



Fary Moini and
Stephen Brown
at Rotary School



THE ROAD TO AFGHANISTAN

It started with a vow to help. Nine years and countless miles later, Stephen Brown looks back with pride on a new school he and other San Diegans helped establish in Afghanistan, along with numerous other projects to bring the country out of isolation. His journeys took him across the globe, through numerous countries, along disappearing roads—and into the hearts of Afghans.

BY STEPHEN BROWN

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2001, I was driving to work at Luce Forward when the “Star Spangled Banner” came on the radio. I felt a wave of emotion and broke into tears. The country I loved so much had been so violently attacked the day before, and the picture of the twin towers collapsing was etched in my mind. I reflected that because of these events, a new world order was about to unfold. As the national anthem continued, I made a promise to myself: I would try to do something meaningful to help my country fight the war on terror.

Two weeks later I was approached by Fary Moini, a newer member of my Rotary Club (La Jolla Golden Triangle). Fary mentioned she had just seen an Afghan refugee mother and child on television and wanted to do something to help. She knew I’d been involved with Rotary-related activities abroad—primarily in several devel-



Fary Moini, Stephen Brown and Haji Din Mohammad, governor of Nangarhar Province, at dedication ceremony for Rotary

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oping countries—and thought I could help her find a way to work with Afghan refugees. I didn't know much about Fary except that she owned a tuxedo rental shop. I was pretty sure they didn't need tuxedos in refugee camps. I asked what she had to offer. She told me she was from Iran and speaks Farsi, which is similar to the Dari language she'd heard the Afghan woman speaking. Fary received a degree in nursing from the University of Tehran and had practiced as a nurse for several years.

I cautioned that a war was about to break out, so that part of the world would be dangerous and in chaos. I asked how she felt about putting herself in substantial danger and dealing with extreme hardships. Fary looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Mr. Brown, this is what I must do. I am being called to do this by my inner spirit."

After some research, I learned there were two Afghan refugee camps just outside of Peshawar, Pakistan. Through some "cold call" e-mails I sent, a Rotarian in Peshawar offered to host Fary and arrange for her to

work in the camps. She arrived in Peshawar in January 2002 and returned to San Diego in March. Upon her return I considered undertaking an education project in one of the camps. Fary advised the camps would soon be closed and suggested we build a school in Afghanistan instead. I told her I thought that was a really bad idea. I had no idea how we would go about that, but I did promise to investigate the possibility.

So I contacted the Pakistani Rotarians for their thoughts. They are Pashtu, which is the same ethnic group across the Afghan border. A group of Pakistani Rotarians went to Jalalabad, Afghanistan, and met with the governor of Nangarhar Province, who said he would welcome the efforts of Rotarians from San Diego and would set aside land where we could build a school. (I am sure the governor had no idea what Rotary was.)

After receiving this news, club member Rick Clark designed a school. We met with Afghan-Americans in San Diego to get their input, and we raised \$90,000 for the school.

Then I realized we needed to actually *go*

to Afghanistan to proceed with this project. So in November 2002, Fary and Flouran Wali, a San Diego Afghan leader, traveled with me to Afghanistan. We flew to London, Dubai, then Peshawar. We met the Pakistani Rotarians. As Americans, we needed permits to travel with an armed guard by car with the locals through the tribal areas. At the border we went by foot through checkpoints and hired an Afghan car to take us into Jalalabad.

Upon arrival we went to the governor's palace. He confirmed he was setting aside land for a school. We visited the proposed site, about 10 miles out of the city, and found two UNICEF tents, a girls' classroom in one, boys' in the other—about 400 students total. The governor explained that this area had been set aside for returning refugee families.

The next day we journeyed to Kabul. It took nearly 10 hours to go about 120 miles. Sometimes the road would disappear, and we would drive through dry riverbeds. No one paid attention to which side of the road to travel on. We went through a mountain pass that is the most breathtaking and frightening I've ever seen. In Kabul, we met with various ministries to determine what approvals were necessary to build the school. We never did get clear answers.

Upon our return to Jalalabad, we met with the local director of education in his home and talked about our concern over getting plans approved. He told us the folks in Kabul are not the ones to approve things and that, in fact, he is the one who approves plans. We rolled out the plans on the floor of his sitting room, and he advised us they were approved. (I have suggested to my Luce Forward real estate colleagues that they look into this expedited permit process.) We followed this with a groundbreaking, since it was clear a school was going to be built.

In Jalalabad on this first trip, we learned there was a university just outside the city. I requested a meeting with its leaders. We met with the chancellor and the nine de-

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partment heads and learned that Nangarhar University was totally isolated. It had no relationship with any university, not a single computer, no usable textbooks. The professors taught using 30-year-old lecture notes. It served 4,000 students with 250 faculty, only a few holding advanced degrees. They pleaded with us for help. We promised nothing.

Fary and I returned to Jalalabad in March 2004 and attended the grand opening of our school. Its student body had grown to about 800 students, grades 1-7—both boys and girls. We also attended the opening of a computer lab we'd set up at Nangarhar University. San Diego Padres owner John Moores and I financed this lab.

On this trip we arranged for Rotarian Steve Spencer to travel with us. Steve, an SDSU professor overseeing some distance-learning programs in the Pacific, provided a lecture to students and professors. He demonstrated accessing the Internet and set some up with e-mail addresses. After the lecture, the Veterinary Department chair said he could bring tetracycline to deal with the computer virus problem Steve had mentioned. Six months later I received an e-mail from the same professor advising he had been successful using the Internet and e-mail to obtain a \$300,000 grant for his department.

Since the March 2004 trip, I have returned to Afghanistan eight times. Many positive changes have taken place. Our school now has more than 5,000 students, about 1,500 of them girls. The first 12th-grade class of boys graduates this year; next year we will graduate the first class of girls.

Other accomplishments include building the first dormitory for female students on the main campus of Nangarhar University and, with additional help from John Moores and myself, a guesthouse for visiting faculty and an International Learning Center with a technology-rich environment.

Fary and I have also facilitated two World Bank-funded partnerships between SDSU and Nangarhar University supporting an English language program and a civil engineering program. We've worked with USAID and NATO to provide computer labs and Internet access to Nangarhar University's Medical School, Teaching Hospital, Computer Science Department and School of Education, and we're working with NATO to connect 16 additional university buildings to the Internet.

We've set up computer labs and connected nine Jalalabad high schools to the Internet. The students use these facilities to connect with U.S. students. We are setting up a peer-to-peer system for the medical

AN AFGHANISTAN SCRAPBOOK

LAWYERS

I know of no attorneys from anywhere doing volunteer work in Afghanistan—certainly none in Jalalabad, or I would know. There is an incredible information network there. I do know that Stanford Law School (where I went to school) is working with a university in Kabul.

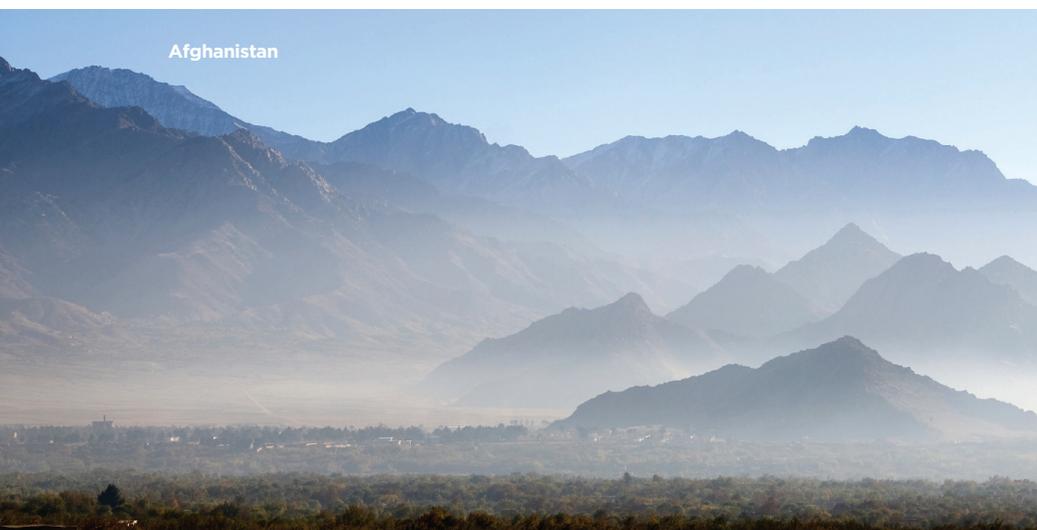
MEDIA

All the information in our media here creates the impression that this is very risky work. It is not without risk, but not to the extent one might think.

GETTING TO JALALABAD

The best way is to rent a car, drive to Los Angeles and catch a nonstop 16-hour flight from LAX to Dubai. Overnight in Dubai and fly on a brand X airline to Kabul. Do business in Kabul, then take a two-hour white-knuckle ride through a spectacular mountain pass (not the Khyber Pass and much more spectacular) to Jalalabad. We can leave San Diego on Monday and be in Kabul by 10 Wednesday morning, ready to do business.

—S.B.



community in Jalalabad to use telemedicine to communicate with peers in the San Diego area and elsewhere. We have established a sister-cities relationship between San Diego and Jalalabad, with broad representation here including SDSU, USD and UCSD as well as the local medical and business communities.

The time I have spent working with my friends in Jalalabad has been the most rewarding experience in my life. Our efforts have directly affected thousands of persons, and thousands more know of and appreciate our efforts.

As an American, I am most welcome throughout Jalalabad. Taliban fundamentalists reside there and, because of the informal information network, must be fully aware of our activities. We have never been bothered.

When we were meeting with a large group of community leaders, I talked about bringing the Internet to the university and about the other things we were hoping to accomplish. I stopped in the middle of my presentation and commented that if an outsider came to San Diego with new ideas that were very different from anything we had been doing, some people would be skeptical and would not welcome these ideas. I asked the audience if anyone felt that way.

One of the leaders stood up and said, "We have been isolated from the rest of the world for the last 30 years while we have been at war with others and ourselves. We need people like you to help get things started and show us the way. We are hard-working people and not afraid of change. If anyone tries to discourage you, please let us know, and we will deal with them in our own way."

I have never needed to take them up on this, since we are always encouraged and thanked. They treat us like royalty. It is an incredible high just being there. ✎

Stephen Brown (stephenbrown@att.net) is a retired partner of Luce Forward Hamilton & Scripps.

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