



ReGreening Afghanistan

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Sultana's Afghan Homecoming

Sultana intended, for years, to return to her home. Her goal was to take "ReGreening Afghanistan," a project of literacy and gardening using principles of permaculture and sustainability back to her home country – a country and a people that suffered for decade upon decade under the ravages of war and internal violence. Unknown to her were the unexpected events that would take her there, and the state of the country that she would find upon her arrival. Sultana has returned home and shares with us her reflections on the current conditions that she finds in Kabul.

Sultana arrived in Kabul in late July aboard *Ariana Airlines*. Her aircraft remains perhaps one of the oldest in operation, with no seatbelts and deafening noise as the worn metal clanked and banged and the engine sputtered and groaned, as if itself determined to complete the journey. An Afghan saying (as there is always an Afghan saying) warns, "to fly Ariana is to have the courage to travel to the other world and back." Consequently, a safe return to ground be-

came the first of many triumphant events that are to be celebrated in the benevolent pilgrimage of this returning daughter of the mountains and deserts.

As the aircraft hovered over the airfield, now strewn with broken down military equipment, crashed airplanes, and rusted parts, Sultana began to absorb the vestiges of internal and external struggles that leaves none in Afghanistan untouched. Her first glance at the parched, treeless landscape of her home left her disoriented and profoundly sad, and her fears would soon prove grounded. As she traveled to a tree-filled grove where she played as a child and that she remembered as a "green, lush forest," she found only three (3) trees had survived the decades of bombings, cuttings, and drought. Snipers were said to hide in trees, so the trees were hacked down and bombed along with the Afghan people.

Not even children escaped the full-scale ravaging, as mines shaped in colorful plastic butterflies designed to attract little

hands, blew their limbs from their bodies and left a country of amputees without the capacity for work. Sultana found immediately the broad scope of the human devastation as she stepped out of her "hotel" which was, unbeknown to her, formerly a holding prison for the Taliban. Kabul streets have become a sea of humanity, burgeoning from 800,000 residents in the 1970's to the current population of 3.5 million residing in 25% of the dwellings that once stood. Those buildings were destroyed by recurrent bombings over thirty relentless years. The streets of Kabul are lined with row after row of handicapped beggars, many of them children – limbs lost to wartime landmines and hands and feet lost to the Taliban. The are scant facilities and services for the disabled, and they have no capacity to make a living without specialized training. Thus, the toll for them -- and for the Afghan spirit in general -- is enormous as the country suffers its own physical and psychic maiming as well.

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ReGreening Afghanistan: Developing Sustainable Family Gardens

The tremendous challenges and pressures of the last four decades on the people and land of Afghanistan have created a continuous state of crisis. Now, thanks to the recent hopefully improved political situation, we envision and are implementing reconstructive efforts towards rebuilding Afghanistan. The leading innovative proposal is the *ReGreening Afghanistan* Literacy and Gardening Project, created by Dr. Sultana Parvanta and supported by CommonWell Institute International, Inc.

The *ReGreening Afghanistan* Project assumes an “ecological model” of human interaction and learning, following the work of Paolo Friere. At the Project’s core is the belief that the individual, family, community and

environment's wellbeing are the foundations of a healthy society.

A primary emphasis and goal of the Project will be to increase reading and writing literacy of participants in their first language. With 49% of male and 78% of female Afghans unable to read in any language, this project dramatically impacts all areas of Afghan life.

In 2001, Oxfam declared Afghanistan to be the poorest country in Asia.

ReGreening Afghanistan teaches reading and writing in a way that helps participants view themselves as capable of asserting control over their lives. Physical health and meaningful work

are the two key components of self-efficacy.

Simply put: the *ReGreening Afghanistan* Project gives Afghan people the personal and economic resources to build sustainable communities, and empowers them through language competencies along the way.



Mother and Child — Begging in Kabul

Photograph © A. Raffaele Cirillo

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The devastation of the landscape is most strikingly felt in the poor quality of air that invades the lungs of Afghan residents, creating dangerous respiratory infections and skin disorders in children and adults alike. Children suffer as their bodies are covered with blisters and boils, and no medication to sooth them. Hospitals are few and are totally ill-equipped to handle the challenges of both the scope and profundity of the current health issues. Sultana reports that a hospital across the street from her hotel collapsed several weeks after her arrival, finally succumbing to the years of repeated shuddering, as the lasting effects of bombings finally took their toll. Without facilities and treatment, long term plight wraps its tentacles around the next generation of Afghans. The term offered for the debilitating condition of the air and fine dust is? Another Afghan saying -- “Kabul fog.”

Likewise, the physical landscape suf-

fers. Global climate change, coupled with the lack of living, breathing trees, creates drought conditions that have taken away the life-giving water from humans and gardens alike. The search for underground water has deepened from 8 meters to 80 meters. Capacity of drilling equipment and generators, likewise, must be increased at daunting expense.

In spite of all, Sultana remains full of hope and is inspired by the zeal and spirit of the Afghan people in their quest for a better peaceful and prosperous future. Each morning she rises early, teaches a literacy class to 15 women before beginning her long workday at the Ministry dealing with urgent urban issues. She spends her days off working with residents on community gardens and assisting with the propagation of ancient trees that might well be lost if not saved soon. They tend the trees individually, hand carrying buckets of precious water to

sustain the growth. Now, when Sultana sees a tree, she says a small blessing and determines to complete her mission and to see the lush fruit and nut trees of Afghanistan once again flourish.

Her spirit is undaunted, her heart is full, and I find that, each week, I eagerly anticipate my telephone call to her, which always inspire and recommit me to “*ReGreening Afghanistan.*”

- Elise Collins Shields



Sultana Paravanta, Ph.D.

Elise to Serve as Mentor to Afghan Women Heading to Arizona

Adapted from story by Mike Sunnucks

When Barbara Barrett visited Afghanistan earlier this year, she saw an emerging country a few years removed from the authoritarian rule of the Taliban. Barrett, one of the Valley's most influential leaders, also saw a country where women who once were oppressed and denied the right to go to school now had more freedom and liberties. That includes the ability to start their own small businesses and other economic enterprises.

An idea hatched from Barrett's visit to Afghanistan that links women entrepreneurs from that developing country with one of the top business schools in the country, resulting in a partnership involving Afghan women entrepreneurs and Thunderbird, The Garvin School of International Management.

A group of 15 Afghan women entrepreneurs will attend Thunderbird in January to learn how to set up small businesses back home. They will go to

two weeks' worth of intensive classes and trade efforts. at the Glendale school on how to set up a business model and plan, how to get financing such as micro loans, and how to find export opportunities for the United States and other markets.

Heading the effort is Barrett, who serves on Thunderbird's board of directors, and Mina Sherzoy, a businesswoman whose family came to California when the Soviet Union invaded her homeland in the late 1970s.

Barrett said most of the funding for the project comes from Arizona contributors to Thunderbird and the U.S. Agency for International Development, which is picking up travel costs.

Barrett said if the Afghan program is successful, the initiative could be expanded to other developing countries, including Iraq, where she traveled recently as part of economic, educational

"It seemed like a perfect fit," said Barrett of setting up a partnership between the Afghan business women and Thunderbird.

Sherzoy said women with media companies, import-export businesses, finance and medical practices are scheduled to attend the two-week program. Most of them are from the capital city of Kabul, Afghanistan's main commercial hub and most open and westernized area. Sherzoy said if the Thunderbird effort works out, more programs could be held there and at other universities in the United States.

Steven Stralser, managing director of Thunderbird's Global Entrepreneurship Center, said the program is a first for the graduate business school and displays the institution's commitment to international economic development. "The attendees will get a well-formed idea of what it takes to start a new enterprise," said the Thunderbird professor. *More info: stralser@t-bird.com*

Meet Sultana Parvanta

Dr. Sultana Parvanta was formerly Director for Communities In Schools at the California Leadership Training Center on the campus of California State University in Monterey Bay. Sultana has been involved in teacher education for more than two decades in U.S. and internationally. She served as Director of Curriculum and Training for the State of Georgia Alternative Schools programs, planned and coordinated statewide teacher training institutes and conferences. She published a bi-annual Teachers Tip for teachers in the state.

Dr. Parvanta taught at Emory University, Georgia State University, Indiana University and California State University in departments of Education, Teacher Training, Policy Studies, and Wellness. She was a researcher at the Center for Research on effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students at the Johns Hopkins University.

Before returning to Kabul, Sultana remained an active volunteer, counselor and teacher in her community.



Photograph © A. Raffaele Cirillo

Woman Amputee in Kabul

YOU Can Be Involved

Sultana's work requires support in many ways. The utmost need are funds for supplies and maintenance expenses. All donations are completely tax-deductible and go directly to benefit the wonderful work we're doing in Afghanistan. To contribute on line, go to www.commonwell.org. Your gift can save a life!

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CommonWell Institute International, Inc

was founded in 2003 by Dr. Elise Collins Shields and a group of concerned leaders.

It is a non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring sustainable leadership for the new century that promotes peace, and that is dedicated in spirit and action to the wellbeing of **all** citizens of the global village, including women and children. CommonWell's support of projects such as the *Re-Greening Afghanistan* Literacy and Garden Project is solely dependent on contributions.

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