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Rebuilding an Impoverished Region

Beth Rogers Thompson

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Santiago has been, in a sense, a meeting of place,” Gómez said. “This is a place that has linked Europe and influenced the pilgrims have had on the history and culture of Spain. When he returned, Gómez has continued his research into how the figure of St. James is used as a conqueror, an intercessor in battles. Much of what he has seen and learned, including some 2,000 digital images, is bringing history and culture to life in his classes. His life is richer for having had the experience.

“I was 60 years old and I had never walked 20 kilometers in one day, or maybe in my entire life,” he said with a laugh. “I walk a mile every day, but that’s with my dog. But 20 or 40 kilometers a day for 39 days! I just feel that I’ve done something for myself that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I have accomplished many things in my life, but this is one of those main pivotal events.”

— Mardi Mileham

A self portrait of Juan Manuel Gómez. Although the weather was unusually dry, there is snow in the background. He had only two days of snow during his entire 43-day journey.

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 1983 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, Januil, 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 fund-raising.

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

Student Profile

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