

Our last update to donors mentioned work on a grant from an agency in Afghanistan to set up an Advanced Education Center (AEC) in Lashkar Gah. The other NGOs participating in the grant are PeacePal (Albuquerque) and Afghan Sister Village Project (Los Alamos). Mohammad retired from his job with Kaiser and Southwest Washington Hospital to spend five months in Afghanistan setting up the project. Despite many challenges and setbacks, the project is well underway and we are still under budget.

In Kabul, Mohammad and his nephew Ayub Kharoti, now one of two project managers, purchased 30 computers, their accessories, a bus for student transport, and a large generator. To eliminate transport cost, they used the bus to haul equipment to Lashkar Gah. Mohammad rented a large house near the edge of town and had it wired for the computers, then heard from local men that they would prefer we not transport girls to that part of town for schooling. Instead Mohammad rented another house close enough to the public schools that the boys and girls can walk to the AEC for classes. This negated the need for a second bus but required the purchase of a second smaller generator. A VSAT (very small aperture terminal) system for internet service has been set up in the house and the two largest rooms have been turned into classrooms for 20 plus students each.



Boys taking English proficiency test

Safety for American teachers became such a concern that we decided instead to hire Afghan teachers, with no shortage of university graduate candidates. Interviews were done from New Mexico via Skype, two English and two computer instructors were selected, and their internet based TESOL (Teaching English to Students of Other Languages) training

began in August. Several hundred boys and girls were tested for English proficiency and 212 (47% of them girls) enrolled in the AEC courses in September. They were joined by 20 male and 20 female public school teachers who wanted to improve their computer and English skills.



Boys taking computer class at AEC

The program, then, has been expanded significantly beyond our original plan for just 25 boys and 25 girls. *How does the staff of four teachers accommodate 252 students?* They do it by teaching classes six days a week, starting at 6am, finishing at 7pm, and taking an hour break for lunch. These hard working teachers alternate lesson planning and teaching for twelve hours a day. For this they are paid up to \$1200 per month, using an incentive pay policy.



Girls taking computer class at AEC

The four teachers and two administrative staff use offices in the AEC house. We continue to rent the first renovated house as a hospitality center where visiting teachers and others can stay overnight as needed. The house is also used for storage space and the grounds as a safe place to park the bus.

Mohammad brought for the classrooms 150 chairs that survived the school destruction and theft in Shin Kalay. For the teachers and administrators in their offices, and for visitors in the hospitality center, he has utilized seven computers previously donated to GVS.

The grantor and the Afghan Ministry of Education are delighted with what Mohammad, Ayub, and the other staff in Lashkar Gah have accomplished in three months of preparation and another three months into the school year. And the men who asked Mohammad not to bring female students to their part of town are eager to have their children enrolled in the AEC.

By necessity, the AEC has become the focus of our work in Afghanistan. But other projects continue.

1) Hoopoe Books: A total of 18,000 books have been distributed in the middle schools and high schools of Lashkar Gah and in villages of Nad-i-Ali District. Teachers from Kabul came to Lashkar, staying in the hospitality center while there, to give seminars to the public school teachers on the use of these books.



Girls reading books from Hoopoe Books

2) The replacement school in Shin Kalay, with construction financed by Afghan Appeal in London and directed by Ayub, still has an enrollment of about 700 boys, while 170 girls are being schooled in homes in the village. The Elders are responsible for seeing that teacher salaries are provided by the Ministry of Education.

3) Afghan Appeal has invited Mohammad to speak in London on February 9th. Mohammad plans to make this engagement while enroute to Afghanistan, where he will remain for the rest of the school year. Recently he spoke to students and updated staff of PeacePal and Afghan Sister Village Project in New Mexico.



Mohammad spoke at Los Alamos High School on December 1

4) Mohammad met with Major Al Jarvis and other staff of the British Provincial Reconstruction Team stationed just outside of Shin Kalay. They inquired if he knew "the enemy," and Mohammad assured him that he did. Asked if he could identify the enemy, he responded emphatically, "The enemy is illiteracy." Intrigued by this response, the PRT staff wanted to know how they could support our efforts. Mohammad asked if they would consider rebuilding the original school with a library and a computer lab. Their affirmative answer came three weeks later. They have begun planning the construction of a security wall and classrooms will follow as funding permits.

5) In Kabul, Mohammad met with Ryan Crocker, the new American Ambassador to Afghanistan. He had received a copy of our documentary *Stealing the Light* and, very supportive of all education projects in the country, was particularly moved by any success in Helmand Province.

6) We are delighted that *Stealing the Light* was named the Best Contemporary Issue Documentary at the DocMiami Film Festival earlier this year. Congratulations to Aimie Burns and her film and editing crew.

We hope to have your continued support of rural school construction projects like the one in Shin Kalay which is underway with some British financial assistance. Thanks for your past support of our projects.

P.S. PeacePal shared with us some of the students' letters. One of them is on the following page. We are amazed at how well the Afghan students already are writing in English!

November 16, 2011

Dear friend!

Hello, my name is Mahboob [redacted]. I am 17 years old. I am from Afghanistan, and I live in Hermand-province, in Lashkergah city. My favorite food is Kabuly palau. My favorite colors are black and white. I am very happy from my life and my lessons. I play foot ball. I am a student of class 10th at Shaheed Engineer Abdulmateen High school. I study English language and Computer lessons at GVSAC. Our teachers are very good and they teach us very important subjects which are very useful in our life. It is a new and unique center in the whole city. So far we haven't had such centers in Lashkergah. I am sure by the time I graduate from this program I would have learned more things. I have nine brothers and I have no sister. My native language is Pashto. We have and like hospitality and we are religious people. And Afghans have a kind of proud and pay attention to separate tribeness. ~~And have~~ we do not celebrate new year in Afghanistan. We have two Eids, they are Eid Ramazan and Eid Qurban. I am really excited to hear back from you. Now submitting you to Allah. Thanks, See you soon. your friend

Mahboob [redacted].