

Helping Afghan girls receive an education

Assistance fund's goal is for graduates to then raise conditions in Afghanistan

By **MARIE L. PFEIFER**, Contributing Writer

MADISON – The journey from Afghanistan to Drew University in Madison has been a long one for Shamila Kohestani.

Kohestani, who grew up under Taliban rule between the ages of 8 and 13, was deprived of an education, the plight of all girls in Afghanistan.

Oppression didn't dampen her spirit or prevent her from aspiring to her dreams when the Taliban were driven out of her country.

Kohestani, dark-eyed, animated and articulate, tells of her dreams and passions. Now a second-year student at Drew, she is one of two beneficiaries to date of the Afghan Girls Financial Assistance Fund, started by local businessmen last year to help young Afghan women who seek a college education in the United States.

The fund identifies promising young women, matches them with participating educational institutions and American host families, and provides financial support to defray expenses not covered by either these institutions or host families, according to the fund's Web site.

'Sharing The Benefit'

"These women are selected not only because they are well qualified, highly motivated and in need of financial assistance," according to the Web site, "but because they are committed to sharing the benefit of their education to improve conditions in Afghanistan."

Kohestani's long road has taken a series of surprising and ultimately happy twists and turns.

"I always wanted to play soccer, but under the Taliban rule only the men were allowed to play. My sisters and I longed for an education that was also not available to girls.

"After the Americans drove the Taliban out, we were so happy. That is when I knew I would be able to enjoy some freedom."

Her new-found freedom provided an opportunity for Kohestani, one of eight girls who were invited to the United States in 2004, to learn soccer as part of the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange, a fledgling program started by Awista Ayub, an Afghan-American and a women's ice hockey player.

When Kohestani returned to Afghanistan, her passion ignited, she continued playing soccer. Her dreams began to take shape in the spring of 2006, when she was among 250 girls who took part in a five-day clinic in Kabul, sponsored by the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange.

Kohestani enjoys the distinction of serving as captain of Afghanistan's National Women's Soccer Team.

Destiny was beckoning her to the United States once again when she returned that summer to accept the Arthur Ashe Courage Award at the ESPN Excellence in Sports Performance Yearly (ESPY) Awards on behalf of all Afghan female soccer athletes.

Proving her leadership skills, she joined with others to start women's soccer teams at high schools in Afghanistan.

Role Model

Despite the oppression of girls that continued to exist in her country, Kohestani went on to become an example for Afghan girls and young women who were weaving dreams during the era of Taliban rule.

"Suddenly, I went from being a girl playing soccer in Kabul, who was criticized for being different, to rubbing shoulders with former President George W. Bush and LeBron James, a professional basketball player, at the star-studded awards in Los Angeles."

During the trip, Kohestani participated in the Julie Foudy Sports Leadership Academy in Hightstown, where she showcased her enthusiasm for soccer, winning her a post-graduate scholarship to Blair Academy in Blairstown.

Blair, a college prep school, helped Kohestani fill in the gaps in her education due to the Taliban regime's ban on educating girls.

Julie Foudy, a former midfielder (1987-2004) and captain (2000-2004) of the United States women's national soccer team, and Ayub teamed up to help girls in Afghanistan realize their potential as leaders to benefit young women in their own country.

Foudy has great admiration for Kohestani and others who leave their families and culture behind to venture to the United States.

“It is truly remarkable the amount of courage it must take for these girls and women to leave their families and culture behind to come to the United States to gain an education,” Foudy observed.

“It is fascinating to watch the transformation of the girls in their journey to find their voice.”

Creating Fund

The Afghan Girls Financial Assistance Fund came together to help young women such as Kohestani under the leadership of Joseph Hyland of Princeton, and David Bugen and Leo Motiuk, both of the New Vernon section of Harding Township.

Hyland is one of the founders and the former CEO of the Environ Corporation. Bugen is a wealth manager, founder and partner of Regent Atlantic Capital, and Motiuk is an attorney focusing on environmental law for Windels, Marx, Lane and Mittendorf.

The three men established the fund in 2008 to aid young Afghan women who seek a college education in the United States. The fund achieves its goals through a four-way partnership: a secondary school, an institution of higher learning, an American host family, and the fund.

For the success of the student in the United States, all four parts must be working together.

Drew University, through the efforts of trustee William P. Knox of Bernards Township, provided a full four-year scholarship for Kohestani, and through networking, members of the fund found a host family, the T.J. Coan and Cathy McKay family of Westfield.

Kohestani has become very close to her host family, so they are known to her as her American Mom and Dad. The two McKay girls, Quinn and Taylor, are her American sisters.

Separation Averted

The family’s attachment to one another became apparent when Kohestani successfully completed Blair Academy but didn’t have a college scholarship. The lack of a scholarship prevented her from continuing her stay in this country, and she returned to Afghanistan.

Remembering this incident, T.J. Coan choked up in the retelling.

The story, however, had a happy ending because Bugen made contact with Knox, and a Drew University scholarship was provided.

Kohestani lives on the Madison campus so she can study and enjoy campus life.

“I want to be here and take advantage of the education that I longed for in Afghanistan. I am here to become educated so that I can take that back with me to my country, and I don’t want to miss any part of it.

“I work very hard, something my American counterparts don’t always understand because they take an education for granted,” Kohestani noted.

“I do not plan to go home to Afghanistan this summer as much as I miss my family because I may have a safety issue from speaking out about freedom for women now that the Taliban is moving back into Afghanistan.”

Currently there are two recipients of the fund – Kohestani and Yasamin Rasoul.

Rasoul was born in Afghanistan into a large family of four sisters and three brothers. The young women were selected in recognition of their qualifications, keen motivation and financial need – and also because of their determination to put their prized educational advantage to work for their peers in Afghanistan.

The fund reviews applicants, selects recipients and determines award amounts.

Contributions to the fund are tax-deductible. Contributions should be made payable to the Afghan Girls Financial Assistance Fund c/o the Community Foundation of New Jersey, P.O. Box 338, Morristown, N.J. 07963, or through the fund’s Web site at www.agfaf.org. The fund will send a written acknowledgment of the donation. Hans Dekker is the executive director of the Community Foundation of New Jersey.

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