

# Davis Projects for Peace

## *Final Report – Summer 2008*

### I. Overview

**Name:** Mujda Amini

**School:** Columbia University: School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA)

**Project Title:** “Library of Hope”

**Location:** Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan

### II. Mission

My primary goal with the Davis Peace Project was to promote literacy in Afghanistan through an educational resource center in Mazar-e-Sharif, a rural part of Afghanistan often overlooked by NGOs and mainstream civil society actors. By increasing literacy rates in Mazar-e-Sharif, I hope to create greater educational advancement and employment opportunities for local residents.

### III. Description

“Library of Hope” is affiliated with *Maulana Jalaludin Balkhi High School* with a student body of nearly 10,000 students, in the town of Chooqdakh, located in the province of Mazar-e-Sharif. The library includes a wide range of learning materials from science and mathematics to literature and children’s novels, all of which are accessible to the students of *Maulana Jalaludin Balkhi High School*.

The project is open to both men and women. This is particularly important because gender segregation is still highly visible in the Afghan culture and particularly within *Maulana Jalaludin Balkhi High School*, where many female students are not given access to use certain school facilities. Our library allows equal access to male and female students. Additionally, since its inauguration, the library has also become a popular educational center for students and a source of communal pride.

### IV. Personal Statement

Having benefited from the privileges and freedoms of living in the United States, I wanted to create similar opportunities for the country’s young people. I know that the greatest gift that I can give to those who have not been as fortunate as me is the opportunity to learn.

### V. Timeline

The initial phase of the project began on June 1, 2008 when I arrived in Afghanistan. Having left the country at the age of three, it was difficult for me to anticipate what obstacles I would meet in achieving the goals of my project; however, after visiting certain Western agencies, I was able to get a better idea about the requirements of building the library. My search began with Timothy Moore, the Literacy Program Director for the U.S. Embassy. Mr. Moore and his team were instrumental in supplying me with useful resources for obtaining English Grammar books that were customized for Afghan students. Most of these books were translated in the local languages such as Farsi & Pashto. Many of the book supplies also included orally recorded audio cassettes versions. These cassettes have proven to be very effective learning tools for many students. Through the support of Mr. Moore’s team, I was able to secure a collection of English translated Grammar books for the library in Mazar-e-Sharif. Additionally, teacher’s manuals were supplied to many of the instructors who are often ill-equipped to effectively teach their students. Given the lack of resources and training for Afghan teachers, these manuals will serve as an effective guide for many of these untrained administrators.

During the first week of my trip, I was notified that the original site I had decided on using to build my library, a mosque named *Mohammad Ali Masjid*, would no longer be available for use. Through a local contact, Mr. Ghafoor Hakimi, I was able to secure a room with *Maulana Jalaludin Balkhi High School*. Logistically, this proved to be difficult as the high school required major renovations since much of its infrastructure was destroyed during the Taliban period. Consequently, this shift in location affected some of my original cost projections, in which many renovation expenses were not applicable and therefore not considered.

In the remaining two weeks that I spent in Afghanistan, my responsibilities were broadly divided in two parts; first I oversaw the renovation of the room which would host the library and second I coordinated the arrival of the books. The renovations were done by local contractors which Mr. Hakimi had found for us. A large part of this process included making sure the contractors were using proper materials and more importantly remained on schedule with the renovations. The newly renovated room was fully equipped with electrical wiring, floor furnishings and custom shelves as well as large conference tables. Additional accessories such as fans, light fixtures and window coverings were provided to create a comfortable atmosphere for all of the students.

The next part of my work was dedicated to acquiring a supply of books, which were mostly purchased locally in an effort to minimize transportation costs. Based on the recommendations of students, faculty members and community leaders, I was able to gather around 2,000 books. Going forth, a list of books will be routinely updated to ensure that newer editions of specific textbooks are made accessible to the students. Additionally, a formalized recordkeeping procedure was established for the school librarian for handling the checkout process of the books. At this juncture, all library related requests will be manually registered in a book until a computer is purchased in the near future to facilitate this process.

## V. Impact

At first, I was daunted by cultural constraints, clashing work ethics and a lack of community pride. Yet within a week these seemingly insurmountable barriers started to break down. After routinely visiting the school and assisting in the renovation process, I was able to find more visitors who were ready to help in completing the project. Students would come between their classes to sweep the floor, discard trash and organize the books. Parents participated by bringing meals throughout the day for all the workers and staff members. Instilling a sense of the community pride and encouraging locals to participate in their own process of rebuilding was by far the greatest milestone of my visit. For me, the community's support of the new library illustrated the power of mobilizing communities at the grassroots level to create change even in the most impossible of circumstances.

## VI. Next Steps

Afghanistan is a country that has survived decades of tyranny and oppression. However, for the first time since the removal of the Taliban, the country's civil society is slowly being rebuilt. My particular project is one of the many seeds that have been planted by expatriates to help rebuild the country at the grassroots level.

In an effort to ensure proper sustainability of the library, I have appointed Mr. Hakimi as a manager to oversee the daily operations of the library. His close proximity to the location will allow him to regularly visit the library and effectively address any of the issues. Additionally, an informational website will be developed in the near future to advise any visitors about volunteering and future fundraising opportunities. During my next trip to Afghanistan in September 2009, I intend to visit the library. I hope to continue to monitor the progress of the library, ensure its sustainability, and expand the initiative to include other cities in Afghanistan.

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### Photographs

