Marla Ruzicka, 26, from the San Francisco Bay Area dedicated her life -- however short -- to helping others.

At 28, she had traveled to Africa to work on AIDS issues, to Cuba to protest the U.S. embargo and had even spent time in Afghanistan after the U.S. war there.

The blonde-haired activist with a cherubic face and infectious smile was a one-woman campaign against human suffering who was instrumental in securing millions of dollars in aid money from the federal government for distribution in Iraq, Democratic U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont said Sunday.

"She came to us with the idea of putting a special fund in the foreign aid bill to take care of projects to help people whose businesses had been bombed by the U.S by mistake or collateral damage of some sort," Leahy explained. "Just from the force of her personality, we decided to take a chance on it."

Ruzicka, of Lakeport, Calif., founded the Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict, or CIVIC, to help families of civilians killed and injured in Iraq.

She had been there on and off since President Bush announced in March 2003 that the invasion had begun, doing door-to-door surveys to determine the number of civilian casualties, friends and family said.

And she died there Saturday in a car bombing in Baghdad.

"It's a terrible tragedy and a tragic irony that somebody who devoted her life to helping the victims of war would herself become a victim of war," said Medea Benjamin, director of the San Francisco-based human rights group Global Exchange, where Ruzicka got her start a decade ago in the world of non-governmental organizations.

Ruzicka's parents were notified of her death on Saturday, just hours after the blast. U.S. Embassy officials publicly released Ruzicka's name Sunday.

"We''ve been very worried about her but we know better than to tell our children not to do anything. We were supportive and just reminded her to be careful," said her mother, Nancy Ruzicka.

She said her daughter had left her a telephone message the night before her death, saying, "Mom and dad, I love you. I''m OK."

"She cared about people and gave people her love and help," she said. "I''ll remember the love she spread around the world and the good ambassador that she was for her country."

Benjamin said Ruzicka walked into the Global Exchange office 10 years ago as a "pretty, peppy, vivacious young woman who wanted to learn about the world."

"She had this real thirst to learn and always had a tremendous sense of compassion," Benjamin said. "She was quite remarkable in her ability to absorb different issues, quickly learn about other cultures and become an ally to people all over the world."

Leahy remembers Ruzicka as a fiery young woman who lobbied him two years ago for federal money to aid civilians in Iraq. He saw to it that $10 million was added into the multibillion-dollar foreign aid bill last year for that purpose, and said another $10 million has been set aside for next year. The money has been distributed in Iraq by government aid workers, with Ruzicka's help, Leahy said.

"She was constantly calling us to say they''re moving too slowly," he said. "She was kind of a one-person department over there ... moving the money around."

Leahy said he would speak about Ruzicka on the Senate floor Monday, and possibly help plan a memorial service for the woman in Washington.

"I said to her father this morning, "A lot of people spend their whole lives and do not begin to accomplish what she's done,"" Leahy said.

Ruzicka was set to leave Iraq within a week, according to the New York-based group Human Rights Watch.

"Everyone who met Marla was struck by her incredible effervescence and commitment," Kenneth Roth, the group's executive director, said in a statement. "She was courageous and relentless in pursuit of accurate information about civilians caught up in war." Roth also said Ruzicka had been successful in lobbying the Senate for $2.5 million dollars to assist Afghans injured by U.S. military action.

In an essay Ruzicka sent to Human Rights Watch a few days before her death, she explained the significance of her work assessing casualties.

"A number is important not only to quantify the cost of the war, but to me each number is also a story of someone whose hopes, dreams and potential will never be realized, and who left behind a family," Ruzicka wrote.

When President Bush announced in March 2003 that the invasion of Iraq had begun, Ruzicka was already in Baghdad with Code Pink, said Jodi Evans, the co-founder of the women's anti-war group.

"Bush came on television saying the game is over, we"re invading Iraq," Evans recalled. "We watched in Baghdad as the country moved into terror because to them, all they heard was that shock and awe was about to hit them."

The other activists decided to return to the United States to talk about how the Iraqi people were affected by the invasion, but Ruzicka made a commitment then and there to stay, Evans said.

"Marla thought she would be more effective staying, because once the bombs started falling, people would be hurt and she needed to help them get their lives back together," Evans said.

A funeral service is set for Saturday in Lakeport.