

Fundraiser offers aid to Afghans

DONNA BUNCE, Orange County Register columnist, PEOPLE WATCH

Tuesday, February 28, 2006 - The **Afghanistan Relief Organization** held its "Celebration of Afghan Heritage and Culture" fundraiser Friday, and it provided a wonderful glimpse into all things Afghan.

It was held at the Pacific Hills Banquet Center in Laguna Hills, and the sold-out crowd of 420 viewed handmade jewelry, crafts, art and brightly colored clothing, and enjoyed an authentic meal while listening to talented Afghan musicians.

Event chairman **Mostafa Khairzada**, who was born in Afghanistan and left after the Soviet invasion, talked about the all-volunteer Afghanistan Relief Organization, established in 1998, and its relief work delivering food, clothing and medical and school supplies to Afghans. Most proud of the Technical Education Center that the organization opened for 800 students in Kabul in 2003, he said, "The majority are street children, to whom we teach English, math and computer and vocational skills. We're trying to teach them self-sustainability." A film on the organization's work by **Masoud Farand** brought Khairzada's words to life.

Author **Khaled Hosseini**, known for his best-seller, "The Kite Runner," was event honoree. Introducing Hosseini was **Alison Sweeney**, best known for her role as Sami Brady on "Days of Our Lives," who was introduced to Afghanistan on a USO tour in 2003. "It changed my life," she said. "Afghanistan is such a magnificent country. That same year, Khaled Hosseini's 'The Kite Runner' was published, and I was truly overwhelmed by the exquisitely beautiful story that shared the culture, experience and humanity of Afghanistan."

After the presentation of a beautifully engraved crystal plaque from the organization by Sweeney, Hosseini spoke about his journey to write the book. "I always wrote as a child, just like in the book," he said. "Later, after I married and was between jobs in San Jose, I was flipping channels one day and heard a news report about the Taliban and the harsh interpretation of Islam imposed on the Afghan people. I couldn't believe they were talking about the land of my childhood. Suddenly, I was writing a story."

Assisting Khairzada were hosts **Curt Stanley** and former Afghan television news anchor **Miria Abassi**. Last heard, nearly \$40,000 was netted, with more donations coming in, thanks to a generous **David Yusuf**, representing Pacific Hills Banquet Center, which donated the hall, food and decorations. For more information on the organization, visit the Web site www.afghanrelief.com