

GOING HOME

FORMER NOMAD LENDS A HAND TO AFGHANISTAN

by Steve Gravelle

The itinerary is Portland, Ore.-Washington, D.C.-London-Dubai-Quetta-Islamabad. The last leg is overland, across the frontier separating Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"The people are the same, the people in the country," said **Mohammad Kharoti '75**.

Kharoti made the long journey to his native land in February, returning March 28. A consultant for the relief and aid agency, Mercy Corps, he was sent to check operations at its two hospitals and six clinics across southern Afghanistan. But he was also able to visit family and Sheen Kallay School, next door to his family's compound in the village of that name.

Kharoti and his brother, Gul Habeb, started the school in 2001, when Kharoti returned to Afghanistan for the first time since 1987.

He welcomed the chance to catch up with his family, but Kharoti's mission that trip was convincing Taliban officials to allow girls to attend the new school — a first under the fundamentalist Islamic regime.

"I went to the Taliban, I went



photo by Scott Heidler/Mercy Corps

Mohammad Kharoti '75 sits with family members in their village compound 100 miles southwest of Kandahar. Kharoti recently returned to the village where he was born and where his mother and extended family still live to distribute supplies to a school he helped to start.

to Kandahar and talked to them," Kharoti said. "I said, 'If the women have to be seen by female doctors, then we have to train female doctors and this will be the start.' I said myself and my family and my brother will help. They said, 'If the security's good and you go with Islamic principles, we have no

objection.'"

The school opened in the spring of 2001 with 10 boys and six girls. After a 2 1/2 -month suspension during last fall's peak of military activity in the region, classes have resumed. Current enrollment is about 200 in first through fourth

grades, 30 of them girls.

"We start with English," Kharoti said. Mathematics and natural sciences are also emphasized and all regular school subjects are taught.

"We hope to get them to see what the world expects of them," Kharoti said. "Maybe within a few years, if we find the funds, there will be 12,000 students."

If that sounds like a dream, consider the speaker is a man who was illiterate until he was 12.

"When I was a kid there was no school, because my parents were nomads," Kharoti said.

That changed in the 1950s and early 1960s, when an American-backed aid project brought irrigation and development to the Helmand River valley. Kharoti's family eagerly accepted the offer of farmland for settlement.

"We were tired of moving all the time," Kharoti said simply. "We became farmers."

And Kharoti became a student at 12, when the government set up a school in his village of Nada Alie. His father had died when he was younger, but not before instilling in Kharoti the importance of education.

His primary role was to support his family, but Kharoti managed to attend school in the mornings, followed by afternoons in the fields. During high school, he was invited to attend a new school of nursing.

Kharoti's work ethic continued strong, and by 1963 he was head nurse at the hospital in Lashkeragh, where an American doctor, Tim Roberts, took notice.

"He got interested in my life, and I said I'd like to be a physician," Kharoti said.

Roberts began writing letters, first finding Kharoti a place in a high school in Lebanon. After finishing a six-year curriculum in just over two years, Kharoti, again with Roberts' help, came to the United States, first to a community college in Clinton, Iowa, where he stayed with a local family, then to Coe.

"Coe gave me a scholarship — \$2,500," Kharoti said. "I enjoyed the Midwest. The people were very friendly, Coe College especially. I still have the letter that admitted me that is part of my life history."

Kharoti lived on campus and found work at Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids as an operating room technician.

"In Afghanistan my background was nursing," he said.

"When I came here I was introduced to the surgical techniques of the western world. They kept me in touch with my medical dreams."

To Kharoti, Iowa will always mean generosity and friendliness.

"I was alone by myself, a single man not married, and they said 'You are in America,'" he recalled. "I have great respect for the institution. If I was going to start again from the beginning, I would choose Coe."

Mohammad Kharoti '75 with a student at Sheen Kallay School. Kharoti started and supports the school, which is adjacent to his family's home.

Born to a nomadic family, he did not attend school himself until age 12 and then went on to study medicine.

photo by Scott Heidler/Mercy Corps

After graduating from Coe with a bachelor's in general science, Kharoti returned to Afghanistan, where he earned his doctor's certificate in Jalalabad.

The Soviet invasion came just a few years later, and Kharoti fled with his wife, Fatima, and four children.

"I'm the only one that came out," he said. "Everybody stayed over there. I lost one brother during the war."

Kharoti and his young family first landed in Quetta, Pakistan, where he had his first contact with Mercy Corps. The organization hired him to teach field medicine to local staff

who were transporting injured Afghans across the border for more extensive treatment at Quetta.

After a year of that, Kharoti went to work at the U.S. consulate in Karachi. The family immigrated to Oregon in 1989 as refugees. The entire family holds dual U.S.-Afghan citizenship.

Kharoti, 59, and his wife have three daughters ages 15, 20, and 24, and a son, 18. He now works in nuclear medicine for the big HMO Kaiser Permanente, but Kharoti's heart is in Afghanistan and he continues to work for Mercy Corps.

Based in Scotland and the U.S., the agency since 1973 has provided more than \$575 million in aid to citizens of 73



nations. Current Mercy Corps programs reach 5 million people in 25 countries. The agency has been in Afghanistan since the mid-1980s, when it was still occupied by the Soviets.

"They were there under the pre-mujahadeen, they were there when the Taliban took over, and they are there now," Kharoti said. "They work with any type of government. The goal is how to help the people — you don't try to get into the politics. Mercy Corps has done great."

And there's the school at Sheen Kallay, the likes of which Kharoti calls the keys to his homeland's future.

"Education is the most important part of the whole thing," declared the man who didn't attend school until he was 12. "Everything is important, but education is the key to the lives of these youngsters. The idea of learning and giving and modern life ... modern technology is very important. We have to somehow work with the rest of the world and understand the international community — and that all is done through learning."

Kharoti calls the events of

Sept. 11 "this unfortunate thing happened. Honestly, it hurt us on both sides: This country is our home, and this other country we were born in. So we felt pretty hurt by the situation. We felt stranded, under pressure."

As the attacks' origins became apparent, the Kharoti family felt "depression, for a few weeks," he said. But the Taliban's support for Osama bin Laden's organization isn't shared by most Afghans, according to Kharoti.

"Our country got involved in it," he said, "and some people took advantage of our hospitality."

The Taliban's fall was palpable during his most recent trip.

"The changes were that music's (played) now, people played music, there were schools," he said. "There was hope the international community will be able to bring peace and security. The common man was happy and enthusiastic for the good work of the international community, but so far, security was really an issue."

For now, Afghans have little fear of political violence, but banditry is rampant outside the major cities.



photo by Scott Heidler/Mercy Corps

Mohammad Kharoti '75 examines a young girl with typhoid at the Lashkar Gah Hospital. The girl's father (far right) had to purchase medicine at the local bazaar. Kharoti recently helped to deliver medical supplies to Mercy Corps clinics in southwestern Afghanistan.

"Security was not as good as when the Taliban was there," Kharoti said. "I personally saw two cases when I was there." In one case, "a husband and wife and a couple of kids" were shot when their home in a rural village was invaded. The wounded were treated by Mercy Corps doctors.

But Kharoti is confident enough of Afghanistan's stability that he'd allow his son Yama to travel there. A computer whiz, Yama graduated from high school as valedictorian and class president in early June and was talking with Mercy Corps officials about work on a project in Afghanistan.

Kharoti remains a man with a

foot in two vastly different worlds. He likes it that way.

"I would like to go back and fourth" between Oregon and Afghanistan, he said. And "if we come to the Midwest sometime I'd like to come back to Coe."

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