

Thursday, September 29, 2005

# O.C. woman helps Iraqi women venture out

A Laguna Niguel resident gives lessons on winning contracts for water projects.

By **VIK JOLLY**

The Orange County Register

An Iraqi woman in a traditional black garment stood up at a business seminar in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk recently and uttered words that reaffirmed Eileen Padberg's belief in her mission.

The woman said she had long labored for a business, but now after the U.S.-sponsored training, she had the tools and the opportunity to run her own enterprise.

"It was so touching. We all cried," said Padberg of Laguna Niguel, who returns to Iraq this week to continue her job of helping women learn how to make the most of business opportunities.

Her assignment came as a surprise. Nearly two years ago, Padberg drafted a plan to include women in the reconstruction process for a San Diego company. Last summer, she was asked to put it into effect.

Her proposal outlined how women should be included in the \$4.4 billion allocated by the United States for water-reconstruction projects in Iraq, including sewage-treatment reclamation plants and water distribution.

She got to work in June 2004, arranging career-development and leadership seminars that showed women how to bid for contracts in a male-dominated arena.

Now, after a brief home visit, she will again give up lunches at the Monarch Bay Club and sunsets overlooking the Pacific Ocean to live in a trailer in the Green Zone, which some jokingly call "the ultimate gated community."



**GROUNDWORK:** Eileen Padberg is going to Baghdad's Green Zone to continue work on Iraq's reconstruction.

The Center for the Study of Democracy

#### MORE INFO

For more about the UCI Center for the Study of Democracy and future events, go to [www.democ.uci.edu](http://www.democ.uci.edu)

The roughly 5-square-mile heavily fortified Green Zone is the U.S. and Iraqi government headquarters in Baghdad.

Padberg, 61, a longtime Orange County political and business consultant, spoke Tuesday at UC Irvine's Center for the Study of Democracy. She said Iraqis appreciate U.S. help but do not want Americans to be in the country long-term.

She talked of hearing mortars hiss overhead and explosions in the distance so often that she - and others - no longer ducked for cover.

In April, she marked her birthday aboard a Blackhawk helicopter wearing a 41-pound flak jacket and a 6-pound helmet en route from the southern city of Diwaniya to Baghdad.

"It just dawned on me that it was my birthday and probably a birthday that I won't forget for a long time," she said.

Most frustrating, perhaps, has been the task of making male executives - U.S. and Iraqi alike - realize that women need to be encouraged to bid for contracts.

"My biggest problem has been with our own white male engineers, who are just like they are here," she said to laughter. "It isn't that they want to hold (women) back, but they just don't think about it. It is not part of their psyche. ... I would say that they'd be very glad to see me go."

Time and again, women told her they didn't have any growth opportunities.

"My job was to see that women had a piece of the pie, and there was a huge pie to get a piece of," she said.

Padberg, who is single, expects to wrap up her stay by year's end and return to living without bulletproof vests, military escorts and the threat of a rumored \$300,000 bounty on any European or U.S. woman's head.

The one chance at normalcy while in the Green Zone for Padberg comes on Friday mornings, when she goes fishing in the Tigris.