

STORY **Afghanistan** February 15, 2002 1:01AM

From Nomad to Doctor

Mohammad Khan Kharoti

I was born to a nomadic family in Afghanistan. I did not have the opportunity to go school or Madrassa (religious school) when I was young. I was not taught how to read. No one in my family could read or write. We did not enjoy the basic right to literacy.

Because we did not own land, we were constantly on the move. Our possessions were meager. Our only possessions were one tent to shelter us from the rain and snow, a herd of sheep, some goats and several camels. This was our life. This was all we knew.

In 1950, an American Foreign Aid project came to Afghanistan. Its work blessed my family, and thousands more, with land. American assistance transformed what was once desert into agriculture land that would produce food for thousands of Afghan families. We received our land in Nada Alie, Afghanistan. With land of our own we were able to settle. We became farmers.

When I was twelve years old an official came to our village and said a school was opening for young children. I was so excited. I had always dreamed of going to school, of learning how to read and write like my father talked about. I went immediately to register. I was put in the first grade. This was the most remarkable day of my life.

My father passed away when I was young. Before he died, he would always talk to me about school. He wished he had known how to read and write. He wanted me to learn. After my father passed away I became responsible for our families livelihood. My role was to work the land and feed the family. I wanted to go to school instead. I made a deal with my mother: I would go to school in the mornings and work on the farm in the afternoon.

My hard work eventually paid off. I completed elementary school in Nada Alie and passed the state exam to enter high school. After my first year of high school I was asked to join the School of Nursing. This was the first nursing school in Lashkergah and I was to be one of the first students to study there. I liked the medical field and believed I could really help people in this way.

The Nursing school was sponsored by two American organizations, CARE Medico and the Peace Corps. After three years of nursing school I started work in a hospital. I put all my energy into working hard. It was not long before I was appointed full-time head nurse. I spent the next five years (1963-1968) working very long, arduous hours at Lashkergah hospital.

The Americans working at the hospital noticed my work and dedication. One in particular, Dr. Roberts, took an interest in my future plans. I told him I wanted to be a medical doctor so I could better help those in need. Saving the life of someone responsible for feeding a family would be the greatest reward I told Dr. Roberts. Dr. Roberts was moved by what I said and said to me, "I have trust in you Mohammed Khan, and I am going to help you".

Dr. Roberts began writing letters to different schools and helped me to get accepted to a high school in Lebanon. I completed six years of high school in two academic years plus one summer. After high school, I attended Community College in Clinton, Iowa and Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, receiving my BA in general science. I then returned to Afghanistan and earned my MD in Jalalabad.

Through the exceptional generosity of dedicated and loving people my dream came true. It is the most amazing feeling to help those who are sick and wounded; to give them back their lives. My personal experiences have lead me to believe that the best way to help those in need is to help them help themselves. Many people have helped my family and me. Over the years they have



Mohammad Khan Kharoti examines a typhoid patient at the Lashkar Gah Hospital. Kharoti recently spent six weeks assisting Mercy Corps health facilities in Afghanistan. Photo: Scott Heidler/Mercy Corps

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made possible the wonderful changes in our lives. From the days of my youth as an illiterate nomad in Afghanistan, to Portland, Oregon today where my son, Yama Kharoti, wins first place at the 2001 Academic All-Stars for computer science. My family and I understand and treasure the glory found in helping others.

This past spring I made a trip back home to Afghanistan. It was very hard to see my country so ravaged from 23 years of war. Many people remain illiterate and schools are not readily available. I had a little money that I used to start a couple small schools for boys, and one school for girls. This is the first school for girls in the village. My hope is that these schools will help bring positive change to these young people's lives by providing them the basic right to literacy.

I currently work for Kaiser Permanente in the Department for Nuclear Medicine, in Portland, Oregon. I work so I can support my family here in the United States and the people back in Afghanistan. Most important in my life today is to see these schools continue. To provide financial support for them to purchase books, provide teachers, a building and clean water. The demand is great but with a little help we can accomplish great things.

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