

Building schools in Afghanistan: One man's battle for education is his way to give back



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(Scroll down for videos)

Dr. Mohammad Khan Kharoti, a Portland resident and founder of the nonprofit Green Village Schools, has worked tirelessly to establish schools in Helmand Province where he grew up

Dr. Mohammad Khan Kharoti has been waging a battle in Afghanistan for nearly 13 years.

Not with the bullets and bombs associated with the war-torn country, but a benevolent battle in which the 70-year-old Portland resident and native of Afghanistan has advocated and raised funds for classrooms, chalkboards, scholarships, computer labs, school supplies and books.

It's a peaceful fight in which Kharoti has worked to develop relationships and build the trust needed to establish public schools in his home village of Shin Kalay and other nearby communities.

It's been a long struggle, but one that Kharoti, a retired physician and nuclear medical technologist, plans to continue the rest of his life. He's doing it with the help of Green Village Schools, the Portland-based nonprofit organization he founded and for which he serves as president, as well as other charitable organizations and residents of Helmand Province.

"The biggest enemy of Afghanistan is illiteracy. Illiteracy will not take us anywhere," Kharoti says. "The only thing is to bring education to the community and bring hope to the lives of people so they can do something for themselves, their neighbors, their community and the world around them."

Kharoti plans to speak Thursday in Albany and Corvallis on "Building Schools: Giving Hope to the Children of Afghanistan." He'll be Valley Talk on KGAL, AM 1580 from 11 a.m. to noon; in Oregon State University's Memorial Union La Raza Room 206, 3 to 4:15 p.m.; and in the Fellowship Hall of Albany First Christian Church, 432 Ferry St. S.W., 7 to 8:15 p.m.

A way of giving back

Kharoti was born in 1943 in the Zabul Province of Afghanistan. Until he was 7, he and his family lived in a nomadic caravan that traveled by camel.

In 1950, the government allotted the Kharotis and other families 15 acres each to farm in the Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan. They grew wheat, corn, barley, cotton, alfalfa, watermelons and beans. The village created from all the adjoining farms became Shin Kalay, meaning “Green Village.”

Kharoti was 11 when his father died. A year later, he became the first in his family to go to school.

After completing primary school, he was admitted to an auxiliary nursing program at nearby Lashkar Gah Hospital, where he graduated second in his class and eventually became head nurse.

He later blazed through secondary school in Lebanon. An American friend there then invited him to live with his family in Iowa, where Kharoti attended community college and transferred to Coe College, completing a premed degree in 1975.

That year he returned to Afghanistan to start a seven-year medical degree and internship program in Jalalabad. He stayed on to teach there one year before moving closer to home in Lashkar Gah, where he was a general surgeon until 1987.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan that year, Kharoti fled with his family to Pakistan. He worked there for the next year, teaching paramedics and treating wounded Afghan fighters known as Mujahideen.

In April 1989, the Iowa family that assisted him in the 1970s helped out again, this time sponsoring the Kharoti family in a move to Portland.

There, Kharoti started a new career as a nuclear medicine technologist, working for Kaiser in Portland and the Southwest Washington Medical Center in Vancouver, Wash., until his retirement in 2011.

Members of his family have all done well. His wife continues to work as a translator. One of his daughters is a dentist, another daughter is an accountant and another daughter has completed a general science degree and is working in the Portland area. His son, a physician, is doing a residency in interventional radiology at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland.

“They’re doing very good,” Kharoti said of his children. “They came here young and applied themselves.”

When they were younger, his children accompanied him to Afghanistan and helped teach English and math to children in Shin Kalay.

Steve Boyer, board chairman of Green Village Schools, said Kharoti’s desire to help the children of Helmand Province is a way of giving back.

“He wants the children of Afghanistan to have the same opportunity to read and write so that they too can interact with the larger world around them,” Boyer says.

‘This is not the solution’

By 1998, Kharoti had been away from Afghanistan for 11 years. He wanted to see his brother and other family members in Shin Kalay. The Taliban was in control of the country

at the time, and he was curious about what was happening.

He didn't like what he saw in Shin Kalay. Kids were not in school because there were no schools in the village of 11,000. Instead, he saw many children working in poppy fields, looking as if they were "semi sleeping."

"Being a physician and seeing the conditions there, I said, 'This is not the solution for the children of Afghanistan.'"

Over the next few years he started making plans for a small school. When he returned to Shin Kalay in March 2001, he and his brother decided that one acre of the family compound could be used to build a future school. For the short term, a one-room mosque on the property would double as a classroom.

Kharoti talked to villagers and learned that the Taliban would not let the project proceed.

He traveled to Kandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city, to discuss the issue with high-level Taliban officials.

"They told me that they were not against school and education, but that boys and girls would have to be separated," Kharoti recalls. The other condition: Girls' teachers had to be either women or older married men.

Kharoti agreed to the conditions.

He was also advised to visit the Taliban's minister of education in the capital, Kabul. He traveled 450 miles and met with the official, who gave Kharoti the green light for his plans.

The school started with 10 boys and six girls. When Kharoti returned in early 2002, "classes were bigger," he says.

In 2003, the Green Village Schools nonprofit was formed and received donations that went toward the Shin Kalay School construction, which also started that year.

Completed in 2007, the school had 24 classrooms and a library. A computer lab was under construction.

"It had firebrick walls and steel beams. It was very well built," Kharoti says. "The (Nad Ali) district (of Helmand Province) never had a school like this."

Enrollment had soared to about 1,200 — 800 boys and 400 girls.

Then disaster struck on Oct. 13, 2008. Over a three-day period, men armed with guns and backhoes tore down the school and stole just about everything, leaving behind only a rubble of bricks. Villagers, however, managed to hide about 150 school desks.

The men were not from the village and Kharoti still does not know who they represented.

The 2010 documentary, "Silencing the Light" featured Kharoti in the aftermath of the school's destruction.

"It was a very sad story, a very tragic moment in my life," he says in the film. "My only treasure outside of my wife and my children was the school for the children of Afghanistan."

At public presentations, Kharoti has shown slides of children in Shin Kalay continuing their school lessons next to the rubble.

“Somebody may have destroyed the building, but the will and love and hunger for education is in the heart of children and their parents,” he says. “We may not have a classroom, but we have the will to study, and that’s what’s important.”

Afghan Appeal, a London -based charity, has funded much of the school’s reconstruction, which has cost nearly \$190,000 so far. Fourteen of a planned 24 classrooms have been built and are filled with students throughout the day.

Enrollment last fall reached 1,160, with 790 boys in grades 1-11 and 370 girls in grades 1-4.

After the destruction, there was fear among parents for girls, whose schooling then became centered in private homes. Kharoti hopes that the number of classes and grade levels for girls will expand as more classrooms become available.

In addition to Shin Kalay School, Green Village Schools started an Advance Education Center, which offers English and computer classes to more than 150 middle school and high school boys and girls in nearby Lashkar Gah.

At the request of villagers in Sakar east of Shin Kalay, the nonprofit organization also has helped fund the formative stages of a school building there.

Three girls who attended Shin Kalay School are now in medical school studying to become physicians. Other former students have come back to teach at the school.

“These people who worked very hard are giving back,” Kharoti says. “It has a ripple effect.”

‘Future of the country’

Boyer, the board chairman of Green Village Schools, says Kharoti has succeeded in Afghanistan because “he works in almost a magical way with all comers.”

“He’s just amazing,” Boyer says. “He knows people in the government, including the governor of Helmand Province. He successfully worked with the Taliban.”

For Kharoti, it’s simply a matter of knowing the people, the language (Pashto) and the customs, and presenting information about the importance of schools and education.

“I just go to the community and say this is the education for your children,” he says.

Two hot-button issues in Afghanistan, religion and politics, are not on Kharoti’s agenda.

“I’m not talking religion,” he says, noting that he is Muslim and considers religion a “private thing.”

“My friends in Portland are Christians, Jews, Muslims ... everybody,” he says. “As long as they’re good people and get along, we can all sit down and talk to each other.”

Asked about the drawdown of U.S. troops this year and the future of Afghanistan, he does not seem too concerned.

“The (Afghan) government’s biggest problem now is corruption,” he says. “Next year, they’ll

have a new president. ... The countryside will be the same as it was before.

“I think education and schooling are the main things. I don’t think we should bring education into politics.”

Kharoti will return to Afghanistan next month — he travels there each spring and fall for a working visit.

He’ll visit the school construction site at Sakar, the Advanced Education Center in Lashkar Gah and the reconstructed school in Shin Kalay, where he’ll work on a number of projects.

“We hope to build a computer lab, a restroom and put in windows and doors,” he says.

He also looks forward to teaching.

“I love working with the kids. They’re the future of the country,” he says. “It’s important to work with the young kids, to teach them so they’ll grow up as decent people and good citizens who can think for themselves.”

Current donations to the Portland-based nonprofit Green Village Schools are going toward the purchase of computers and other equipment for Shin Kalay School, operational expenses (including salaries for English and computer teachers, supplies and fuel of generators) for the Advanced Education Center in Lashkar Gah and scholarships for women studying for careers as physicians, midwives and nurses in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan.

Donations can be made on the organization’s website: www.greenvillageschools.org. Checks can be sent to Green Village Schools, P.O. Box, 80061, Portland, OR 97280. Donations are tax deductible.

Mohammad Kharoti's mid-valley appearances canceled

Due to illness, Dr. Mohammad Kharoti has canceled his three talks scheduled for Thursday in the mid-valley.

Kharoti is founder and president of the nonprofit Green Village Schools, which has established schools in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan. His work was featured in Sunday’s Democrat-Herald and Gazette-Times.

He was to speak from 11 a.m. to noon on KGAL, AM 1580. Graham Kislingbury, online editor for Mid-Valley Newspapers who wrote a Feb. 23 story about Kharoti’s work, will be on Valley Talk at that time.

Also canceled are Kharoti's talks in Corvallis and Albany on “Building Schools: Giving Hope to the Children of Afghanistan.” Those talks were scheduled for 3 p.m. Thursday in La Raza Room 208 of Oregon State University's Memorial Union and 7 p.m. Thursday at Albany First Christian Church.

No date has been set to reschedule the talks.