

IN MY OPINION DON'T MISS OPPORTUNITY TO HELP AFGHANS' EDUCATION

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Thursday, March 7, 2002

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Summary: U.S. schooling opens young refugee's eyes; he wants the same opportunities for those left behind

Being a refugee from Afghanistan has often gotten me attention. Since Sept. 11, the level of interest about my life and beliefs has risen exponentially. I am often asked to share my thoughts and experiences with others.

People also want to know what I think Afghanistan needs to make it a better place. The best way to answer both of those questions is to start from the beginning.

My life began in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, in 1984 when the Soviet war was still raging. I was luckier than most because my family was wealthy. My father had received some of his education in America and worked as a medical instructor and surgeon.

Life in Afghanistan, however, was dangerous no matter what your income. By the age of three, I already knew to hide in the crater of a bomb after it went off.

My family briefly moved to Pakistan, where my three sisters and I went to a British private school and studied English. I frequently played with friends rather than go to school. Education was not a priority for me.

After eight months, we immigrated to the United States, arriving in Portland on April 27, 1989.

Up until the eighth grade, I continued to take my education opportunities for granted. One day before I started high school, I had an epiphany. I realized that it was purely by chance that I got to escape the situation in Afghanistan.

I was no different from my friends or any other Afghan. Yet, it was I who had been given a chance in a new and better world. This made me feel that I had to make every use possible out of the opportunity for fear that I would waste it.

For the next four years, I tried hard in school and in sports. With my new effort came great benefits. I became an intern for Xerox. I won competitions, excelled in sports, gained the respect of my peers and teachers and much more.

Four years ago, I would never have expected to be where I am right now. Being senior class president and valedictorian means so very much to me and my family. If they knew of it, my fellow Afghans would feel the same. If there is one realization I have made, it is that education is more important than any other aspect in life.

Those who do not have educational opportunities available to them, like many children growing up in Afghanistan today, have been cheated.

The education system in Afghanistan can hardly be called a system. Decades of war have left the country in rubble. Less than a third of the population is literate, and schools lack even basic supplies. With a failing education system will come a failing nation and a desperate people.

With Afghanistan in the spotlight, there is now a great opportunity.

We, as Americans, are lucky to have the chance to help the education system in Afghanistan. Organizations like Mercy Corps, which my father is assisting in Afghanistan, are providing support to Afghan schools.

They help to give the people of Afghanistan the one thing they've always wanted -- a chance. You never know how

much someone can accomplish until you give him or her a chance.

After all, who would have known that the little school-skipping Afghan boy would have reached such heights in life?

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Edition: SUNRISE

Section: EDITORIAL

Page: B11

Record Number: 0203070061

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