

Giving Afghan People Access to Clean Water

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My name is Shabana Basij-Rasikh. I was born in Kabul in 1990. Now a freshman at Middlebury College in Vermont, I was born and raised in war. When I was six, education became “illegal” for girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. My parents risked sending me and my sisters to “secret school”—if the Taliban had known, they would have punished or killed the teacher, the students and their families. So six days a week for the next five years I dressed as a boy in order to walk the 45 minutes to school in safety. Thus I could interact daily with the world beyond my house—and so, too, could my sister, who, in her *burqa*, was able to attend the school only because of my escort.

After the fall of the Taliban, I was able to attend a public school for the first time. I began to understand things differently. Always the top student in my class, I was a member of the cultural and social club and a volunteer at Red Crescent, training other students in first aid. I began to study English intensively as a freshman. By year’s end I was one of 40 out of 2,500 applicants to win a national Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Scholarship funded by the U.S. State Department through the America Councils for International Education.

I spent the next year in Wisconsin as a senior at Onalaska High School, graduating two months after I turned 16. Having left my country for the first time, I was able to see it from a different perspective— and it changed my life dramatically. I had two objectives there: to teach Americans about Afghanistan and to learn about the United States. I gave more than 30 presentations at the University of Wisconsin— La Crosse, high schools, middle schools, scouts groups, book clubs, a military base in Sparta, rotary clubs, and churches—and made many contacts. I also learned about volunteerism, giving 106 hours to the public library and the high school in Onalaska.

When I returned to Afghanistan, I could see so very many opportunities to make a difference. I decided to focus my volunteer efforts on helping develop peace in my community. Besides holding a full-time job as executive assistant to the country director at the American Councils for International Education, I organized and executed a number of community services projects. I taught 35 students—doctors, lawyers, police officers, college students, and high school students—from 5 to 6:00 a.m. six days a week for seven months. It was a wonderful experience to interact with students of different ages, backgrounds and experiences.

I visited the Allahoddin Orphanage in Kabul where, after talking to the children and staff, I wrote a proposal to the Rotary Club of La Crosse requesting their support. Within five months of communicating back and forth, the rotary club sent one year’s worth of school supplies and \$4,800 to cover other school needs. Then I needed to buy the clothes and the shoes and distribute the supplies. A group of YES alumni and colleagues from my office helped, adding great meaning to the volunteer effort. The alumni and I planted 50 trees at a middle school in Kabul. Then a friend from Wisconsin and I started a project whereby orphanage students and a middle school in Wisconsin traded art card and gifts and thank-you notes. And I am raising \$75,000 to complete a school in my ancestral village of Qalatik. First we dug a well 30-meters deep and now we’ve built six classrooms. I hope to build ten more so that it can become the first girls’ high school in my ancestral village – Qalatik Village.

Afghanistan is a country that already had been at war for decades before I was born. We have lost much more than I can mention here.

But! one thing, for sure, that we did not lose is hope. I believe that my generation is THE generation that will recover the ground we lost. As Mrs. Davis has said, “We don’t know what tomorrow holds, and, therefore, let’s take advantage of today, and be as useful as we can be—I do believe in that.” I believe in that, too, Mrs. Davis. I want to be useful today and all the days after. That is why I am writing you to request your support in digging six, 30-meter wells in remote areas outside of Kabul and in Laghman Province.

Afghanistan very recently has faced years of drought. A main causes of illness in Afghanistan is the lack of access to clean drinking water. People travel miles to obtain it. Not long ago, I, along with my brother and sister, had to carry buckets of clean water to my home from far away. I still see little children in my neighborhood and around the city, let alone in the provinces, slogging buckets of water. And when people have no access to clean water, what they get from the river is often brown, with unknown upstream travels.

Six deep wells strategically dug across different areas will give thousands access to clean water. It will reduce illness hugely—especially for children. People will save their energy for other things, and little children will have time to enjoy their peaceful years of childhood and have fun! I would be so happy to be able to give these children back their time—to enjoy, not to walk and walk again to retrieve water.

By April, with the help of my family, the YES alumni network, and the American Councils, and with professional advice, the locations for the six wells will have been chosen. By May 25 (after my finals), we will launch the project and begin to monitor it closely. And by June 10, the wells will be installed! As a result of my experience at the school in Qalatik, I know how to contract with trustworthy drilling contractors.

I would like to conclude by expressing my sincere appreciation to the Davis Foundation for giving youth around the world such wonderful opportunities to participate in bringing peace to their home countries. There is no better way to spend a summer at home than dedicated to a peace project.

I urge your support and hope that I will be one of the privileged who will be granted the opportunity to make a difference in my beloved country. With your support, nearly 6,000 people in Afghanistan will benefit from clean drinking water. And those people will understand that the Davis Foundation really cares about people and truly is helping those in need. They will realize that there are people outside Afghanistan who care for them. They will become great hosts for foreigners traveling to Afghanistan. Bridging the distance between these proposed beneficiaries of your support and the rest of the world is a wonderful way to promote peace.

I also will raise awareness of this peace project at Middlebury College and throughout the Middlebury community. Learning of this project and hearing of my experiences during the summer of 2008 will have a positive impact not only in encouraging students to participate in promoting peace around the world, but also in encouraging donors to contribute additional funds for my other peace related projects.

Health is wealth. The Afghan people who drink healthy, clean water will become wealthy.

I very much am looking forward to discussing this project further with you. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.