



GVS has had another successful year in Afghanistan. We report here on progress in the Advanced Education Center in Lashkar Gah with a new grant with PeacePal in Albuquerque; a new beginning in Shin Kalay with funding from Afghan Appeal in London; the enrollment of three young women in medical school with full tuition support from the LBW Trust in Australia; and the financial and political go-ahead to build another school in Helmand Province with Afghan Sister Village Project in Los Alamos. We are very grateful for the generous help from NGOs on three continents, all of whom share our goal to advance educational opportunity for boys and girls equally in Afghanistan.

Advanced Education Center

Last year's grant for the AEC was not renewed but with his usual magical touch, Mohammad managed to stretch a much smaller \$50,000 grant from a new funding source to maintain the enrollment at 100 boys and 100 girls. He could do this because four teachers and the administrator (Ayub) accepted smaller salaries, the rent on the building was reduced, and GVS owns all of the equipment from the previous grant. Ayub is so devoted to the project that he said he would work for nothing if necessary. Economic Ministry representatives were astounded at the learning going on in the center at a small fraction of budgets required by other domestic and international NGOs in the country.



Girls debate in English class

With fewer teaching hours, has education suffered? Hardly. Mohammad was fascinated with a new method used in the English classes. He sat in on a debate, ten girls a side, about the roles and responsibilities of their parents. One side supported their fathers, the other backed their mothers, the complex conversation about Afghan culture taking place fully in English. A single computer teacher, with an able assistant, manages the morning computer classes for boys and the afternoon classes for girls. One of the English teachers carries double duty as an administrator for four of his eight hours work day, six days a week.

The local bank added some creative challenge to the situation with a list of new rules. The manager insisted that withdrawals over a certain amount generate an added fee; an NGO can have only one account without an added fee; and Ayub must get a

new ID card because his beard is shorter now. In Kabul, Mohammad confirmed that none of the rules apply. Life is definitely different in Helmand.

The reach of the AEC is well beyond Lashkar Gah. The students continue to communicate with their counterparts in Los Alamos and Albuquerque. Crews from Helmand's Sabawoon TV station have visited to do interviews that were broadcast across the province. The Economic Ministry would like to use the AEC as a model in other parts of the country. The documentary on GVS, *Stealing the light*, is shown to all students at the center and translated into Pashto for wider distribution to the Ministry of Education and local politicians.



Mohammad interviewed by Sabawoon TV

Shin Kalay

In Shin Kalay almost 200 girls are still home schooled. During the Eid celebration a number of them came to Mohammad begging him to rebuild the school, with their parents in full support. Meanwhile about 800 boys are enrolled in the mud brick classrooms by the mosque (4 classes each for grades 1 to 6) and in Nad Ali government school (grades 7 to 9). The situation will soon change for both boys and girls with the rebuilding project at the site of the original school.

Afghan Appeal is funding the construction. Villagers are loaning tractors and trailers. GVS is paying 1 Afghani for each brick recovered from the rubble to save the purchase cost (7 Afg per brick) and transport cost of new ones. Teams of workers from the village have recovered 100,000 bricks, generating \$2,000 of income and significant emotional investment in the project. Large pieces of rubble were used to build two bridges and the privacy wall itself was started by early December.

The Elders have set up committees for security, for problem solving, and for purchasing. The latter group includes Habib who insures that any major purchases are priced from three to four places before a contract is considered. A work supervisor is in charge of hiring and paying workers and taking attendance (everyone must be there at 8AM). The supervisor alternates family groups in his hiring, trying to find those in greatest need of employment.



Bricks recovered from the original school

The Elders had previously secured permission from the Taliban (security insurance) to begin construction on the new school but by the time Mohammad arrived in Helmand in early October, rumors had created a setback. Word was that Mohammad and his son Yama (not in Afghanistan for several years) were promoting Christianity. The Taliban, themselves concerned about Mohammad's safety, wanted to meet in Chaman, Pakistan. He obliged, accompanied by two Shin Kalay elders. The Taliban seemed thoroughly reassured by the answers to questions about GVS, the AEC, and the new school in Shin Kalay. They are also eager to watch *Stealing the Light* and will be provided a copy. The reverence for Mohammad in Southern Afghanistan has spilled over into this border region of Pakistan and facilitates the work and security of GVS.



Building privacy wall

Medical School Students

Three young women, Anara, Noornama, and Fatima, all from the original school in Shin Kalay, proudly enrolled last summer in a private medical school in Lashkar Gah. Their act symbolically may be the most beautiful fruit so far of the seeds of education planted in 2001 when Mohammad returned to Afghanistan to begin talk of a school in his family compound. Ayub personally paid their first semester tuition while GVS sought funding for their five-year program. In a classic piece of networking, Afghan Appeal referred us to the LBW Trust, a Sydney Australia based charity that supports needy students in countries where cricket is played. Apparently their board had discovered that the sport is played in Afghanistan (news to us) and was especially eager to support the education of Afghan girls. They have generously offered to pay their medical school tuition for five years, pending feedback on satisfactory progress. The students are taking exams at the end of the first semester right now and we await the report ourselves. We wish them every success in their long journey.

Sarkar

Last spring when Bob Fuselier, founder of Afghan Sister Village Project, and Blake Batten with PeacePal visited the AEC, they had a chance to meet the Elders of Sarkar, a village 5 km east of Lashkar Gah. The Elders had previously expressed a need for a school in their village and provided convincing reasons for a coeducational primary school of their own. They were fascinated when Blake showed them villages in Afghanistan and villages in America on Google Earth, perhaps cementing in their minds a connection between future donors and future students of the school.

Upon return to the US, Bob began fundraising, agreeing to match donations up to \$10,000. Mohammad met with the Ministry of Education this fall to complete the necessary paperwork and to visit the site in Sarkar, right off the main road and adjacent to a police station. By mid-December, we got news that the funding is sufficient to begin the project. Mohammad will remain in touch with the Ministry of Education by phone and anticipates construction will begin when he returns to Afghanistan in April.

Thank you

We are grateful for the support we have had from you in the past and hope that you will continue to work with us in one of the most challenging areas of Afghanistan. As the country prepares for its next election and the withdrawal of a majority of foreign troops in 2014, the focus on education in Helmand becomes even more important. Mohammad has proven that he can work with people of all political persuasions and the work he oversees for GVS is nudging this province in the right direction.

For those of you in Portland, Mohammad will be a speaker at the 2013 TEDxConcordiaUPortland conference. Tickets go on sale in January for the March 23rd event at Concordia University in NE Portland. Please visit tedxconcordiauportland.com for more details.