

THE MONDAY PROFILE

A lifelong dream realized

Mohammed Kharoti: Education gave him an opportunity to give back

By **CAMILLE SPENCER**
THE OREGONIAN

The young boy waits in line as the others push and shove. It is Afghanistan in the 1950s, and the boys jostle to get their names on a roster to attend school for the first time. Opportunities for education are rare.

His mother doesn't want him to go to school, wishing instead that he would work to help support their nomadic family. But the 12-year-old's

dedication is fueled by memories of his father, who died the previous year of what he now thinks was pneumonia.

His excitement mounts on this clear and sunny afternoon in Sheen Kallay. In a few minutes, his trek begins. It is the start of a journey that his father, an illiterate man, could only have imagined for him — becoming an English-speaking citizen of the United States with a college degree.

"I stood in line to write my name," recalled Mohammed Kharoti, 60, a nuclear medicine

technologist in Portland. "I kept thinking, 'Man (the teacher) may forget me!' It was a special time for me, to be a student and go to school."

Kharoti never considered turning back: "Your dad has a dream for you," he says, "and you have a dream."

That dream has transformed into a lifelong dedication to education and commitment to the children of Afghanistan. The latest leg of that commitment began Friday, when Kharoti flew

Please see **KHAROTI**, Page A6



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Mohammed Kharoti works as a nuclear medicine technologist in Portland and Vancouver, but he has dedicated his life to educating children in Afghanistan.

Continued from Page One

back to the village to continue establishing his Green Village School, a place where a few hundred Afghan children meet their first opportunity to learn.

Kharoti's passion is further driven by the deterioration of Afghanistan, ravaged by more than two decades of conflict. And as the past two years' intense focus on the nation wanes, he fears that few beyond those with a deep connection, such as himself, will continue to help.

Kharoti invested \$5,000 in 2001 to establish the school, and the effort has snowballed into the non-profit Green Village Schools Inc. of Portland, which finances and operates the school. As president of the board of directors, Kharoti remains the visionary for the group, which works with Portland-based relief agency Mercy Corps to provide supplies.

In this, his first trip back in two years, Kharoti and two of his four children will spend six weeks building a security wall to protect the children, providing better infrastructure and school supplies, and teaching math and English classes.

"It will be an adventure for (my) kids," Kharoti says. "They will appreciate (American) society. Their colleagues in school can learn from them."

Humble beginnings

Kharoti was the oldest of six brothers in a family of kochey, or nomads, in Zabul province. The family of eight traveled with 50 other kochey through Afghanistan by camel. Good pastures and the childhood joys of constant change abounded.

High mortality rates in Afghanistan took a toll on the family, and three brothers died before age 5. In 1979, one was killed during the invasion by the Soviet army. Kharoti's surviving brother lives in Afghanistan with their mother, who also is illiterate and worked in the fields to support the family after her husband's death.

Despite his mother's reservations, he finished high school at 18 and headed to nursing school, graduating at age 21. In addition to earning his credential, his life changed dramatically there, because he met his future wife, Fatima.



Courtesy of MERCY CORPS

Mohammed Kharoti, 60, speaks to students at a school his organization built in 2001 in the village of Sheen Kallay. Kharoti, of Portland, is spending six weeks working at the school in Afghanistan, his childhood home.

"She was pretty, educated and lived in a city," he says. "Me being an educated man, it's good to have an educated wife."

Kharoti was friends with her parents in a society where men and women had no social contact.

"He was my classmate in nursing school, and he would come to our home," she says. "My parents would sit with him, not me."

He eventually asked for Fatima's hand in marriage. The two have been together 27 years and have four children: Sultana, 26, Homaira, 21, Yama, 19, and Homa, 16.

Kharoti worked as a nurse and took more classes. Then a sponsor brought Kharoti to the United States, where he attended Coe College in Iowa. He returned to Afghanistan in 1982 to attend medical school, and a stint with Mercy Corps followed in Pakistan in 1987.

Kharoti emerged with a general medical degree from the World Health Organization, which led him to Kaiser Permanente and Portland in 1989. As a nuclear medicine technologist, he operates diagnostic equipment used to evaluate patients with potentially serious organ trouble. In addition to

his day job in North Portland, he works in the same capacity on call at Southwest Washington Medical Center in Vancouver.

Dedicated to Afghanistan

But Kharoti remained connected to a nation divided by years of destruction. Relatives still had no ability to read or write. And children, much like himself as a 12-year-old, still yearned to go to school.

After a trip to Afghanistan in March 2000, Kharoti returned to the United States with one intention: to build a school for those children.

When he founded the Green Village Schools organization, the proud father refused to take money from outsiders, not wanting to be perceived as pilfering donations. But when co-workers at Kaiser Permanente heard about his purpose, money began falling into his lap. The organization now has 12 board members who provide money for the school, supplemented by donations from the community.

"He began to feel he owed a real

debt to his country and felt schools were the way to educate people and bring about change," says Anthony Wawrukiewicz, a board member.

Kharoti's wife supported her husband's decision. She saw what the value of education did for them and knew he was a man of his word.

"Education changed his life," Fatima says. "He wants his country to have the same opportunities. I wanted him to do it."

It's no surprise that a man who says "for fun, I work" is returning to his country to finish what he started. In addition to the security wall, the school infrastructure needs work. They must bring school supplies. And about 200 children, taught in grades one to four by four teachers, need math and English instruction.

Sultana and Yama will make the journey to their birthplace. The two haven't been back since they were small children and will teach classes during the trip.

"I'm excited and nervous," says Sultana, the oldest sister with vivid memories of a childhood where she could identify missiles by their

six weeks in village

MOHAMMED KHAROTI

Age: 60

Family: Wife, Fatima; daughters Sultana, 26, Homaira, 21, and Homa, 16; and son, Yama, 19

Home: Portland

Occupation: Nuclear medicine technologist

Mission: Educating Afghan children through his Portland-based Green Village Schools Inc. (www.greenvillageschools.org)

Quote: "Every culture in the world has unique points we can apply. All humans can work together to accomplish great things in life, and learning from each other can take us high."

sound. "In Afghanistan, you grow up fast. You get mature in some aspects. We'd come to school and learn about dead classmates, but that was life. In the United States, I feel safe."

Tribute and support

Humility and passion for education are what most speak of when talking about Kharoti. Those qualities, they say, run through his life, and his patient care exemplifies his perfect union of education and community service.

Deborah Shaich, a nuclear medicine technician at Kaiser Permanente, calls him "very kind to patients, a very conscientious worker."

"He's always eager to do more.

When I met him in 1991, his English skills were very limited, but he's come a long way."

Bobbie O'Boyle, Northwest region imaging director, at Kaiser Permanente, says she initially was struck that Kharoti started a non-profit organization rather than accept donations personally and appear, in his mind, like a thief. O'Boyle says her desire to help Kharoti led her to join the board of directors.

"We met his kids six months ago, and we were infatuated with their desire to go back and teach," O'Boyle says. "We are very excited about their excursion. He is so focused on giving back. He feels favored and lived a good life. He has advantages many others from his country do not."

Yama, whose smile grows when describing his father, says his dad always talked about "how we needed an education."

"He's inspirational," Yama says. "The things he does and the goals he has for him and his family — he takes on so much and succeeds."



Camille Spencer: 360-896-5718;
camillespencer@news.oregonian.com