

Education key to stopping terrorism

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CEDAR RAPIDS - Military force won't, in the long run, make the world a safer place, Mohammad Kharoti said.

"A gun never brings security," he said. "What brings security is, you have to win the minds and hearts of the people."

Kharoti had no inkling his effort to establish schools in his native Afghanistan could someday play a role in American security. But in a small way, he said, that's what's happening.

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

Kharoti, 60, spoke to former Coe College classmates Friday afternoon as part of the school's 1972-76 cluster reunion. With his brother, the 1975 Coe graduate started the first school in Afghanistan to accept girls in early 2001, when the militant Taliban still ruled the country.

Kharoti neatly diverted the Taliban's arguments against educating women.

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

Kharoti got permission to open a school "with Islamic principles in mind."

The school in his boyhood home of Sheen Kallay ("green village") in southwest Afghanistan now boasts an enrollment of 675 students ages 6 through 17 - 250 of them girls.

Kharoti's reverence for education is born of his past: He was illiterate until age 12, when a school opened in the village where his nomadic family had settled to farm. His father, who died the previous year, urged him to take advantage of any chance for education.

Kharoti set his sights on medicine "because my dad died of sickness." His teachers took note, and he was invited to a new school of nursing where an American doctor arranged for him to attend community college in Clinton.

That led to a \$2,500 Coe scholarship. He worked as an operating room technician at Mercy Medical Center, returned to Afghanistan and earned his doctor's certificate in Jalalabad.

The Soviets invaded a few years later, and Kharoti, wife Fatima, and their young family fled, winding up in Portland, Ore., where he works as a nuclear medicine technologist.

His 2001 trip to Afghanistan, Kharoti's first visit in 14 years, was for Mercy Corps, a Scottish charity that operates clinics around the world.

Kharoti used about \$10,000 of his own money to start Sheen Kallay School.

"I did not tell my wife," he joked. "This is America, with equality."

The school's operation is now funded by Green Village Schools, a charity started by Kharoti. Son Yama, 19, and daughter Sultana, 26, accompanied him on a return trip to Sheen Kallay this August.

Sultana brought several books on the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. It was the first Kharoti's old neighbors heard of the attacks.

"Everybody was shocked," he said. "They couldn't imagine what happened."

Afghans are still wary of foreigners, a legacy of the Soviet occupation.

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

On the Net

Sheen Kallay School: www.greenvillageschools.org

Caption: PHOTO

Mohammad Kharoti Coe College graduate

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