

Partner of Tom Stone Has Some Success in Afghan School Donations

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her to Jonathan Hoffman. He founded Direct Aid International, a Northfield, Vt.-based nonprofit that raises money and helps build public buildings in rural and often dangerous areas of Afghanistan.

At a fundraiser dance last September, Loving raised \$3,000. Since then, kids at The Pomfret School and Dothan Brook School raised \$1,200 and \$700, respectively, and others have donated more than \$700 through cardboard boxes, adorned with Stone's picture, at area gas stations.

At another dance in South Strafford on Saturday, Loving raised \$600 more.

But the largest gift came from a private foundation, which awarded her a grant that matched \$10,000 she has already raised.

Hoffman and Loving hope the money can build a school for boys and another for girls, but they won't know if that's possible until he travels to Afghanistan later this summer.

If both are built, they would be the ninth and tenth schools Hoffman has helped build in Afghanistan.

He says the towns in which the schools are built will contribute one-third the cost of labor or materials.

The Afghans, he says, will cover the construction, management and teaching.

They just need the monetary backing to erect the buildings.

Although he agreed to help Loving, Hoffman says he never expected her to garner so much financial support, especially in such a short time.

"That really is an extraordinary amount of money," he says. "For her to raise \$40,000, it shows the effort that she put in, but it also confirms just the strength behind Tom."

Stone, Loving says, wasn't like most people.

"He was an incredibly wonderful person," says Loving, sitting barefoot on her back deck in Tunbridge yesterday as the wind whipped through her sandy blonde hair. "Just a bright spot in the universe."

In varied functions, Stone served the military off and on since 1971.

His devotion to the armed forces even into his 50s, Loving believes, may have been sparked by his brother's disappearance in Cambodia during the Vietnam War while working as a photojournalist.

Stone was deployed three times to Afghanistan with the Vermont National Guard from 2002 to 2006, and on his second trip as a Special Forces medic, he converted an old cargo container into a medical clinic where he treated Afghan men, women and children, who often lined up outside the makeshift hospital at 6 in the morning to receive treatment.

"He just had a way of understanding people," she says. "They trusted him."

Before his service in Afghanistan, Stone left his home at the time in Pomfret and completed an eight-year walk around the world.

And when people asked him why, Loving remembers: "He would say,

'Because I can.'"

In Russia, a government official paid him \$1,000 to visit schools across the country and conduct physical education programs for young students.

Photographs Stone brought back from his trip often depict him standing, walking or playing with children, making the schools built in his honor,

Loving says, fitting.

"He was a magnet for kids," she says. "Someone said to me recently, it must be really incredible to make someone else's dream come true."

Still, for Loving, who started dating Stone in 2000, her fundraising success hasn't swept away the pain of his

death.

"I can never say it was meant to be, and it's OK that he's not here," she says, "because it's not OK."

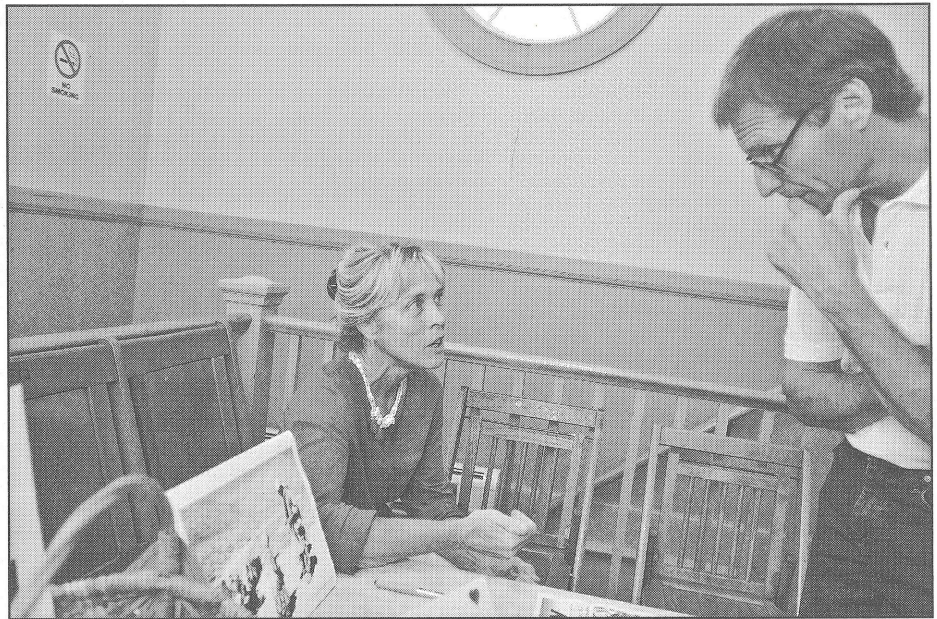
Eleven days before he died, at Loving's longtime request, Stone had a set of pictures taken of him.

Next to a window on the west side of her house, some of those photographs are mixed with others of the couple.

One photograph, though, has a special place in the home and in her heart.

In it, Stone is wearing a reversed, brown baseball cap with "ROSE" sewn into the side.

Loving keeps it framed on a table in



Rose Loving of Tunbridge talks with Bobby Gagnier of Springfield, Vt., about her fundraising efforts with Direct Aid International. Loving has hosted two dances in addition to other fundraising efforts to raise money to build at least one school in Afghanistan in the memory of her partner, Tom Stone, a Special Forces medic who was killed there in March 2006.

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her living room.

A small candle sits in front of the picture, and four sand dollars, which the couple found on the beaches of Plum Island, Mass., surround it.

Other reminders of Stone — an

iron-and-wooden bench where they used to sit and hold hands, or the way he would say "good girl" to her — fill the moments of Loving's days.

"You start wrapping your life around that hole, and you start living

with it," she says. "I miss him being my companion. My buddy. ... I miss that in my life."

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