

PROMOTING PEACE THROUGH EDUCATION

By Steve Gravelle

Mohammad Kharoti '75 continues to build a bridge between his native and adopted lands.

"It will be strong, it will not be broken, it will always be there," Kharoti said of his native Afghanistan.

Back on campus for Coe's 1972-76 cluster reunion Oct. 23-26, Kharoti updated former classmates on his effort to educate the children of his neighbors in the rural Afghan village where he grew up.

First profiled in the Summer 2002 Courier, Sheen Kallay School has a current enrollment of about 675, including 250 girls.

That was unheard-of in Afghanistan when Kharoti, 60, started his school in early 2001. He had to first convince officials of the Taliban government that educating women wouldn't violate the regime's proclaimed strict Islamic principles.

"You say a female patient can't go to a male doctor," Kharoti told an official in Kabul. "Somewhere along the line, we're going to need a woman doctor. If your wife gets sick, would you like to keep her?"

Kharoti won approval to admit girls if his school's curriculum was maintained "with Islamic principles in mind."

Illiterate until he was 12, when his nomadic family settled in Sheen Kallay under an American-backed development project that provided them with irrigated farmland, Kharoti fled Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion of 1979. Before that he'd attended high school in Lebanon, came to Iowa under the sponsorship of an American doctor, graduated from Coe, and returned to Afghanistan to earn his medical degree.

Although illiterate himself, Kharoti's father instilled in him a reverence for education. The year after his father's death, Kharoti honored his wishes, enrolling in the first school to open in his hometown.

"Because my dad died of sickness (probably pneumonia), I thought I could help somebody else" through medicine, Kharoti said.

Kharoti now lives in Portland, Ore., where he works as a nuclear medicine technologist. He and his wife, Fatima, have three daughters and a son.

Daughter Sultana Kharoti

'00, 26, and son Yama, 19, accompanied their father on his most recent trip home in August. Both were born in Sheen Kallay, where Kharoti's mother and a brother still live, and spent their six weeks teaching at the school.

Among Sultana's lessons was telling students about what happened in New York City and Washington D.C. on Sept. 11, 2001.

"They did not know, because they could not see it," he said. "Everybody was shocked. They couldn't imagine what happened."

Learning of Sept. 11 perhaps helped Afghanis understand a bit about the subsequent American invasion of their country. Kharoti saw no military presence in Sheen Kallay, but said Afghanis are understandably wary of any foreigners.

"American people I'm sure have pretty good hearts, kind and generous hearts," he said. "But when you're in a military uniform, people are scared of you, because we have a history."

Kharoti has started a nonprofit charity, Green Village Schools



Photo by Yama Kharoti

Sultana Kharoti '00 teaches Afghan school children about the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States. She accompanied her father, Mohammad Kharoti '75, to Afghanistan in August and spent six weeks teaching at the school he established in 2001.

(Sheen Kallay is Pashtu for "green village"), to sustain and support the school. Information is available by writing Green Village Schools, P.O. Box 80061, Portland, OR, 97280, or online at www.greenvillageschools.org.

Although they're charitable, Kharoti is confident donations to the school will produce a profit of a sort.

"If we want to help somebody, we have to put our energy to education," he said. "It will change their philosophy of life completely."

Steve Gravelle is a freelance writer and a reporter for the Cedar Rapids Gazette.