hoped we would have some guidance on. Then we ate. They cooked a traditional meal called Kubiann (my spelling is probably wrong)

We leave for Mashhad by plane today and do two days of work shops before heading back to Tehran for a series of workshops and meetings. I will chime back in when I have Internet access again love Tom

Update 2

"and may nothing ever take it from you"

I have to be one of the luckiest people in the world to have this experience; we arrived in Mashhad, greeted at the airport by 15 members. Again they said our arrival time was a secret as several hundred members would have shown up. This all sounded a little exaggerated but then we were told they were going to have a meeting tonight and wanted us to be the speakers. We parked a block or so from the meeting and were told we have to wait in the car until 9:00. Then they drove us through a maze of cars and into a huge auditorium where there were over 3000 members sitting on the floor a big banner at the back room that said welcome NA world services we love you. It was just amazing. I didn't feel overwhelmed but more humbled by the spirit by which they were all there.

We all shared for about 20-30 minutes each with interpreters. You could hear a pin drop in the room they were so quiet and attentive. We were told if they had more time to plan there would have been several thousand more, but to expect that in next city's we visit as word gets out.

It's absolutely astonishing.

There were several rows of woman in the back of the room, Becky shared as a woman with 27 years clean, and you can only imagine the impact that had. When we spoke and said how long we were clean they all chanted out something in Farsi that I later found out meant "and may nothing ever take it from you"

As the meeting closed we were told we would have to be whisked out of the auditorium as we will be (lovingly) mobbed by the members, everyone wanting to hug us and have their pictures taken, it would of taken hours and could be a bit dangerous for us and the crowd its self. For NA that is bazaar to even think we could be treated like that but we were told to forget it, the fellowship is going to want us to be special and they are going to treat us like rock stars weather we like it or not. This only tells me how important their connection to the rest of NA is to them,

we are symbolic of their Unity to NA as a whole and to have members from their world services and the United States is huge for them. For them to see members with 27, 28, and 37 years clean shows what they can look forward to, These are times when you just have to accept that our higher power is going to use us in a temporary role that might feel awkward but is a role you have to accept.

The next day we conducted the first of a series of work shops that we will be doing all month through out Iran, there were 215 members from the Mashhad Area, all of them were Group Service Representatives or Area and Metro committee members. I have been to a lot of workshop in NA and pretty much know the challenges of keeping a roomful of addicts focused. Many times a third of the room will have faded off halfway through the day. These guys were amazing, they were so into it. I was surprised at the grasp they have on the principles and the service structure and how quickly they adapted to the tools we utilize in these workshops.

Even with 200 members it is a bit over whelming when they get a chance to get up close, everyone wants to hug you kiss you on the cheek or neck, they absolutely swam you, some grabbing at your arms some pulling you, everyone wanting to get their photograph with you or get you to sign their books. They didn't want a recovery greeting in their books they just wanted a large sweeping signature that really was like a scribble. This is their culture and this is what makes them happy and is important to them. I feel a little weird reporting it as I know some of you are going to think (What the F). What ever happened to humble anonymous service? I can only assure this is just as weird for us. The energy can suck you dry, and by the time we hit our hotels we are wiped out, and this is only day four.

Tonight we get back into Tehran at midnight, probably get to bed at one or two AM, then we start a series of meetings with various Iranian health and addiction agencies beginning at 8:30 AM and this will go on for two days. On the 7th Anthony and I will travel to Qom, (the Islamic equivalent of the Catholic Vatican. As a woman Becky is urged not to go. We will do a workshop there. On the 8th more PR meetings, then a series of workshops in Tehran with the local fellowship.

Before we left Mashhad we went to a Bazaar, as we were driving through the streets we would see groups of students marching with flags and banners, Siamak told us they were celebrating the Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution and the over throw of the American Embassy 27 years ago.

For some reason I assumed there more Americans in Iran for various reasons like business or other NGO's but the reality is we could very well be three of the only Americans in Iran.

I asked if maybe I blended in, I was assured I didn't. But here is the feeling you get here, We have only been greeted with kindness, smiles, friendly glances and in some occasions people

from the streets going out of their way to assist us and once they know we are Americans they welcome us and hope we have a pleasant stay. The Iranian people are some of the warmest sweetest people I have ever met.

The work shop with the doctors and health providers was very productive, Anthony did a great presentation about our fellowship and we fielded various question that pertinent to this group of professionals but not that unusual as to the questions we would receive any where else. The purpose and theme of the workshop was to build cooperative relationships with these professionals and the local NA fellowship. After our presentation we had round table discussions that comprised of the doctors and the local public relations committee (PI) member's .It was fabulous to see them all working together.

None of this would be possible with out the relationship the Iranian fellowship has had with the Iranian National Center for Addiction Studies and the doctors and administrators who have befriended us.

I will check back in a few days,,,,,,,,,,,,,love tom

Update 3

"YOU ARE MY BELIEF"

Yesterday Anthony and I went to Qom. It was suggested that Becky did not come as she might draw too much attention. Qom is the most important place for Shiite Muslims. It is supposed be considered the Vatican of the Shiites. We drove there early in the morning and were met with 400 members. The workshop was supposed to be 200 but many of the members just came, we worked it out although that is a huge group to facilitate, the enthusiasm was wonderful, many of them were just happy they could meet members of their world services. At one point a very large man came up to me and hugged me and looked me straight in the eye and said "you are my belief." I can not begin to tell you what it feels like to have someone with such deep sincerity place their love for the fellowship of Narcotics Anonymous on you like that. You know it's not about you and yet you're the channel they want to express this though.

It was a long day and we had a long drive back to Tehran, exhausted I hit the bed, up at 6:00 AM to get ready to facilitate another series of workshops with a group of doctors and the local

fellowship PR/PI committee. It was a great success and the beginning of a cooperative relationship between these professionals and the NA fellowship in Iran.

Tomorrow we will do a series of workshops with the Tehran Area and the following day we have 3 Areas coming into Tehran from different parts of the country where we won't be able to go because of time restraints. Some how we have been able to keep up with the pace and stay present. Our hotel is comfortable and we have Wi-Fi, cant ask for more.

The Tehran workshops were different than Mashhad and Qom. I suspect it's going to be that way as we travel; each Area has its own personality. Tehran tended to be looser and a little wilder, I could joke around more and they would get it, the workshop was held in south Tehran, which would be like Venice, California or lower Manhattan NYC, my kind of people. Both workshops had close to 400 members.

The streets were crazy, and the traffic actually was worse, I could spend a page describing what the traffic is like here, all I can say is buckle up and know God is in charge, the exhaust is over whelming and you pretty much have to keep your windows up, we came up along side of a truck yesterday and as he turned his exhaust pipe was pointing straight at us, he hit the gas and blew a cloud of smoke straight into our car. It was so thick you couldn't see. Traffic comes from every direction, up one way streets in the opposite ways in the roundabouts, left hand turns from right hand lanes, u-turns where ever and when ever you want. Everyone drives aggressively but they don't seem too pissed off. Its life in Tehran.

The Workshops in Tehran were held at a state run Orphanage. As I have said I don't know that much about the Islamic culture but from what I was told they provide wonderful social services, I guess the workshops we had with the doctors would be a good indication of how much they care.

But I got to meet all the children, they were just gorgeous, I showed them some magic tricks and they were thrilled, they all put their hands to their hearts and said "Salome Tom" as I left, I got a few good pictures that I will cherish.

Anthony left last night, I think he was looking forward to getting back home and tending to the office, also he and Bea celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary two days ago so and he was feeling bad he was not there.

Becky and I will leave for the Caspian Sea Area today with Siamak and translators and helpers, you would not believe how much support we have had putting on these workshops, how completely organized and efficient they are. These guys are serious about being in service. So far we have work shopped and trained over 1000 trusted servants and got them to address the issues that most affect them and come up with solutions and strategies that will work best for them.

They are very smart and once they get it they take off with it. It's really a joy to see it happen. This is NA money at work, it's the seventh tradition and the twelfth Step in action. We should all be proud at what NA is doing through Narcotics Anonymous World Services.

We do a lot straw polls to get an idea of what is working or not working with these Areas, when do the section on Sponsorship we ask how many have a sponsor? The response is nearly 100% the same with how many are sponsors, you have to realize this is a fellowship that is really only 14 - 16 years old and most of the members at these workshops are 1 to 6 years clean, when asked how many sponsor 5 people about half the room raises their hands, about a third sponsor 10 and a hand full more will sponsor 15 and more. Those are some significant stats compared to what we would see with the same polls taken in most US communities.

Not sure what the Internet connections will be like in the next couple of days so I am going to send this off now. I have received so many responses from these little updates from members I have never met that have had these forwarded to them and I want to say thanks for all the prayers and support, we appreciate it. I am glad to be able to do it, I know this is the kind of stuff our fellowship loves to know about and it's my hope that they will know this is their work being done that those of us on this travel team are but representatives of Our Primary Purpose and Our Vision Statement.

Update 4

Day 13

We are by the Caspian Sea, just finished a 7 hour workshop in a city I can't pronounce let alone spell, the location was definitely an inner city experience, and again it was packed, at least 350 or more people. These workshops have been held on weekdays, workdays for these guys and yet they come and they stay until it's all done. I can't tell you how much I love these people, Polite, my god, thoughtful, you wouldn't believe how considerate they are, I believe this is the way Iranian's are. It's an old old old culture and there are some very beautiful things about it.

So we are by the Caspian Sea, I didn't know but it's really a salt water lake, the biggest in the world and it borders five other countries including Russia. The drive to here took 5 hours and was breathtaking, up over a snow covered mountain range and across a massive dam the feeds all of Tehran, the dam and the roads were quite an engineering feat. Again the driving and the traffic had me puckering at both ends. They will pass on blind turns, and over come 5 cars at a time to pass with on coming traffic, the roads were so narrow at places with sheer cliffs. It takes over three hours to get through the pass and an accident would shut this pass down for the day.

-----I forgot to mention that Anthony and I had gone to famous mosque and shine while we were in Mashhad last week, I don't believe I have ever seen anything as beautiful. I have seen a lot of beautiful things, this was really pretty indescribable. The whole mosque covered at least one square mile, we got there about an hour before the call to prayer. They were rolling huge Persian carpet out over the marble floors, I am talking hundreds of carpets, thousands of people, families and old people were pouring in from all directions. We didn't get to see how the call went because as soon as the sun set you couldn't move and we would have been stuck there for a long time. The out side was just gorgeous, towering domes made of pure gold, beautiful ceramics and marble inlays everywhere. Going inside the mosque was like entering another world, of course no photographing was allowed and one would have to have their head examined to even think of treating that place with anything other than with the up most reverence and respect.

I felt a little uneasy being there like I had no business there, we moved through crowds of people praying and doing their rituals kissing doors as they passed through, touching things in ways you knew were meaningful to them, there was one room where there was a tomb, it was the tomb of the Imam Resa, the eighth of the Shiite Imams of which the mosque and shrine was dedicated and build for. I don't know that much about Islam, but from was explained to me Mohammed had only one daughter and no sons, the daughter got married to Alli who was Mohammed's cousin, they had 12 sons, of which one mysteriously disappeared, they believe he was brought to Heaven much like what Christianity believes happened to Jesus and He will one day return. (I hope I didn't mess this description up, please for give me anyone who is Muslim if I didn't get it exactly right) As each one of the Sons died a holy place was built in their honor, many Muslims believe that at these shrines miracles happen all the time, people will bring their sick and dying their afflicted and blind and they would get as close to this tomb as they could and stay as long as they could. There are tons of stories about people being miraculously cured. We didn't get very close to the tomb as it was mobbed with people climbing the gates hollering prayers and throwing money into the tomb, it was pretty wild and chaotic for our standards.

All the time we were walking through the mosque no ever one looked up at us and stared, you sort of knew they knew who you were, but you never got the feeling that they resented you being there. Anthony is a big black man and me a white balding Irish guy, we definitely stood out. This was not a tourist spot and it is unusual for westerners to be there. We were with five NA members. I really wish I could describe what it looked like in there, the ceilings and walls floors and everything, I have been to the Vatican and many great cathedrals, Buddhist and Hindu temples and none of it comes close to this. I can only imagine what some of the other great shrines in Islam are like. I feel sort of dumb as a westerner not really haven known any of this.

As we were walking through the mosque we ran into an NA member who was from the Caspian Sea area and visiting Mashhad, he had come to the shrine to pray. It seems every where we go we were running into NA members. The bazaars the airports on the streets.

One of the members in Tehran was telling us before he found NA he tried everything to stop using. He had walked all the way to Mashhad four different times in hopes of a healing from his addiction, it would take him 10 days by foot, It is supposed to be common for Muslims to do things like this, it is their belief that they would receive a miracle. I asked him if he brought any drugs with him for the trip and said "of course, what you think? I would be going through withdrawals on the road?" We all laughed.

When we got to the Caspian sea the members that lived there told us that the member we had run into at the mosque in Mashhad had gone to the tomb, he saw a young man tied to the tomb with ropes and two large men guarding him so he wouldn't run away, when asked why he was tied to the tomb they told him his parents had him brought there in hope that a miracle would happen and he would be free from his drug addiction, the NA member talked to him and ended up bringing him to an NA meeting. As of this date he has 7 days clean.

NA is where Miracles happen everyday!

We are back in Tehran, Piet from Sweden is here at the hotel, so we have another member of the world board with us, He will be with us for the next ten days, Tonia from Greese will be here in a few days, she is also a member of the world board and she and Becky will be doing some workshops for the woman. There is usually a dozen or more woman at all the workshops, it seems after a while they loosen up with us and you start to get the feeling that under the veil an addict is an addict is an addict. But Islamic law is tough on them and they have a rough rode. Becky did one workshop in Mashhad for the woman while Anthony and I went to the mosque and she said there were over 70 women there. At one time I heard an estimate of about 2,500 women in NA in Iran. There is an increasing move to segregate for woman to have their own meetings.

Tomorrow was supposed to be our first day off in 14 days. But an appointment with the United Nations Drug Control office in Tehran has been arranged for us, we can't very well say no. So we will see how that goes tomorrow, I am sure its going to be a meet and greet visit and another opportunity to connect NA's name to some of the people who can open doors for us.

Update 5

From the October Issue of the NAWAY magazine

"My name is Habib and I am an addict. Greetings to all the addicts at the Central Prison of Qazvin, and to all NA groups around the world.

"I am writing this letter as I pass the final moments of my life. I am very close to death. I wish to send a message to all fellow members: I got clean through a Narcotics Anonymous meeting in jail, and through attending these meetings, I stopped using drugs in jail. I have become very close to God. I feel good, and I am at peace with myself and the world. I have accepted the will of God.

I'd like to ask you fellows to stay clean and be of service. Try to help other addicts stay clean physically, mentally and spiritually. Please continue this path to save other addicts. I have nothing else to say. My name is Habib, and by dawn my life will end. I will be hanged for the crimes I committed, but I have been clean for eighty-four days beside you I wish success for all addicts . . . members and non-members. God bless."

Habib, Qazvin, Iran.

Several members who read that article asked me if I could find out about Habib? I am sorry to report he was executed three months ago.

We leave tomorrow for Isfahan and will do another workshop there. I thought I might give you some details about exactly what we are doing in these workshops. Prior to coming the WSO asked the Iranian Region what issues was pertinent to them? What did they want to discuss? How can we be helpful?

So we basically structured the topics of the workshops around the input we received from them. They of course wanted to know about NAWA (narcotics anonymous world services) their WSO, their world board and their World service conference, we brought some video that shows snapshots of the fellowship from all over the world, they got to see their brother and sister addicts celebrating, I looked at them while they are watching and see their faces light up. For most of them this is the first time they have had any real connection with NA out side of their country, suddenly their world expanded. When the snap shot of Iran comes on they applaud as

they realize that they are one with us. They made up posters for the workshop with the Hawaii world convention theme " One fellowship Many friends" Way cool.

We then give details about the WSO, the staff and our three branch offices, we tell them where the money comes from that supports the services of WSO and the WSC. (88% from the sale of literature, 11% from direct donations and 1% comes from interest on misc. investments.) When we tell them the fellowship through the conference gives away about 500,000 in free literature every year they start to get the picture of how important the seventh tradition is. In my opinion it is really no more than an extension of our twelfth step.

Then we facilitate a discussion on what is working and what isn't working in their service structure, they form circles of 15- 20 members and write down their ideas, we then have them prioritize the two most important ideas and have each circle give us their two ideas as we write them on a big poster paper in English and Farsi. When we are finished collecting the ideas we tally up the ones that got the most hits and can pretty much tell them what they believe are the most important issues and solutions are that they need to work on. What is even more useful than us walking them through this process is we teach them how to use this tool in their own workshops. Everyone gets to participate and they love that. They are quick and smart and will put this to use right away

We do the same thing with the IDT's (Issue discussion topics) building strong home groups and keeping an atmosphere of recovery in our meeting.

The discussion we had on the seventh tradition is very interesting, they do no fundraising, nor do they tack on a profit from their events or conventions. Much of their funds come from their direct contributions and the sale of the literature and other recovery related materials. They definitely have issues with the fund flow, groups hanging on to money or the money getting hung up in the metro, area or literature committee. But it's been very interesting to me that they come closer to fulfilling the spirit of the seventh tradition than anywhere else that I seen. It's my hope they become the first community in NA that is totally self supporting through the basket. What a concept.....!

Later we have a larger discussion on Sponsorship and end the workshop with a lengthy question and answer period, that range from questions on sex, members of NGO's who are also NA members, lots on working the steps, traditions and concepts and on and on. It's an 8 hour workshop and we are wiped out by the time its over. At each break they crowd in wanting pictures and hugs. It gets overwhelming and means we get no breaks. But they are unbelievable, almost no one leaves, the room is packed to the end and they not only do this on a work day but hey also pay to attend the workshop, which covers their lunch and teas and on top of that they have to turn away lots of members because their just isn't enough space. ManOman these guys are serious about serving NA.

We are going to be on the road for the next 8 days and I have no idea if we will have Internet access at the hotels we will be staying at. But I will do my best to keep these up dates coming.

Update 6

I finally got to attend a regular NA meeting in Tehran, and a small one to boot. One hundred and fifty members, all men. That is considered small here. There was no way Piet and I could of just slipped in and attended like any other member, we had to be the speakers, but the meeting lasted two hours and we did our thing in less than an hour so we were able to hear from a few of the other members, the meeting was held in sort of mosque, the reason I say sort of was because everyone entered with their shoes off and we sat on the floor in a huge empty room layered with carpets. There were big pictures of religious leaders on the walls but the building its self wasn't ornate.

They do some things very different, when they give out the 30-60-90-to one year key tags the person who stands up is met by his sponsor who gives him the key tag along with a hug. There were four members celebrating birthdays, I think it was 1-3-5-8 years, they too came up and were met by their sponsors, several other members would come up and hug them and give them a bouquet of flowers and the birthday boy would speak for 2-3 minutes. The guy with eight years talked for almost ten minutes, the secretary sarcastically thanked him for observing the time limit. Several members shared and wanted me to know they loved Americans. The meeting was closed in the ways we all do and then Piet and I were mobbed again with members wanting hugs and photos. (Everyone has a camera cell phone)

Piet used to live in Tehran, he started using there when he young, driving around Tehran with him is a trip, its like walking down memory lane he shows us were he hid from the police under the sidewalks were the gutters flow or what roof tops he would shoot dope on.,Such sweet memories. (The good old sick days.) But he loves Iran.

Isfahan

Wow. What a beautiful city! It's like entering a place where time stood still. Yet is modernized and a huge city. Alli met us at the airport and drove us to our hotel; the hotel is like a living museum, absolutely gorgeous. Yesterday was really our first day off in 16 days, Alli and his family took us to an ancient Mosque and Square. Some amazing history took place here. We

went to a Bazaar to shop, this Bazaar is very old at least 4 hundred years. It went on an on, Siamak said we need to stay close to one another, if you make a turn on your own your gone. It's a maze of alleys and corridors that sell everything and anything. Its where most of the Persian Carpets are sold and they are stunning beautiful. The smells from the vendors selling spices like saffron was wonderful.

There is a huge river that flows through the city with bridges that was built from 1000 years ago, they are so beautiful. I am sure this isn't the Iran that most people think of. Isfahan used to be a Jazz center before the revolution. I think Duke Ellington did a piece called "Isfahan."

This day was supposed be our first day off, but not really a day off.....we were invited to a party, a sort of party you can't refuse. Many of the old timers were going to be there, some of them hardly speak to one another but because they knew there were members of world services in Isfahan they wanted to meet us. The reason it was called a party is because they do something that is very unique in NA, I have never heard this done anywhere else. They celebrate the completion of the 12 steps. Basically what they do is the first time a member has worked all 12 steps they have a little party like this, their sponsors line up and the sponsees line up in rows in front of them, of course everyone is sitting on the floor, the sponsees have something written and each one is called upon to read their 12 step.

At first I thought this was really strange, but as I watched I realized what a brilliant little ceremony this is. What would be more worth celebrating than completing the 12 steps for the first time? I know scores of members in the states who have been clean for years and have never done all 12 steps. Here working the NA program means working the 12 steps, no if's an's or but's about it. We were asked to share and you got the feeling you were going to be listened to very closely by these old timers. There has been a lot of controversy in this area, and not much of a connection with the region. The situation with the woman here is the most difficult than in all the areas. Apparently there is only one meeting for woman and about two hundred attend it. We found out later that no women were allowed at the workshop. This caused a bit of a stir in the beginning of the workshop. We couldn't get a straight answer as to why? And we were not going to let them off the hook by making nice about it. You can only imagine how this must feel for Becky being the only woman allowed. As representatives of World Services it is not our role to attack their customs even though we have feelings about it. But what we could do is stand on principle. I am not sure what happened, whether they acquiesced or realized they were wrong but by noon there were a few women at the workshop. But this is an issue that is far from being resolved, I wish we could do more but this a culture that has laws that will put you in jail if you interfere, its only recent that "some" woman will dare to shake a mans hand in public.

I think this workshop was a turning point for this Area; it was the smallest, one hundred and sixty trusted servants. but the discussions we had with them opened up the lines of communications.

I hope in these updates it doesn't appear that I am painting a rosy picture of NA in Iran as the "miracle fellowship" because they have problems here that are big and some that are institutionalized. I think having this travel team here and hitting all the areas around the country is giving them a new perspective and new tools to work with.

Members here have been threatened with knives at business meetings, one members shared the other night his car windows were broken after a hotly debated business meeting. One of the biggest issues is the size of the meetings, 300 to 400 members at each meeting has got to crazy. There are over 5000 meetings listed, and another 2000 meetings that meet in parks that can't be listed because they move around. There biggest challenge is meeting places getting and finding means to get more, often they get so big the landlords throw them out.

Road dogs

There have been a group of trusted servants from the Tehran Area that have been to almost every workshop we have held. They travel by car over night and show up at he workshop and organize everything for us, they are amazingly sweet dedicated and full of enthusiastic energy. They have this down and will carry it on long after we are gone. Last night two of them were on the same flight to Shiraz as us. Seeing there happy faces brings a huge smile to my heart, it reminds me of the excitement I used to feel when I first got involved in service when NA was young. Last night one of them was helping a woman who was on the plane with an infant and two year old, he took over the responsibility of getting the two year old on and off the plane while the mother carried the infant. That's what I call practicing these principles in all our affairs. We have some wonderful human beings in NA that are spiritual giants to me; you know them by their actions.

Shiraz

Our flight was delayed and we arrived at 11:00 pm, at 5:00 AM I was awakened by the call to prayer echoing through the city and reverberating off the mountains. They have a PA system that is amazing. Needless to say I put the pillow over my head and went back to sleep.

Tonia from Greece is here and its so good to see her, She and Becky were supposed to do a workshop for the woman today and Piet, Siamak and I were to have a casual day, but we got word that has all changed, We do the big workshop today and a big meeting tonight.

The big meeting didn't take place until today. It was rescheduled for 3:30 in the afternoon on a workday. As we drove down the street it seemed we were hitting a busy part of the city, the sidewalks were packed with people, then I realized they were all heading in the same direction through these gates into a sports arena, we drove around back and were ushered through a door, as we walked up the hallways I could hear this roar getting louder and louder, I turned a corner and looked into an Arena packed to the gills, (Becky and I are still arguing over how many members there were,) I say 10,000 she says 8000 and the members who were in charge say 10,000 -12,000 inside and a couple more thousand outside who couldn't get in. But whatever, it was huge. As we walked in and started to take our seats the members all started clapping and then chanting as they clapped, you know why they are clapping and you know exactly who you represent. I thought holy shit, this is off the charts. Becky says to me "what did we ever do to deserve this experience? I said we shot a lot of dope, that's all, and beyond that we have just showed up like any other member.

The five of us (including Siamak) did good; it was an amazing experience seeing that many faces up close intently hanging on to your every word. Feeling their joy and seeing the hope in their eyes when we share about how excited the rest of the fellowship is about what is happening in Iran. (I remember a speaker at a convention once starting off his share by asking for a show of hands of everyone for whom this was their first convention? He then said what I am going to say is for you. Because the rest of you are probably going to judge and critique the hell out of me) No problem here with that, for nearly all them this was their first look at NA members out side of Iran.

As I was sitting there taking it all in I could picture my self sitting in the crowd as a young man with only a few years clean and how I would of been feeling seeing this. It has to be as awesome for them as it was for us.

They had a count up rather than a count down. There was a lot of 3 - 5 years clean, which tells me that the fellowship has a strong base that will continue to support the kind of growth they have going on here.

Getting out of the Arena was tricky, if the members could have gotten to us we would have been trampled, it's a strange phenomena that happens in a crowd like that, kind of scary. We had to wait close to an hour before things thinned out at the exit. Piet had to get to the airport and back to Sweden.

Becky and Tonia did a workshop for 90 women earlier in the morning and they were all there and more, there was an 8 year old boy with them that was 40 days clean. It was very heart moving to see the connection Becky and Tonia had with them; they were all sitting off to the side

leaning over to see. To them Becky and Tonia represent a dynamic of freedom and hope that they had yet to see as possible.

Once we got out we went straight to a member's home where the Shiraz area service committee officers were and wanted us to help them with a series of service related questions. That took a couple more hours but we didn't mind as they are so dedicated and so sweet, they are basically having growing pains and we all know what that's like.

Tea or chai

I thought they are different but here Tea is Chai, they drink lots of it and they serve it up when ever and where ever. In Iran they have a custom where they will take a sugar cube dip it in the tea and then put it in their mouth and drink the tea as it washes over the sugar. It's cool looking the way they do it and kind of second nature to them. The custom came about 90 years ago when One of the Moola's thought he was getting screwed over by the British on sugar cubes, apparently the British controlled sugar cubes in Iran, so he outlawed sugar cubes and said they were evil. Later he and the Brit's straightened out the situation but he didn't know how to tell the people that Sugar wasn't evil anymore without appearing stupid, so he told the people that sugar cubes could be made clean by dipping it in the tea first and then putting it your mouth and letting the tea wash away the evil, It obviously worked..

I think in about every city we have been we have been invited into someone's home, we meet the mothers the fathers uncles Aunties and children and then EAT,,,,,,My god do these people like to serve up food. almost everywhere they place huge plates of fruit in front of you, there is no way you could eat it but without fail here comes the fruit, also sweets, lots of them, I have been off of sugar for the past three years and for the first half of the trip I did pretty good, then I started chipping, then chopping and tonight I chomped downed a whole cream puff, it was really good. But it looks like I am in relapse on sweets. I have also introduced a whole new concept to Iranian NA, they never heard of chipping. I am sure I have set a great example.

I wish I could turn this section of this travelogue over to Becky and Tonia. Thank God they are here. Because if they weren't the woman in this fellowship would have received almost no attention to their issues nor would they have been apart of these workshops. They have a very rough time in this society, as I said before we have been trying to be careful not to interfere in the culture here. But for the past three workshops the women have been specifically excluded and we haven't been able to get any clear answers as to why? They say its no problem when we

bring it up and then allow them, but really not that many have the courage to come knowing they are not wanted. Some traveled many hours to get to the woman's workshops, some have been doing their own sort of "road dogs" and have shown up in nearly every Area we have been, a couple have been funded by the region because they serve on the regions workshop committee. I think this is probably the most difficult issue for us. I have gone over it in my head over and over trying to see how standing on our principles and expressing my own values in this culture would help or not. Certainly individually I can and do, but as representatives of NAWS I don't know if it would create a situation beyond my intention?

The Government here which is really run by the religious leaders has been watching NA grow, they like us and have been supportive of the fellowship, but they do not appreciate any western influence that challenges their religious beliefs and values. Believe me they could shut NA down in no time at all, not everyone here in Iran thinks NA is Allah's gift to addicts. So I think (just for toady) the best we can do is pray for our spiritual principles of love, open mindedness, fairness, equality, and kindness to guide the actions of those who are in positions to consider the needs of all NA members

----- --It is mind blowing the number of addicts we have run into on the streets, Piet drove to Isfahan with an NA member from Tehran, he inadvertently left his passport at the Hotel reception desk, (your required to leave your passport when you check in) when he tried to check into the hotel in Isfahan they wouldn't let him, they told him he would have to go to the police station and get a letter from them, He was worried how difficult this was going to be but the policeman at the station was an NA member so no problem.

We tried to visit a shrine in Shiraz and as we were ready to buy our passes the members recognized the guy at the ticket counter was an NA member, we tried to park at a busy Bazaar, and the guy who controls the parking is an NA member who just happens to have a space for us. We step off a plane in Mashhad and the guy on the runway is an NA member. It goes on and on.

Later we heard while the big meeting was going on the police were across the street with the Mayor and were standing by in case the crowds got unmanageable, it was done in a spirit of cooperation and they didn't have to do anything. But the Mayor sent out a squad of men to get rid of the vendors who were setting up shop on the street to sell knocked off NA merchandise, Now that is the kind of cooperation I am talking about.....!

On another note Siamak just heard from the members in Tehran the Minister of justice called and wants to set up one final interview and is eager to push through the legal registration of NA as an NGO in Iran. This is a very difficult thing to get and it usually takes years and in a lot of cases it never gets passed. It will make life so much easier for the region and it will allow access to meeting spaces that are not available to them in their present status.

This stuff doesn't come easy, the members on the region have worked hard with their PR/PI efforts and it has paid off.

The meeting we had with the UN office of drug control in Tehran, was very interesting, The woman we spoke with knew NA inside and out, she knew our traditions and the unique problems NA has in Iran, Her insight actually shocked me, at one point she asked about the difficulty of acquiring meeting space and said that meetings with 200 - 300 can't afford many members the ability to share and really get into an intimate recovery process, she said she hoped we will soon be able to get the NGO status and be able to have smaller meetings. She also said the UN recognizes NA as the number one source for recovery for addicts.

It gave me chicken skin to hear this; one of our goals in our Vision statement is that "Narcotics Anonymous has universal recognition and respect as a viable program of recovery."

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Bandar Abbas

-----This is a city in the south of Iran, it is very different than the rest of Iran, it sits on the Persian Gulf and has an old wild west energy to it, the women are dressed in much different clothing, they wear colors (black is the normal color of Iranian woman) on the streets. Some of the men and the woman actually look more Indian or Bangladeshi, even their skin is darker, but it's not wise to suggest a comparison.

The Persian Gulf is full of ships and tankers', looking out across the gulf sits Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Dubai. The dust was blowing a bit so everything had a sort of haze to it; it is quite dry and sandy. Last night I was walking through the Bazaar with some members when I heard some gun shots, then explosions, I kept looking at everyone around me to see if any one was concerned? But they were just going about their business. When we got to the street I saw streamers floating down from the sky. Siamak said this was a celebration day called "Mobilization day" when the country readied itself for an attack against its shores. We walked down towards the water where there were thousands of people celebrating, I was feeling a bit nervous being the only American or even westerner around but had hesitant faith that these guys wouldn't take me anywhere it would be dangerous to be. Suddenly a huge explosion went off, the concussion was so strong I wanted to hit the dirt, It was so powerful car alarms along the streets were going off. Its hard to imagine that right now across the gulf there are people living with this all the time..

A member was telling me how he feels when he hears all the saber rattling between our governments, he said he feels insecure, not sure what will happen to his family or his job, should

he start putting away money in case something happens so he can pay his mortgage?
He said he loves Americans but he loves his country too, we didn't get into politics but it was good to just relate as one. Some times I don't grasp how it feels to be under this kind of insecurity.

I think the fellowship in Bandar Abbas was very different from the other areas we visited, much more laid back, I don't think I have been kissed by more men in my life.

The four sisters

Tonia and Becky came back from a woman's meeting. They said it was small but there were four sisters, all clean, actually five, one lives in Tehran, we went to a meeting that night and I met them, they also attended the workshop. What a site to see the four of them sitting together. It was kind of magical knowing how our program can save a family.

We got back into Tehran at 2:00 AM; the road dogs flew with us, what a hoot. There were about 35 members at the airport to see us off We got into Tehran in the wee hours and had to get up early to trek across town again that same morning to meet with the Regional RSC, they wanted us to attend, they wanted our honest impressions of what we thought was their weaknesses and strengths answer some questions and say some good byes we were there for about four hours and could really feel the past 23 days catching up on us, I was about brain dead, we got back to the hotel and went our separate ways to our rooms I ordered in some food, lamb curry, happy thanksgiving.

I at least had the next day free to hang out with Siamak, but Becky and Tonia had one more woman's workshop to do. It actually turned out to be a great workshop with over 200 woman, they got energized and had some very good discussions about what they might want to do for their future. I bet we are going to see something very unique come out of this which might be a model for communities that have similar challenges. One suggestion I heard talked about was opening up a woman's NA hot line. The reality is woman wont call and talk to a man, especially if they are married. I thought that idea was brilliant and really wonder how many NA communities around the world would benefit from an idea like this?

I talked my wife Tali, not good news she has been scheduled on the 29th to have cervical neck surgery, its major procedure and can't be put off. There is no way I can get home in time to be with her. Needless to say I am worried. But I know she has lots of support, two of her close friends and sponsees will be with her. and I will be home on Kauai by the time she gets home from Honolulu

AA

AA has been struggling in Iran for years, The first member who help get NA started in Iran was an addict who was involved with AA in the US, he returned to Iran and tried to start AA here but was confronted with the problem that consumption of alcohol its against Islamic law. He instead started NA meetings and translated some of our NA literature into Farsi. He also started a treatment program that has become one of the main treatment centers in Iran. He became very well known, a struggle with many of the other NA members over interpretation of the traditions and his treatment centers created a division and the fellowship was torn in two for quite awhile. We believe these early struggles (similar to what the Brazilian fellowship struggled with) made them stronger. We had many discussions re. NGO's and NA membership. We stayed consistent: they were an out side issue and we have no opinion on them, they wanted us to tell them if someone worked in treatment they should be banned from being in service in NA. (Apparently some of these NGO's send their staffs who are NA members to meetings to recruit clients to the treatment centers). Still you can't deny full membership. But you don't have to elect someone you feel you don't trust or who might have ulterior motives or an agenda for being in NA service.

Two AA members joined us for dinner on our last night in Iran. I had met them years ago in Hawaii. They were desperately seeking some advice as to how to keep AA separate and growing in Iran. They said everyone in AA goes to NA, some members who get resentment at their NA group comes to AA and then takes over the meetings and turn it into an NA meeting. It's almost impossible to do PI/PR and get the word out to the community that they exist. If someone asks what is AA? They have to say it's like NA, and then everyone knows what they are talking about.

I really felt for them, I remember in my early years of recovery the AA's being so supportive of NA in Hawaii. There is certainly no animosity between AA and NA in Iran; it's just that AA is at a huge disadvantage.

Our last day in Tehran we hoped would be a free day to do some shopping. But we got word the Doctor from INCA wanted a meeting with us. It was request we very well couldn't refuse as he has been so instrumental in helping NA in Iran and really help facilitate our visas into Iran. The meeting actually was great, he wanted to know how our trip around Iran went and what did we see as some of the challenges facing the fellowship, one of the issues we pointed out was the problem with meeting spaces and the size of the meetings. He was aware of this and said he had been having some discussions with the governor of one of the states and thinks he might be able to open some facilities for them, He had just returned from a conference in Egypt and said his institute was now the Regional education center for addictions. This would make them the center of education on addiction for the entire Middle East. This is really a huge honor for them and for us an unbelievable gift. Because they will continue to push acceptance and awareness of our program, they also want to make awareness of NA as part of the curriculum for Doctors, Psychiatrists and psychologists at the University. This is truly the ideal in forming cooperative

relations with those who can really help us do what we can't do. They basically promote us and they do it peer to peer in such a way that all we have to do is show up and carry our message to those who make it to our doors.

I am so impressed by the good will they extend us. But it is more than just that, our members in Iran have done some great work over the years to build these kind of relationships, they had to be consistent, open minded and willing to take risks and give of their time to involve themselves. These members are like the rest of us, they have jobs, businesses and families and yet they make it work. When an opportunity arises they dropped what they are doing and jump on it.

Just as we were leaving Tehran we heard the Iranian censors unblocked NA.Org, members can now go to our site and be as informed as the rest of us. NA is not viewed as a threat

We left Iran on the 26th late at night and arrived in Dubai, I thought this part of the trip was going to be a foot note and Iran the big story. But as we were all told when we first got clean "hold on to your seat because your going to be in for the ride of your life"

This part of the middle east is very different than Iran, It is an education for me so I will share it with those of you who are as clueless as me.

Iran is Persia. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Qatar, United Emirates (UAE) and a bunch of other small countries are all Arabian, The Arabs are very different than the Persians although they are all predominately Islamic countries they differ in how strict they practice it. Most of these countries are very oil rich, Saudi Arabia the richest and the UAE second. The wealth in the UAE is off the charts. As our plane stopped on the run way these long Black Mercedes pulled up along side and a gathering of beautiful woman and men in traditional white Arabian attire got off the plane and straight into the limos.

Dubai

I hardly know where to start. It is clearly headed towards being one of the most beautiful modern cities in the world, in every direction you can see there is major construction going on, huge sky scrapers going up everywhere, I mean miles of them. The tallest building in the world will be completed by next year, every where you see there are huge building cranes, I figured the national bird must be the crane. It's expensive to live there and there are lots of Western Expatriates living there, it's considered a play ground for the rich and famous, as well as a place where Arabs can come and find non- Islamic entertainment. Women are free to dress the way they

want, no head scarfs. (Becky was happy) Although it's against the law for male and females to hold hands or show affection in public, or for singles to live together unmarried.

Lisa is a woman from the UK who moved here a couple of years ago when her husband took a job in Abu Dhabi and became very active in trying to get NA more prominent, but between Abu Dhabi and Dubai there were only 3 meetings a week and they were struggling. NA in this part of the Middle East has not been embraced like in Iran, the members in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have been more successful yet they still face some huge obstacles in being accepted and legitimate. Egypt is bigger but has to operate under the auspicious of a known NGO to get meeting spaces.

It's very different here; most of us don't have to worry about our meetings being illegal. But in this part of the world if police haven't given permission for meetings they risk being arrested.

Bassum from Bahrain was coming over to see us and attend the workshops we were doing. He called Lisa and told her since he was going to be in Dubai and Abu Dhabi he wanted her to get him into some NA service work. He is an H&I kind of guy.

Lisa checked around at a couple of places to see if she could arrange some kind of PI presentation with the Psychiatric hospital and the national rehabilitation center. She had made contact with them before and got a cool reception, but as a last minute decision she gave it a shot and they said yes. What transpired is no more than a God shot out of the blue.

For the next two days we drove between Dubai and Abu Dhabi. At the Psychiatric institute the Doctor in charge arranged a seminar with all the key staff who work with addicts. It was mandatory that they attended. Instead of us doing the presentation we had Bassum do it and we kind of coached from the side and then we helped with the Q&A he did great and did it in Arabic which made all the difference in the world.

The next day we went to the national rehabilitation center, we expected this presentation to be small, we brought along another Arabic speaking member and a member from India to assist Bassum. We were taken back a bit when we walked in the door, the room was packed with Doctors, administrators, and nurses. There were four men in White Arabian cloths that looked a little intimidating. And intimidating they should. They were the Police, the head of Narcotics and the ones you have to deal with if you want to do anything in this part of the world. The session was absolutely fabulous, they virtually threw open the doors and want to know how they could help us, they want to have an inpatient HI meeting and provide a meeting space for a meeting at the facility. I think Lisa almost fainted; she had been working at this for a while and hit nothing but dead ends and rejection. So you never know?

The relationship with the Police is huge; the fact that they gave it their nod will allow NA to really grow here.

Over the years I have seen many expiates move to countries like this and start NA but they rarely reach out to the local population, what usually happens is NA becomes seen as a group for westerners and a sort spiritual selfishness settles in.

I am very involved, so of course I am more critical of the lost opportunities. So thank god for our members who come to these countries who devote themselves to reaching out, especially when it's done with a real spirit of humility and selfless service.

Becky and I really didn't need to do much more than answer some questions and make a few clarifications our presence as directors from the World service Office gave it some international credibility, we shook a lot of hands and passed out cards.

The work shops we did in Dubai were small and really were a sharing session; I think we needed it more than them

Becky and I left Dubai at 3:00 am, 6 hours to Frankfurt, we didn't sit together and got separated when we arrived, so she is off to LA, (bye, bye Becky) I have an 8 hour layover before catching my flight to San Francisco, 13 hours and I will spend the night at an airport hotel and catch an early morning flight to Kauai. Tali should be arriving and I will be able to take care of her while she recoups.

Through out this trip we have received lots of emails and messages of support from you. We have really appreciated it. These little updates were never intended to be anything official from NAWS. It is really my style of sharing that started out to a few people in my address book. Most NAWS related trips have an official (trip report) that Staff and Board members complete after the trip and we have on file, at each board meeting we review them and get a personal spin on what is happening with our fellowship, that way we can all stay current with the pulse of those we serve and every once in a while they will hit the NA headlines. But I understand this series of up dates took on a life of its own and has been forwarded on an on to a lot of members, it started to feel like we were taking you along with us and in a sense we were. The Narcotics Anonymous story is far from over and we are all apart of it. So thank you for trusting us with these responsibilities and giving us such a wonderful opportunity to serve you in this way. Love Tom Mc

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I asked about our new comer from the Mosque in Mashhad, he's got 28 days.