

Field Reports

World Community Service

Rotarians break ground for Afghan school

They're finally heading home after months in refugee camps, but displaced Afghans still face bleak prospects. Hoping to assist a generation cast with the tremendous burden of effecting a national recovery after years of conflict, U.S. Rotarians recently broke ground for a school near Jalalabad, Afghanistan.



Students welcome Rotarians to a proposed school site near Jalalabad.

Planning for the project began shortly after Rotarian Fary Moini, a registered nurse, returned from Pakistan, where she served as a Rotary Volunteer supported by a grant from The Rotary Foundation of RI, in early 2002. Moini, a member of the Rotary Club of La Jolla Golden Triangle, Calif., spent two months helping families in refugee camps near Peshawar, Pakistan. Children living in the camps attended makeshift schools with few amenities, and Moini knew that when they returned to Afghanistan, conditions wouldn't be any better.

Rather than allow education to become yet another casualty of war in Afghanistan, where two-thirds of the population is illiterate, California Rotarians decided to support a new school. Led by Moini, who speaks Farsi, a language similar to the one spoken by many refugees, and Rotarian Stephen Brown, members of the La Jolla Golden Triangle club raised about US\$100,000 to build a school on the outskirts of Jalalabad. The largest single contribution was a \$50,000 grant from the William H. Donner Foundation, a New York-based organization that supports humanitarian projects in developing nations. La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotarian Rick Clark, an architect, drew the plans for the school. With help from Flouran Wali, a U.S. citizen of Afghan heritage and a representative of the Afghan government in Southern California, Brown and Moini organized Southern California Friends of Afghanistan. The group is dedicated to helping Afghans and educating North Americans about Afghan culture.

In November 2002, Brown, Moini, and Wali traveled to Afghanistan to meet with government officials and representatives of nongovernmental organizations working in the region, including engineers from the Abdul Haq Foundation, which will oversee the project. Zamarrud Shah, a member of the Rotary Club of Uni Town Peshawar, Pakistan, accompanied the U.S. delegation. Shah, who hosted Moini during her time as a Rotary Volunteer, was to assume responsibility for on-site project supervision after La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotarians returned to the United States.

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During the group's visit, the government of Ningarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan agreed to donate land for the school. When the Californians arrived at the proposed site, they got their first glimpse of the makeshift classrooms the school will replace. Two large UNICEF tents sheltered about 200 students each, and teachers conducted class without books and other basic supplies. According to Brown, there are at least 7,000 such tents around the country. Groups of students also gather for class by the roadside, a few withering trees their only protection from the harsh sun.



Rotarian Fary Moini (center, with boy) helps Afghan children in a refugee camp.

"There are kids just sitting in the dirt," says Brown. "They have no utensils of any sort: no chalkboards, no chalk to write with, no books, no notebooks for writing, no pencils — nothing whatsoever."

Most of the students who will attend the new school recently returned from refugee camps in Pakistan. The government anticipates that there will be hundreds more families returning to the area, and the school could serve as many as 2,000 children, with students attending classes in shifts.

Before the Rotarians returned to Pakistan, they broke ground for the facility. Long-term plans include the addition of a small medical clinic and a vocational training center for adults. Brown says he also would like to build a guesthouse on the grounds to accommodate visiting volunteers. The task will likely require additional funding and ongoing support from Rotarians in Pakistan and the United States, but La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotarians are determined to see the project through.

"If I find that we're out of money, I'll go looking for other money to complete those pieces of it," says Brown. "This is my personal response to 9/11."

— M. KATHLEEN PRATT

Refugees return home with Rotary support

Afghan refugees who have been living in camps in Pakistan since 2001 are returning home with assistance from Rotarians. At the Shalman and Mohammad Kheil camps near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, some 48,000 refugees have been receiving Rotary aid since early 2002 after Rotarians responded to a Notice of Disaster with donations of US\$1.9 million.

Millions of refugees have fled war-torn Afghanistan over the past 20 years, but the RI Board of Directors issued the call for contributions after as many as 200,000 refugees flooded across the border into Pakistan following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States and the ensuing U.S. air strikes on Afghanistan.