



Planting Hope and Growing Love

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Baghdad, Iraq – Not counting the sheep, the population of Batel is somewhere around 300. Located in northern Iraq - in what was formerly called Kurdistan - it lies in the Semel region. Not too terribly long ago, it was one of over two hundred villages viciously burned to the ground by Saddam's soldiers.

The surrounding area is an infertile and, too often, barren cropland. At this point, by no stretch of the imagination, can the town be cited as a picture of urban redevelopment.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region North employees John Sundeen and his wife Clarice Kinney-Sundeen plant one of five symbolic saplings at the Batel Kindergarten, in Iraq. GRD Photo

At best, the electricity is highly unreliable, the drinking water is unsafe, and the sewer system is so terribly outdated that to call them unsatisfactory is nearly a compliment. The community's very streets - by way of litter, rubble, and debris - still vividly attest to its violent destruction.

Like the structures of the community, in that time of terror, families were torn asunder, trampled, brutalized. Parents, siblings and entire families were callously murdered. Mothers survive without their babies. Fathers exist, alone. Children know well the meaning of "aytam" or orphan.

As did the mythical Phoenix, can this community be reborn from its own ashes? What impetus would that take? Perhaps, might that be the care, concern and love of others?

One structure - a United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and Project and Contracting Office (PCO) collaboration - with a new metal roof stands out. Financed

by Iraqi Recovery Funds, when completed, it will be a six room structure. Though all primary grades will be taught there, it is called the Batel Kindergarten and should be completed by November. It is a place for children, a place of learning, a place to know, grow, and remember.

Recently, John Sundeen and his wife Clarice Kinney-Sundeen made a pilgrimage to this tiny village. A trip thought through in their heads and now made from out their hearts.

John is a Construction Representative and Clarice a Senior Construction Manager. They came, from the USACE Memphis office to Iraq in early March of this year. Here, they are a part of the USACE Gulf Region North.

Joining them on this trek were two employees from the USACE Mosul Area Office, one from the Dahuk Resident Office, two Iraqi engineers, and a Peshmerga security team.

The Sundeens had a specific purpose beyond perusal of the ongoing construction activities. They came with a sense of loss and hurt from within.

Just prior to his deployment to Iraq, their Marine son-in-law, Staff Sgt. Matthew Adams, was killed in an accident leaving the grandson without a father. They came to Batel to share with others - who had also lost their loved ones - their hopes for the future through an act of nurturing stimulation and preservation of life. They came to plant trees. They did so in the front of the very school orphaned children now attend.

Just as the Sundeen's grandson, Isaac, is now fatherless, many of these children of Batel have lost parents, as well. Their lives changed forever. How apropos this gesture?

As a result of this couple's visit, five saplings stand by the entrance of this school, symbolic of so much more than the potential of eventual shade. They represent shared loss, love, and hopes for all of the world to learn to live in peace.