

Kristin Hagerstrom, left, and her interpreter attend a women's crafts and poetry event in Ramadi, Iraq. Hagerstrom has focused on helping women, who were at grave risk when insurgents controlled the area. She says more women now feel safe enough to attend such events. COURTESY OF KRISTIN HAGERSTROM



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'There are things I can do to make it better'

Houston native is a member of reconstruction team striving to improve daily lives of Iraqis

*By KATHRINE SCHMIDT*

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WASHINGTON — Like many other working moms from Houston, Kristin Hagerstrom has a morning routine.

But her routine is anything but.

Hagerstrom, 57, wakes up on a military base near Ramadi, Iraq, puts on a body armor vest and helmet, and hops into a Humvee to drive to the capital city of Anbar province, once the most dangerous city in one of Iraq's most dangerous regions.

The career Foreign Service officer and mother of two is a member of a U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team, one of the 25 units of military and civilian workers helping to rebuild regional governments in the country. Like her son, John Hagerstrom, a 22-year-old Marine who has served in Anbar, Hagerstrom took the assignment that she said complements the military's effort.

"This part of the war is just as important as the shooting part of the war," Hagerstrom said in a telephone interview from the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. "If you get basic services back to the people, it creates a safe environment. If young men have a job, they won't be tempted to take \$500 from al-Qaida to plant an IED," jargon for a roadside bomb.

### **A devastated city**

Ramadi was a city of about 400,000 before Iraq's insurgency took root there, with a front group for al-Qaida in Iraq declaring it their capital. Under the control of the group, the area became one of the war's deadliest fronts.

The tide turned in late 2006 when local leaders brokered an agreement that unified many Sunni tribes against the group, eroding its support.

When her team arrived in April, Hagerstrom said, Ramadi was a devastated cityscape. Trash was everywhere. There was virtually no electricity, and sewage flowed in the streets. Now, she said, residents have power for 16 hours a day, things are much cleaner and hundreds of shops are open.

### **Teaching self-government**

Under Saddam Hussein, decisions about local services like sewage management were made from Baghdad. So now, Hagerstrom said, her unit is working with municipal officials and tribal leaders to develop the basic skills of self-government: Teaching the newly inaugurated mayor and city council how to run meetings, make and follow budgets, and manage staff.

"They have really been a very great support in the city," Ramadi Mayor Latif Ayada, who works with Hagerstrom and the other team members, said through an interpreter. He was in Washington last week with other Iraqi officials as part of a State Department tour of the U.S. "They really went the extra mile to help."

Hagerstrom and her colleagues say they are seeking concrete action, not symbolic acts.

"We think it's very important to build up the local government: the imams, the Iraqi police, the tribal leaders," she said. "We stay away from taking a box of school supplies and handing them out."

Hagerstrom has focused on helping women, who included Ramadi doctors and lawyers but were at grave risk when the insurgents controlled the area.

"One of the things that al-Qaida did was push women out of the schools and out of any place in the economy," Hagerstrom said. "One place we've seen an incredible growth is the number of women who will come out to events, who feel safe enough now to do that."

Hagerstrom, a Houston native, does this sort of work for a living. Her 17-year career as Foreign Service officer has also taken her to Peru, South Korea and Burma. She said she'd probably stay in Iraq about a year before another assignment. She's hoping for China.

### **'I'm not a warrior'**

Adventure runs in her family. Her father was an Air Force pilot in World War II, and her mother also was a pilot. But it was her Marine son John who convinced her to head to Iraq.

"My son came here, so I needed to, also," she said. "I'm not a warrior. My father and my son are warriors, but there are things I can do to make it better."

The State Department believes that Hagerstrom and her colleagues can provide a positive face for rebuilding efforts under criticism in the nation's capital.

A report from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction released Oct. 18 said the \$1.9 billion program had met with limited overall progress.

At a State Department news teleconference from Baghdad, Hagerstrom said that such criticisms represent only "a snapshot" — the inspectors leave and don't see the improvement on the ground.

"The most gratifying thing is how optimistic the Iraqi people are," she said. "They really are in this together. They really believe that they can do this."

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