

Dreams bashed, not defeated

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SUMMARY: The Afghan school blossomed, even though villagers feared the rebels; now a Portlander vows to rebuild it

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Afghanistan's literacy rate is just 28 percent

JENN DIRECTOR KNUDSEN

In March 2001, Dr. Mohammad Khan Kharoti's \$10,000 dream to educate girls and boys in his native Afghan town became reality. Eight years later, the school is a heap of rubble.

On March 24, 2001, Green Village Schools welcomed six girls and 10 boys to its sparse classrooms. Kharoti, who has lived in Portland since 1989, had transformed his roughly one-acre family compound in Shin Kalay, a town of about 11,000 people in the southern Helmand province, into its only school.

By 2007, roughly 1,200 students --about 400 girls and 800 boys, ages 6 to 22 --attended Green Village Schools.

By October 2008, none did.

Rebels from north of Helmand province descended on Green Village Schools from Oct. 13 to 17, razing the compound, making off with every donated pencil, textbook, ream of paper, chair, desk, computer, even metal support structures.

Kharoti and Green Village Schools' 11 board members say they're uncertain who to blame and don't much care.

Their focus is, simply, to rebuild the school.

Not one child could read

Kharoti, 65, Green Village Schools' founder and board president, is the son of illiterate parents and proud of his four accomplished children. He's a compact, bearded man passionate about educating the children of Afghanistan, a war-torn country smaller than Texas.

He believes an educated populace --not military might --will save the country.

A 1998 trip to his birthplace inspired Kharoti to create a school there and, perhaps later, more throughout the country. Each would provide a free education to its students.

While visiting friends and family in Shin Kalay, he observed that not one school-aged child could read or write. (Afghanistan, a country of roughly 33 million people, has a literacy rate of about 28 percent, according to the U.S. Library of Congress, whose report also states, "In reality the bulk of the students represented in the enrollment figures remain functionally illiterate.")

During a return trip in March 2001, Kharoti gathered village elders to tell them he wanted to start a school. They

were scared and skeptical: "The Taliban would not let us have a school," Kharoti recalls they told him.

Undeterred and accompanied by a brother and a friend, Kharoti went to Kandahar in Helmand province's southwest to tell a high-level Taliban official he wanted to establish a co-ed school.

Kharoti said he had no fear; strict as the Taliban were, they, too, desired progress.

That official quickly approved Kharoti's plan and soon after the government's minister of education authorized it, with one contingency: The school had to hew to Sharia law, Islamic religious law that governs many aspects of day-to-day life, including interpersonal conduct.

In late March 2001, with conditions met and donated school supplies in place, Green Village Schools opened its doors to co-ed instruction and a world of possibilities for its students and their families.

"Nobody had seen a school before. Nothing before existed like this," said Gresham's Kent F. Van Winckel, the Green Village board's executive director.

A nonprofit since December 2002, Green Village Schools is the only United States-based nongovernmental organization working solely to build schools in Helmand province, according to Van Winckel.

"It was like a wedding every morning for the village," recalled Kharoti, describing the children heading off to class, their parents celebrating in their wake. "I never imagined something like this."

Van Winckel said up to 2,400 Shin Kalay students had attended the school in its 7 1/2 years. And board chairman Steve Boyer of Portland said that by October 2008, every student was reading at grade level.

Groping for the right words, Kharoti said, "It felt like the emotions of the people was a wind to start a fire." Kharoti said the girls' mothers reveled in their daughters' professional possibilities: An education would save them from having to scratch out a living milking cows.

"These were the hopes of the mothers, who'd never gone to school," Kharoti said.

Even the cement's gone

Green Village Schools' online newsletter described the events of mid-October 2008: "Even the piles of cement were stolen."

Its destruction "brought a sorrow to the whole village," Kharoti said. "Some of the students were sobbing."

Today, Green Village Schools' board is raising money, gathering supplies and tinkering with a blueprint that includes additional security and structural fortification for Shin Kalay's second-generation school.

Shin Kalay's people now know education's value and desperately want back that gift, according to Boyer.

A fraction of the students are being taught elsewhere. But most aren't so fortunate.

"The villagers now are so lost," Kharoti said.

"The dream of my life is I will be alive, or buried somewhere by the school, to see the progress of the kids at the school," Kharoti said. "To bring prosperity to the lives of those after them."

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