

Steven Thomas Stefani (Tom), a University of Nevada, Reno graduate student lost his life October 4, 2007 in an explosion that impacted his convoy near Ghazni Province in Afghanistan. Stefani had been serving a voluntary nine-month detail since March of 2007 as a USDA Foreign Agricultural Service advisor to develop and implement projects to help the people of the Ghazni Province. Stefani lived in Wells, Nev., where he worked for the U.S. Forest Service as a rangeland management specialist in Northeast Nevada on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

Stefani had volunteered for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to go to Afghanistan to help rebuild farming efforts. Tom was developing and implementing projects to help the people of the Ghazni Province. Tom was teaching farmers how to heal and renew their wasted soil and to replant denuded hillsides with trees. He built relationships with Afghan tribal people in the same open and quiet way that he worked with Ruby Mountain ranchers. He worked directly with Ghazni's Director of Agriculture to create a reconstruction plan that included a poultry rearing facility and other agricultural advancements. Last month, Tom proudly reported that construction had begun on a cold storage facility for farmers to store their commodities, which would enable them to preserve and sell the products. He had also worked on a project to improve grape production and management practices. Tom's contributions will have a real and lasting impact on the people and agricultural economy of Afghanistan.

Tom was known by friends in Afghanistan as "Big Daddy Ag." He knew about the dangers of his job, but he chose to go help people. Stefani went on 75 missions accompanied by heavily armed U.S. Army convoys to help teach Afghans good agricultural practices. Stefani voluntarily extended his time in Afghanistan in order to tighten the gap between his leave and the next USDA volunteer, who would replace him next March. He wanted to shorten that time gap so projects wouldn't fall apart. "The fact that Tom recently requested an extension of his service time in Afghanistan speaks to his courage and commitment to protecting our freedom and creating a better life for deserving people," said USDA Secretary Chuck Conner in a statement after Stefani's death.

Tom was born December 3, 1978 in Lakewood, Calif., and grew up loving the outdoors. "He loved animals," Stefani's father said. "He loved life."

Tom attended Placer Hills Elementary School in Meadow Vista and Weimar Hills Middle School. For high school, he opted to home school with Maidu in Auburn. This gave him the opportunity to graduate a semester early and the flexibility to (be very active) in 4-H and Boy Scouts, and to help his father in the family's construction business. Tom became an Eagle Scout and was a 1996-1998 State 4-H Diamond Star (Ambassador), a 1995 4-H County All Star (Ambassador) and very active in the Placer Hills 4-H Club. He played a very important role in the 4-H summer camp these past few years.

He attended Coalinga Junior College where he majored in agriculture, then transferred to the University of Nevada, Reno. He was about to finish his master's thesis this December, said Dr. Barry Perryman, Stefani's graduate school advisor from UNR's Department of Animal Biotechnology. He had been studying the restoration of the salt desert shrub in the Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation for more than two years. "He was a good ecologist and he understood

these Western ecosystems very well, especially for someone so young”. While attending school at UNR, Tom pursued his passions in agriculture and natural resources. He took many classes related to rangeland management and forestry. He also became involved with both the range and forestry clubs on campus, where he competed in intercollegiate athletic and technical events. In the classroom and the field, Tom used his mentoring and people skills to help many of the young minds thirsty for guidance and knowledge. In addition to his own Masters Research project, conducted near Pyramid Lake, he helped students and professors conduct natural resource related research projects across Nevada. During this time, Tom became involved with the Society for Range Management (SRM) and became a Nevada Section member. Tom took the opportunity to attend national level SRM meetings where he presented his research findings and contributed to the camaraderie of the organization. He continued his membership throughout his career as a rangeland management specialist.

Stefani is survived by his father Steven Stefani; his mother Barbara Stefani; two brothers, Dan, who attends UNR, and Jon; and his fiancé, Jessica Dhaemers. They asked that stories of their tragedy recognize Tom’s work -- that Tom be remembered for the work he was doing and the hope he provided, and not just for the sacrifice he made

The family has set up an account at a local bank. Two of their ideas are contributions toward rebuilding a school playground in Ghazni, Afghanistan (a project Tom was already working on) and a fellowship in his name at UNR.

Donations and cards can be sent to:
Steve and Barbara Stefani
995 Arrowhead Lane, Auburn, CA 95602