

Green Village Schools

Report on Mohammad's 2009 trip to Afghanistan

This follow-up to our previous newsletter contains two reports. In the first, by our Board Chairman, you will find there is universal commitment to rebuild the Shin Kalay School and to expand educational opportunities elsewhere in Helmand Province. In the second, by Dr. Kharoti's daughter Homa who traveled with him, you will see Afghanistan through the eyes of a college educated woman with family roots in that country.

Summary of Recent Developments

Steve Boyer, MD

Mohammad and his daughter Homa have returned from six weeks in Afghanistan, where they met with elders, students, government officials, Afghan and foreign health care providers at Bost Hospital, and the international community at large in Lashkar Gah (**LG**). There was enthusiastic support for a number of GVS proposals, including a new primary school in Shin Kalay (**SK**), an Advanced Education Center (**AEC**) in LG, and rural midwife/nurse training programs at Bost Hospital in LG.

The SK Elders received a formal document of permission from the Taliban to begin school again. The permission comes with conditions that we not use the Karzai history book and that the Afghan government not pay any teacher salaries. The Ministry of Education (MOE) is willing to provide us books that do not have Karzai's photograph and they can provide tents if needed. Since the schools destruction, we have been running classes taught by the Mullahs in several mosques. This month we are starting classes in a space outside one of the larger mosques, with ten former teachers and over 300 students already signed up. A charity in London is providing financial support for the construction of temporary mud wall classrooms and for the purchase of books for the students. Ayub Kharoti, Mohammad's nephew, is supervising the entire project.

The Education Advisor for the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Anna Lennartsdotter, who coordinates funding from Denmark, the UK, and the US, has previously overseen the payment of room and board for 100 boys from Nad-i-Ali District (**NAD**) studying in LG. She and Mohammad have now convinced the MOE that the purchase of a bus for

(Continued on page 2)

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transporting girls from boarding rooms in LG to public schools there, would allow the same support for NAD girls. Her goal is 300 girls. So another opportunity for girls' schooling may be opening up as a result of a practical suggestion by Mohammad – a bus! Anna is also responsible for directing funds from the British charity in London to the temporary school in SK and Ayub has submitted a proposal to her for help with the Advanced Education Center in LG as well.

The Chairman of Education for Helmand Province said the MOE will continue to accept SK students into the LG schools and will put money into their budget for rebuilding a permanent school in SK. Further, he agreed that if GVS supports a girls-only school in the Safi area of LG by paying teachers' salaries, the MOE will take over the salaries during the next two years as proposed. We will pay three teachers, including the Mullah, \$50/teacher/mo for one year, and half of that for another year. The Chairman says the MOE has a plot of land available in the Safi area and will build a permanent school there.



Provincial Chairman of Education,
Sher Agha Safi & Dr. Kharoti

The Governor of Helmand (Gulab Mangal) gave his approval for two plots of land for the Advanced Education Center, one for classrooms and an office, another for a warehouse if needed. The plots are government land available for purchase at reduced price. He fully supports all GVS projects in Helmand Province.

The Provincial Representative of the Ministry of Finance was informed of the problems we have had with a duty free tax certificate for supplies shipped from the US. He assured Mohammad that the certificate would be provided when needed but the certificate is not in hand and at the present time we are not shipping supplies from the US. We will continue to buy items locally, even computers. Purchasing there is cheaper than shipping and it helps the local economy.

Mohammad met with a number of staff at Bost Hospital to discuss GVS support of a midwife training program. He was told that it would cost \$200,000 for five teachers to train 20 students in an 18 month program. Having personal knowledge of the actual costs, he responded to them that GVS would pay \$36,000 only (Af4000/mo/teacher for salaries and Af4000/mo/student for room and board, with Af/\$ exchange rate of 50/1) and would subtract payment when either students or teachers were absent. Ann Raisma (Estonian health expert and nurse) would work with GVS to put together the midwifery program. The midwife students from any district in Helmand Province would be welcome and would have to return to work in their own district

(Continued on page 3)

when training is completed. Mohammad also talked to hospital staff about a rural nurse training program for ten female students from Helmand Province at a cost of \$1000/mo for three years or \$36,000. Planning is on hold until Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) takes over administration of the hospital and brings in more surgeons and midwives. In theory MSF administration and staff would enhance the midwife and nurse training programs for rural students. Both of these programs are essential for improving rural maternity health care in Helmand Province. The life time risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes in Afghanistan (1 in 8) is third highest in the world, exceeded only in Sierra Leone and Niger, and within Afghanistan the risk is highest in rural areas.

Regarding the Advanced Education Center, Mohammad was delighted with the size, design, and location of a house right across the street from the USAID offices and was able to get a rental agreement at a fraction of the cost for similar houses in the area. We have signed a contract for one year and begun planning for the Center where computer, math, and English classes will be held. A larger number of computers will enable more students in LG to take classes there. The center will also be the administrative office for any and all projects in Nad-i-Ali District.

The USAID office informed Mohammad that American volunteers working with GVS could stay in their staff house. Potential volunteers might be teachers at the Advanced Education Center or health care providers/teachers at Bost Hospital.

In the meantime the SK girls studying in LG have moved out of the old rental house because the rent went up and have moved into a house purchased by Mohammad's brother, Habib. The rental fee is now going to Habib with assurance of a stable monthly fee. The living conditions for the 11 girls are much improved as well, especially with running water. Until the Advanced Education Center is ready for classes, the girls will continue their special classes in this home.

Measures of success:

GVS is the only NGO with education projects in Helmand Province. None of the 295 CARE or 39 Central Asian Institute schools (reported on in Nicholas Kristof's recent New York Times article) are in this politically unstable province. The CARE schools go through 6th grade and students are taught in mosques. The major difference for GVS is the goal of getting boys and girls completely through high school and into college, with a focus on classes in English, computers, and math along the way. Computer hookups require electrical wiring generally not available in the mosques. The best measures of our success to date are having 400 girls in SK with some level of literacy, 11 girls studying in LG, including 4 in the 11th grade with some fluency in English, 100

(Continued on page 4)

boys in secondary school in LG, and 27 boys in high school in Kabul, including one who is the top student in all of his classes.

Projects underway and anticipated costs:

- 1) School in Shin Kalay: over 300 boys and girls already signed up and likely many more to follow. The salaries for ten teachers will cost ~\$10,800 per year. (ave ~\$87/teacher/mo in 2008).
- 2) Support of Shin Kalay girls studying in Lashkar Gah: \$15,000 per year, including the tutorial costs, (to come under AEC expenses when the center is operational) and room and board.
- 3) Advanced Education Center: the only current expense is the \$1000 per month rent. Ongoing costs will run an estimated \$42,600 per year eventually. In the meantime the major set-up cost will be computers.
- 4) Safi area school in Lashkar Gah: three teachers including the Mullah will teach Arabic, and reading and writing Pashto to 80 girls at a cost of \$50/teacher/mo or \$1800 per year.
- 5) Midwife and nurse training programs: \$36,000 each for total of \$72,000 per graduating class.

In summary:

Temporary school construction (project #1) is underway in Shin Kalay with adequate financial support from a British charity. Future construction of a new school, if and when the region is politically stable, also has promised support from the MOE. We currently need help supporting the SK girls studying in LG (project #2). The Dutch and British funding sources also want to support education of NAD girls in LG so, if and when this support is realized, we may have some help with project #2. The other three projects (#s 3, 4, and 5), all in the safe environment of LG, will need support from other sources. We have one grant proposal underway and promised assistance as outlined above, but now is the time we really need your help. We want to keep the educational momentum going. We are convinced that the hunger for education can no longer be extinguished by local reticence and threats, even in Helmand Province. The Taliban themselves seem to have an investment in schools beyond madrassas and are agreeable to projects with workable constraints. The MOE understands the constraints and is supportive of us working within them.

Your support of GVS has significantly increased literacy in Shin Kalay. Yes, the first school was lost, but its destruction has created an even stronger hunger for education. Your continuing support will nurture this hunger and bring hope to those who have struggled so long without it.

(Continued on page 5)

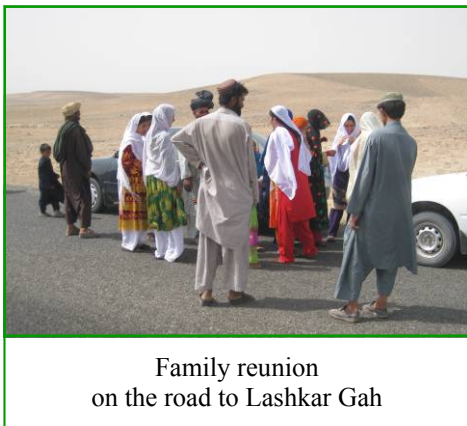
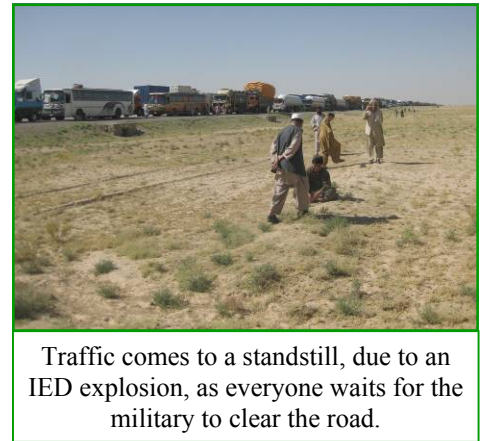
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I need to go back...

Homa Kharoti

Everyone told me that I was crazy to go to Afghanistan during a time like this. I started to get nervous in the days leading up to my departure as I watched the news and read articles online about bombings every other day. But at that point my ticket was already purchased and there was no turning back. I told my father that I wanted to go to Afghanistan and I wasn't about to go back on my word. When we were landing in Kabul my stomach felt as if it was stuffed with butterflies. I was so nervous and yet so excited. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, exhaled, and then told myself, "Homa, what happens will happen. Don't let your fears distract you from why you came." At that moment the wheels touched the runway and I opened my eyes to see an unsightly airport.

Days later we took a flight to Kandahar and proceeded to drive for 3 hours on a road that would ultimately bring us to our destination, Lashkar Gah. What we feared most was the possibility of IEDs blowing up as we drove. Unfortunately our fear presented itself not once, not twice, but five times during that road trip. I had never been so nervous nor had such a near death experience up until then. My mind was running through a list of questions and emergency protocols – which I had gained from workplace trainings in the event of a disaster – that were of no use to me in Afghanistan. I was scared.

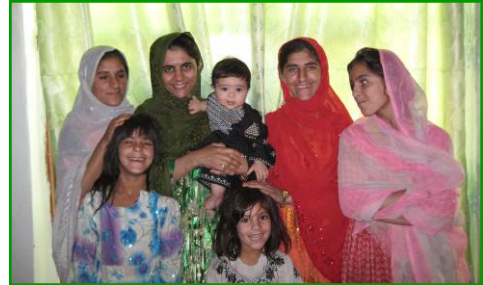


We finally arrived at our destination which was my uncle's house in Lashkar Gah. I didn't want to be rude so I did my best to engage in small talk about my long travel with my family. But my mind was somewhere else. I was very silent and numb to the realization of my arrival. I was gazing out the window of the living room thinking about how I was so far away from home. I was calm because I knew that this was what I asked for and my sensitivity to the shocking surroundings would lessen as days passed. My dad turned

(Continued on page 6)

to me and said exactly what I was thinking, “Homa you’re a long way from home. But you will do good work here and tell the stories to people in America.” So my story begins...

I met dozens of women who wanted to see me. I was treated like a celebrity at times because everyone wanted to meet me. Distant households would hear that an *American* woman arrived who’s Afghan. Meeting the women and chatting with them was intriguing to me and at times uncomfortable. Every single time I was asked, “How many children do you have?” Not “*Do* you have any children?” When I said none, the women gasped shockingly. Then I was asked “Well, who has your father given you to?” I replied, “No one, I’m not married.” The women covered their mouths in disbelief. They would go on to tell me that I’m a grown woman and that I have been spoiled making it so no man will want me. Or, that they expected me to have had 7 to 10 children by now. In turn, I was also shocked by their questions and conversations. “I’m only 23 years old,” I thought. I just graduated from college and plan on going to law school. Getting married and having children is the last thing on my mind.



Some of the Lashkar Gah Girls with Homa’s sister-in-law, Pulow, and her baby who also went on this trip.

After being asked these questions so many times I replied back to one woman in a subtly irritated tone saying, “What’s a man? A book will get me a lot farther.” The women sat back slowly and drifted off into thought for a few moments. Then she made eye contact with me again and said, “I’ve never been given the chance to have a choice between the two.” My heart sank and guilt overcame me. It was similar to the feeling of when you eat the last bite of your sister’s tasty leftover meal not knowing that she was craving it all day at work and waiting to get home to eat it.



Midwife, Homa, and nurse reunion at Bost Hospital.

I felt bad for my irritated comment. I wanted to give her the chance to choose just like I wanted to buy another meal for my sister. Luckily I was able to turn that conversation around from a depressing topic to one that was hopeful and motivating. I told her, “Your chance may have passed, but your daughters still have an opportunity to go to school and better their lives. I think you should support them in going to school because there is an entire world out there to learn about.” Her spirits were lifted and she smiled saying yes she would support them. Everything the women talked about related to their children, their husbands, making dinner, sewing things, and

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neighborhood gossip. Few conversations, if any, took place about the economy, current events in the news, recently published books, musicians, local businesses or historical events.

It was a busy month full of tutoring sessions and exciting meetings regarding the reconstruction of the schools. We met with the Chairman of the Ministry of Education for Helmand Province, the Governor of Helmand Province, members of the international community, and the board of medical doctors at the Lashkar Gah hospital. Though I was very fortunate and honored to meet these wonderful people nothing was more personally rewarding than tutoring the students who used to attend the schools in Shin Kalay. I was very impressed with the reading level of some of the students. I brought a few books of my own to read during the trip. A good handful of the students I sat with could read those books. Their pronunciation was better than I expected and when I needed to correct them they caught on quickly. Though the meaning of some statements was difficult for them to comprehend they probed me with questions until they understood. The students from Shin Kalay went on to tell me that there were even times when they found themselves correcting other students' English at the school in Lashkar Gah.



Homa, Gov Mangal, and Mohammad.
Homa accompanied her father
to many of his meetings

Spending time with them gave me a chance to see how much they craved to learn new things. They wanted to be told stories, learn rhymes, sing American songs, and play games like hopscotch. I felt as if I was providing them with more than just an education but rather an opportunity to see the world differently. I wish I could have spent more time with them. I wish I could show them the world. As the end of our trip grew closer, the only thing that I could think about was how I wished I could have done more for them. It was a strange feeling leaving the country in its chaotic state. As we flew over Afghanistan on our way back, I gazed off into the hillsides that lined the horizon. I felt guilty for leaving. I was going home to my cozy, sanitary, safe and opportunistic lifestyle in the states. I thought to myself, "We are no different. Why then do I get to leave and they have to stay?"

Since my return to America I have already thought about when I will go back. I need to go back and help these children and provide them with the same opportunity my parents were presented with, an education. As my parents would say, "Education is the key to life. It will take you places."

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To:

Building Hope through Education in Afghanistan



Dr. Kharoti met with elders from the district of Nad-i-Ali as well as from surrounding districts. Invariably he was asked “How can we help you?” to which he would respond, “You can help me by sending your sons and daughters to school.”

Green Village Schools

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