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Local foundation helps Afghans trapped under Taliban rule

By Jon Kingdon

It was 20 years ago when Lafayette resident Budd MacKenzie happened to read a Parade article about Greg Mortenson with the title that said, "He fights terror with books." The article went on to explain how Mortenson built a school in a small village in Northern Pakistan where he saw students having to write their lessons in the dirt and wrote about it in his book, "Three Cups of Tea."

MacKenzie was able to contact Mortenson and learned that he was also building schools in Afghanistan. "I asked him how much money he would need to build a school in Afghanistan, and he answered \$25,000," McKenzie explained. "I told him to pick another village, letting him know I was raising money for a school; we ended up raising \$60,000 and in 2005, the school was finished and that was when I first visited Afghanistan."

After that first visit to Afghanistan, MacKenzie made a commitment to do more and started his own charitable foundation, "Trust in Education (TIE)," to help educate the children of Afghanistan, particularly girls. A second project for TIE was providing 'food-clothing-shelter' for a country that had been devastated by the Russian invasion and the constant battles between the local warlords. The foundation also provided Afghan farmers with over 22,000 fruit trees, 300 sheep, delivered over 30,000 tons of clothing blankets to families living in refugee camps and funded the building of bridges and the construction of wells.

Jump forward to November 2021 and much of what TIE had accomplished had been thwarted by the Taliban government. "On December 24th, we had 10 computer libraries with computers full of educational software that were run by women and utilized by over 1,000 girls a day," MacKenzie said. "On December 25th, they all had to be closed when the Taliban decreed that Afghan women could no longer work for foreign nonprofit organizations."

One program that has continued for the past 10 years was TIE's sponsoring of children, who had to work on the streets to help support their families. Sponsors in the United States provided \$50 per month in exchange for their parents' agreement that they would no longer work on the streets and would go to school. There were 152 children that were sponsored and 55 graduated from high school and 17 from college. Fourteen of the women who were attending college were barred by the Taliban from the universities. Many fled the country with their families after the Taliban took control and 52 children are still in the program and receiving support.

In November 2021, MacKenzie was prompted to establish a family sponsorship program after seeing a report on CNN about a 9-year-old girl being sold to a 55-year-old man for \$2,000. "When I saw that story, I realized that if a country is so destitute that families are having to sell their daughters to survive, we needed to provide those families with economic support," MacKenzie said.

Sponsored families receive \$100 per month from their sponsors for a year which is enough to feed a family of four for a month. Sponsors contribute either a half-a-year (\$600) or the full year (\$1,200). This is a zero-sum program for TIE in that 100% of what's donated goes to the families.

"I don't believe that patchwork works, like providing food that lasts a month," MacKenzie said. "What I wanted to do was to provide support for the families that was long-term. At this point, 93 families have been sponsored and I have asked Mujeeb, our program director in Kabul, to send me the profiles of seven more. There are now 384 people (246 children and 46 widows) that continue to have a place to live and food to eat which is so important for those who have been living day to day."

Mujeeb interviews the poorest of the poor and sends profiles and photos of the families which he recommends to TIE. MacKenzie is also doing what he can to provide educational tools for boys and girls to use at home by having TIE buy tablets and loading them with educational software, creating a tablet library. "The tablets bring education into homes and provides every member of the family with the opportunity to learn," MacKenzie said. "The tablets have everything a child would learn from first through the 12th grade, and more."

With the sponsorship money, some of the families have been able to start small businesses. TIE also funded a class on how to repair cell phones. "For those who are likely to get a job or start their own repair business," MacKenzie said, "we will pay the \$150 needed to purchase the repair tools, having provided these men with a marketable skill they did not have."

Since the women can't get out of the house and get jobs, TIE is finding ways for them to make money. "We are providing tailoring classes for them and will help them market what they produce," MacKenzie said.

Though the overall numbers of starving families are daunting, it's a matter of keeping things in perspective. "Once at a Rotary club, I gave a talk about our program, and someone shouted out that what we were doing was just a drop in the bucket. That may be true, I said, but if everybody took responsibility for a drop in the bucket, the bucket would soon be full," MacKenzie said.

For more information about Trust in Education, visit www.trustededucation.org, or email trustededucation@gmail.com and the phone number is (925) 299-2010. For information on the family sponsorship program, visit <https://trustededucation.org/get-involved/sponsor-an-afghan-family>.

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[back](#)

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