

How We Found Mr. Paul

By Jackie Spurlock

One of the most rewarding activities for PCIA is reuniting people who knew each other years ago in Iran. We regularly receive requests for help in finding RPCVs or PC staff members, and we're often successful.

In August, 2011, as our first-ever reunion began in Portland, OR, Idaho Public Television journalist Marcia Franklin made her way to the "Dezful" table. Having produced a documentary about her 2003 trip to Iran to report on the environmental movement there, Marcia had been invited to Portland to show the film and share her insights. But she had a secondary mission – to help her Boise friend Azam Houle locate the Peace Corps volunteer who had served in the ancient city of Dezful in the 1960's when she and her sister Ezzat and their siblings were growing up. The volunteer's name was Paul Levering, but in Dezful, he was known as "Mr. Paul."



Jackie Spurlock in Abadeh, 1975.

That morning in 2011, Marcia did not find Mr. Paul at the Dezful table, but she did find RPCV Ed Lathrope, who had also served in Dezful, from 1966-68. She explained to Ed that her friend in Boise wanted to reconnect with Paul Levering who had also served in Dezful. Marcia and Ed exchanged contact information, and before long Azam sent the following message to Ed Lathrope:



Ed Lathrope from the Group 9 training booklet.

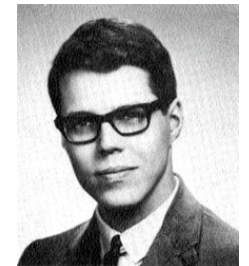
"My maiden name is Goushegir and my father was a physician in Dezful. My family had the fortune of meeting Mr. Paul Levering who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Dezful...I'm including his photo in this email -- just in case you may have known him. We all remember him very well and would love to know how he is doing."

Upon receiving this message, Ed contacted Doug Schermer, the keeper of the membership list and historical database of Iran Peace Corps volunteers and staff members. Doug responded to Ed in 2013 that we had no information as to the whereabouts of Paul Levering.

A year later, I was organizing my email and came upon the request from Ed for help in finding Mr. Paul. By 2014, the database had grown to hundreds of PCVs, and Paul Levering was now there! Not only that but he lived not far from Doug in Arizona. I alerted Doug, who reached out to Paul, inviting him to one of the semi-regular lunch get-togethers of Arizona Iran RPCVs.

Paul called Ed for the first time in 2014, and after a cordial chat, Ed gave Paul the contact information for Azam in Boise. In 2015, Paul flew to Boise to meet Azam, Ezzat, and Marcia. Paul revisited Iran for the first time in 2016.

We at PCIA are incredibly moved by this simple, eloquent story, embodying as it does the spirit of Peace Corps. Ezzat Goushegir speaks for those in all the countries where Peace Corps served, not just Iran. The impact resonates down through the years. If only those people on the train had had the opportunity to join the Peace Corps in their early years.



Doug Schermer from the Group 14 training booklet.

Here is the Rest of the Story

By Paul Levering, Dezful (1964-67)

Probably most Iranian PCVs would say they received more from their PC experience than any contribution that they were able to make. For me it goes much further than that. I was lucky to be the first volunteer assigned to Dezful. My achievements as a TEFL instructor were meager and my Farsi was never that great. Yet I had never before (or since) received such an on-going welcome, an enthusiastic acceptance, and a desire for friendship. After a few weeks I was literally a guest in some family's home every evening.

On the street I had the wonderful feeling that everyone was a friend. Many Dezfuli asked me for my photograph. I had a few wallet-sized photos made. But there were more requests. I had more photos made and in a short time they also were gone. Finally I had a batch of 400 made. In a few months they were gone too, every one.

In the front window of the photo shop there appeared several photos of me with Iranian friends. In the front window of another shop beside portrait-sized depictions of Mohammad, Hussein and the Shah appeared still another tiny photo of "Mr Paul." I began to feel that I was somehow some kind of unofficial honorary son of Dezful. My gratitude for those wonderful days has never waned.

Fast forward to five decades later, out of the blue, thanks to Marcia and Ed, I found myself on the telephone with Azam. Of course, I was joyfully surprised. She urged me to visit her in Boise. A part of me held back. I didn't know if she was just being courteous. Not long afterwards she sent me a portrait-sized photo of Mr Paul. Her brother, who had kept the photo all those years, sent it electronically from Ahwaz to Azam who then enlarged it and sent it on to me. So I decided to go to Boise.

It was wonderful to be met at the Boise airport by Azam, Ezzat and Marcia. Azam arranged a party where I got the chance to meet her two sons and their families as well as to further connect with Marcia. Although everything on the surface was contemporary American, old Déjà vu, feelings from Dezfuli gatherings flooded my consciousness.

I was Azam's house guest for just a few short days, but something very important to me happened: I struck up a most lively non-stop dialogue with Ezzat. I invited her to Tucson and she accepted. She was interested in the adventures of my life-long obsession backpacking in foreign countries (now on 119). During her Tucson visit she taped 21 hours of sometimes intense interviews. She asked good questions and she listened to my responses with unwavering attentiveness, subdued compassion and non-judgmental follow-up questions. It was an unexpected rather cathartic experience for me. Later she invited me to Chicago, her present hometown.

Once in Chicago, Ezzat and her friends threw me a party attended by 50 guests. I had the opportunity to meet her son and his family, her friends, and many of her professional colleagues. Her long two-part online article in Farsi about me and my adventures had just been published. Comments reacting to her article came from some of the party guests, out-of-town phone callers, and emails from several different countries. It was an exciting evening for me. In the following few days Ezzat and I shared long animated contagious conversations with her friends and colleagues.

After the Boise and Chicago visits, I still touch base with Azam. Ezzat and I have frequent email exchanges and every other month or so we have a long telephone conversation about travel, literature, and what I would call the human condition. We even talk about her writing a play based on my experience in Colombo, Sri Lanka when after emergency surgery I was nursed back to health by Afghan rebel detainees. But that will have to wait for another day.



The photo Paul Levering distributed in Dezful.