

Trip to Afghanistan: A Progress Report on the Building of Girls' Classrooms and a Perimeter Wall.

In August of 2003, Mohammad Khan Kharoti, his daughter Sultana (26) and his son Yama (19) traveled to the GVS schools in Sheen Kallay, Afghanistan. Their mission was to help build four new classrooms for the girls' school and a perimeter wall. Sultana and Yama, who were returning to their homeland for the first time in seventeen years, also went to teach English and mathematics, respectively.

On their journey, the three had to board five airplanes to get to Quetta, Pakistan. From there they drove across the border to Afghanistan. The drive to Sheen Kallay was filled with many time-consuming checkpoints, but the group managed to reach the village in less than a day.

Upon the Kharotis' arrival at the school, the need for more classrooms was apparent immediately. The school had added grades five and six for the boys and grades three and four for the girls. The expected summer enrollment for the school had been 150 students, but 400 attended and autumn enrollment is estimated to be over 500. The school had only three small classrooms for the boys and the girls were being taught in Mohammad Khan's brother's guestroom. Because of the lack of space children, primarily girls, were being turned away at the doors every morning.

One of the first objectives was to gather the elders of the village and talk about the school. Unanimously, the elders, including the local mullah, stated their unconditional support for the school and its attendees. Mohammad Khan was told on several occasions that the schools had become a beacon of hope for the locals and that people from villages near and far were trying to arrange for their children to attend. With many blessings and in great excitement, Mohammad Khan was told to begin work.

Construction of the new classrooms began right away. Thirty local villagers, along with Mohammad Khan and his brother, Habib, were on-site six days a week. The construction of the four rooms and the perimeter wall went on simultaneously. On the average day, workers would arrive at sunrise and work until late afternoon, taking a break for lunch and the traditional tea. Truckloads of bricks and gravel came in daily and the classrooms began to take form slowly.

The perimeter wall, which was needed for security and privacy, was built on a foundation of cement and rocks one meter below ground. The wall itself is now two and a half meters high, built with cement and cinderblocks. The parents of girls attending the school were understandably conscious of the visibility of their daughters to men passing by the school and the wall construction has allayed their concerns. A mosque on an adjoining lot forms one end of the compound and serves as part of the perimeter wall.

Sultana and Yama spent from two to seven hours a day teaching. Yama took a group of 15 students under his wing. His rigorous curriculum began with simple arithmetic and, in

four weeks, ended with his students solving basic algebra problems. Students had about fifty homework problems per night, one timed quiz each day, and a timed exam once a week. Nine-year-old Abdullah, son of the local mullah, finished as the top student.

In his final days of instruction, Yama spoke with his students about their goals in life. To his great pleasure, the students professed a love for education and a desire to attend and complete studies at a university. One student, Raza Khan, said that his country had seen enough fighting and that only through their education could Afghanistan rise from its rubble.

Yama, responsible for documentation of the trip, took over 500 digital photos and many hours of video. He also interviewed the teachers at the school and created short biographies, which can now be found on the GVS website.

Sultana taught after-school voluntary English classes to both boys and girls. She had 16 girls and eight boys in these classes. Her students were so eager to learn that they would stay long after class was over to listen to Sultana. She challenged their paradigms about morals, hygiene, and etiquette. She also taught a one-day dental hygiene class to all four hundred students. Afterwards, she handed out toothbrushes, toothpaste and floss donated by the Pre-Dental Student Organization at Portland State University.

In the early afternoon, Sultana usually taught a general science class about subjects ranging from anatomy to earth science. In her free time, she spoke with local women about the advantages of smaller families and cautiously introduced ideas of birth control. The average family in the village has about 13 children.

Sultana's conversations with her students were helpful to them in an unexpected way. In a society where women have been denied education for decades, many of the girls truly believed they could not perform well in school. Her role model gave them self-confidence and many began to believe that they could do anything they put their minds to.

When the Kharotis departed, many of the students and teachers at the school were in tears. They asked Mohammad Khan to relay their message of appreciation to the GVS donors and Americans in general. Many parents admitted a fear of a halt to the financial support for the school.

Presently, the four classrooms for the girls are still under construction. The perimeter wall has been completed on all but one side and is almost ready for the installment of a front gate. GVS will need further funding to ensure that the wall and classrooms are complete before the coming winter. Many items at the construction site have not yet been paid for and money is due both to local merchants and workers, all of whom are very pleased to help with the project.

-Yama Kharoti