

southern californians build a terrific school in Kabul

By Ann Marlow, Los Angeles Weekly, 2005

I'd planned a lot of things to do today but accomplished only one, because a demonstration at the Ministry of the Interior protesting election irregularities turned the city into a giant parking lot. It took my friend Peg two hours to go from her rented apartment in Microrayon, on the way to the airport, to my guesthouse in Shahr-i-Nau. We were due to leave at noon to visit classes at the **Afghanistan Relief Organization** (ARO) school in Karte Char, near Kabul University, at 1 pm, but we were an hour late.

Parween Omidi, who lived nearby, had taken me by the school quickly after we went to the American University on Wednesday. It's operated by a Southern California-based NGO called Afghanistan Relief Organization. Founded mainly by Afghan-American women, the school offers English, computer and job-training classes to 800 students from the poorest Kabul families. The kids are selected by going door-to-door in poor neighborhoods, and I saw the student records that classified their economic circumstances, ranging from dire to worse.

The school is in an upscale house donated by its owner, the former Afghan ambassador to Iraq, for his lifetime. It has that air of good upkeep that is invariably a sign of foreign, or returned -exile inhabitants. (The more purely Afghan aesthetic, as represented by nearly all houses I've visited, includes debris scattered about and the local equivalent of cars on blocks in front of the house.)

The director, Abul Fuzel Khalili, an Afghan-American, showed us around. Mrs. Omidi pointed out that he is working without pay. I was very impressed by the well-organized look of things, rare in Afghanistan, and still more so by the fact that the equipment spoke of use. The computer lab looked as if the students had just filed out; the one at Balkh University was a museum, immaculate because no one could get it together to actually use the donated equipment. We met a couple of young teachers, and I was floored by the fact that they spoke good English, one almost without an accent. There was only one English professor at Balkh University who spoke as well.

These young men were working for much lower salaries than they could get in the open market with such good English - all 11 teachers' monthly salary combined was \$1700. Nonetheless the teachers were almost bouncy with enthusiasm, although this was Ramadan, and their stomachs were empty.

Because we visited during the 3 hour break between the morning (6-10) and afternoon (1-5) sessions, I wanted to come back when students were there.

I also wanted to bring my friend Peg, since the school seemed a potential vehicle for her interest in job-training and home crafts programs.

I'd met Peg in 2002 on my second visit to Afghanistan, in Kabul. A sturdily built and youthful 61-year old originally from Seattle, Peg had taught English in Kandahar with the

Peace Corps from 1966-7 and then helped train Peace Corps volunteers in Kabul for a couple of years afterwards. At that time Afghanistan was pretty safe: Peg had driven all over the country alone, once following a single line of telephone polls across the roadless desert between Kandahar and Farah. She'd fallen in love with the country and when the Taliban fell she had the idea to go back and do something for the people. In 2002 she was happy and optimistic; in a rare case of virtue rewarded, some of her former Kandahar students now held high positions in the government and were in a good position to help her with whatever she decided to do. I saw her in Kabul again in 2004. By this time she was the head of the Afghan Center, an Afghan-American NGO, but after a few months she came to a parting of the ways over issues of how to best run their job-training programs.

Now, she had sold her house in Ithaca, New York and planned to relocate to Kabul and Australia (where she'd spent a half dozen years working as a young woman.) I hadn't seen her on my first stint in Kabul and now the reasons became clear: not only had she been ill, but making her Microrayon place habitable to a lot of time. Her four room apartment only cost \$300 a month, but as elsewhere in Kabul the electricity was sporadic, and there was no backup generator as wealthy people (and all the guesthouses catering to foreigners) have. This meant that she had to bring water up from a pump downstairs for washing and cooking, heating it on a gas ring to get hot water. The kitchen was still too dirty to enter - and if someone who'd lived in Afghanistan for four years called it that, it was. I'd visited Microrayon a number of times, some of them to see Shafiq Habibi, a well-known women's rights activist, and found it immeasurably depressing. Conditions there make an American housing project look luxurious. But in the midst of what most Americans would consider an unlivable situation, Peg was trying to figure out how to teach poor Afghans marketable skills. Peg wasn't rich, and had to support her 92-year old mother, so she had to think carefully about how to balance her needs and her desire to help Afghans.

From the moment we walked into the first class it was obvious that my initial impression was correct: this place was a success. In one English class, kids were speaking on the topic of "Islam and the rights of women". They were more coherent and had better command of English than the relatively privileged kids I'd taught at Balkh University (even if several did begin their exposition "in the name of God", echoing in English the traditional Arabic "bismallah".) In computer class kids were busy using database programs, and in the scary computer repair room, they were delving into the innards of computers. Boys outnumbered girls 2 to 1, as I would have expected among poor kids. There are a lot of girls in the universities, maybe 40%, because they serve the middle class for whom a university degree is a status symbol. Since these girls wouldn't be in the workforce anyway, the family isn't losing any money on their education. But in this economic class the girls would either be working at home, or perhaps helping relatives in some menial occupation.

Then Mr. Khalili took Peg and me to see the class that is a surefire hit among foreign women: karate for girls. This was also a personal interest of mine. I'd been passionate about martial arts in my thirties and studied tae kwon do, hapkido and northern style

Chinese for four years. So I was eager to see what these girls were learning. Taught by a slightly build Afghan girl who had placed well in international competition, the class of 25 or so was practicing in a large room in Mr. Kalil's house. The girls were all different shapes and sizes and ranged from mere white belts up to blue. Some seemed talented, others not.

They were using a home-made and overly soft punching bag, and had no kick pads to make full contact kicks, pulling their blows when they sparred. A few couldn't afford uniforms. But their enthusiasm and pride was touching. I told their teacher, who looked all of twenty, that I would give \$10 to any girl in the class who could do more pushups than me, pointing out that I am 47. I did 30 (it's one of my odd talents) Only two stepped up for the challenge, and one was able to do 31. She looked flabbergasted to get the money. I felt invigorated afterwards although, due to stomach problems, I hadn't eaten that day, inadvertently fasting just as the girls were.

We went back for one more class, English conversation. Peg and Parween took turns teaching the class, which mainly consisted in the students firing questions about life in America. Naturally they were most passionate about asking Parween about the situation of Afghan-Americans in the US. The most revealing question was whether Afghan immigrants are able to work for the US government. In Afghanistan, nearly the only source of professional employment has been the government (and now the NGOs.) Unless your father is a bazaar merchant, you don't think of opening a shop, and this is looked down upon by many educated people anyway. (Wholesale businesses and commodity businesses on a retail level seem to be higher status. Oddly enough to an American, owning a gas station seems to be higher up on the social ladder than owning a clothing store.) Parween explained that in the US, most people were employed by the private sector, but that yes, if they were qualified, Afghan Americans could be hired for government jobs.

If you want to contribute to this school, donations are fully tax-deductable as long as they are made through the ARO, a 501c3 humanitarian organization. The school doesn't need supplies - these are shipped over from the States or bought in the bazaar- so much as operating funds. Your money will go a long way. Teacher salaries are around \$150 a month.

ARO can be contacted at: info@afghanrelief.com or tel 818 258 3333. Donations may be sent to POB 866, Cypress CA 90630. More information is available on www.afghanrelief.com. If you mention that you would like to donate to the school in Kabul your money will go there.