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Rebuilding an Impoverished Region

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Rebuilding an impoverished region



Mujib Kamawal '06, left, with one of the many cousins he visited in Afghanistan in January.

When Mujib Kamawal's family fled to Pakistan from their native Afghanistan, they left a lush, vibrant region. When they returned for a visit years later, the Kama district was a wasteland. They knew they had to help.

Mujib '06, now a Linfield chemistry major, was born three years after his family escaped the atrocities and killings of the Soviet invasion in 1981. In 1985 when he

was a year old, his family moved to Portland, where his parents still live.

But the Kamawals could not forget the people of their homeland. When he returned to Afghanistan in 1996 and 2001, Mujib's father, Jamil, was shocked by the devastation. The land was barren. Only poverty and illiteracy flourished.

"I had this vision that I wanted to see, that I could help our people in a constructive way," Jamil Kamawal said.

With modest personal resources, Kamawal, a land surveyor for Washington County, established the non-profit Kama Relief Corp. in 2001. Education is its primary mission.

"Our goal is to provide an education to every child there," Kamawal said.

The organization has established three schools and sponsors activities at three others, as well as some adult classes at a community center.

Kama Relief also runs a food-distribution program that has helped about 90 needy families, including widows, orphans and people with disabilities, Kamawal said. A small stipend is paid to families who take in orphans, to eliminate the need for building orphanages, he added.

Kamawal also is trying to establish a health clinic in the Kama district, whose residents cannot even afford transportation to medical care. "The roads have been heavily damaged, so it can take two hours or longer to travel 20 or 30 miles," he said.

Kamawal and his wife, Mahbooba, visit Afghanistan annually at their own expense. He is proud that the tax-exempt organization runs on a lean budget with little spent on administration. Kamawal said its annual budget has ranged from about \$20,000 to \$40,000. Most of the

money, he said, comes from donations collected in Portland's Muslim community during Ramadan observances.

Mujib, along with his four brothers and his sister, has visited the Kama district and assists with the relief efforts. He designed Kama Relief's Website and helps with fundraising.

In January, Mujib visited Afghanistan to witness the results of those efforts. He saw a new schoolhouse nearing completion and "moved a lot of rocks," filling a floor that would later have cement poured over it. He also helped distribute food.

"It's really a horrible situation," said Mujib, who had not been there since age 11. "There's no clean water, and a lot of people don't have enough food. It hurts to see all those people – little kids who don't have enough to eat or drink. We do what we can and hope it's enough. Usually, it's not."

Mujib is applying to medical schools and hopes to become a surgeon or a pediatrician. But he also wants to remain active in Kama Relief. "I definitely want to be an integral part of it as I grow older," he said. "I hope to get involved more and more."

For more information on Kama Relief, visit www.kamarelief.org.

— Beth Rogers Thompson



Jamil Kamawal speaks to local residents before distributing food. He is in front of the community center his family's non-profit organization helped build in the district in which he was raised and from which he fled in 1981.