This Project for Peace, “The Afghan Scholar Initiative,” (ASI) took place during summer 2008. Our goals in the project were to create a short documentary about our pilot scholars, Meetra Ameni and Sikandar Ahmadi, who will attend Gould Academy this fall, using the documentary as part of a presentation to elite boarding schools, and securing scholarships for Afghan students at elite boarding schools in the United States while laying the groundwork to incorporate as a nonprofit.

We achieved many of our goals in the project, while adapting to changing circumstances in both Afghanistan and the United States. Our documentary, produced by filmographer Juliana Montgomery, features our two pilot scholars. The documentary, a copy of which is being sent to the Davis United World College Scholars Program, has been professionally duplicated for distribution to schools, media outlets, and potential donors. We also succeeded in securing six to eight scholarships that will begin in the 2009-2010 school year. An exact number of scholarships has yet to be determined because some schools have committed to a variable number of scholarships, depending on the strength of selected students. Additionally, we scaled back the number of scholarships from 16 because we thought that we would be unable, logistically and financially, to support any more than 10 students in the next year. We have also begun the process of incorporating as a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation, and hope to be fully incorporated by the end of fall 2008 so that we can begin fundraising immediately. The Afghan Scholar Initiative has been a valuable Project for Peace as it has laid the groundwork for a nonprofit organization that will promote the ideals of peace and understanding for years to come.

The Afghan Scholar Initiative has been a valuable Project for Peace as it has laid the groundwork for a nonprofit organization that will promote the ideals of peace and understanding for years to come.

Initially our Project for Peace had two phases. For phase one, Qiam traveled to Kabul with filmmaker Juliana Montgomery to shoot a 10-minute documentary about the project and our two pilot scholars, Meetra Ameni and Sikandar Ahmadi. Qiam and Ms. Montgomery’s two weeks of shooting the film were successful, resulting in approximately seven hours of footage. Qiam’s job as the producer of the documentary was to find the locations and to arrange meetings with the family of the scholars, their respective schools, and some of the authorities in the Department of Education of Kabul. The families and people at the Department of Education were very welcoming and helpful. In order to film Sikandar and Meetra in their classrooms, Qiam and Ms. Montgomery had to be authorized by the Department of Education of Kabul. The director personally welcomed them, served tea and provided them with the appropriate documentation. He thanked both Ms. Montgomery and Qiam for their efforts.

In Afghanistan, Qiam and Ms. Montgomery faced many challenges along the way. Ms. Montgomery’s safety turned into number one issue for Qiam in Afghanistan. Although they did not face a direct threat, Qiam and his family were very nervous nevertheless. The level of attention that Juliana received as a tall African American lady in Kabul added to Qiam’s anxiety. Ms. Montgomery could not film outdoors because the police would make great trouble, asking for documents that allowed us to film. In one instance, the police stopped Qiam and Ms. Montgomery, checked Ms. Montgomery’s passport, and asked her to delete the scene that she had filmed of pedestrians. Therefore, Ms. Montgomery had to shoot the scenes that she found interesting from the compartment of the car. She edited the DVD in the United States and created the master copy. The project’s web-designer, Audrey Feely, created the logo for the initiative and printed the logo on the 100 copies of the documentary. John and Qiam have sent copies
of the DVD to the schools with which we are working. Also, we are in the process of distributing the DVD to media outlets and potential donors.

The objective of the second phase of our project was to visit a number of schools in New England, in the mid-Atlantic region, and on the west coast. We started by contacting 10 schools, introducing the project, and requesting appointments. Before we contacted the schools, we thought that we might be able to visit all these schools. However, after contacting the schools, and holding several meetings via phone, our plans needed to change. Different school administrators reacted in different ways to this project. Some schools such as Milton Academy and Shawnigan Lake School did not reply to our phone calls or our emails. Some schools were very welcoming of our project, but put different conditions before us. For instance, Madeira School liked the initiative very much, but asked us if we could come up with some of the funding from an outside source. Cate School offered to work with us and provide a scholarship to one of our scholars. However, their condition was that we should be able to guarantee that our scholar will be able to go to college after graduating from Cate. Other schools such as Mercersburg Academy, the Taft School, the Hotchkiss School, Emma Willard and Oregon Episcopal School agreed to work with ASI with few to no restrictions. We are still negotiating with Miss Porter’s School and Proctor Academy. The schools that are onboard with our project understandably also have their own concerns. Although very excited about this project, some schools, such as the Hotchkiss School, want to have a hand in designing the model for selecting the students. Emma Willard School is concerned about getting the best student, who can cope with their rigorous academic system. Thus, we were very successful in obtaining between six to eight scholarships for the fall of 2009.

The scope of our project changed during the three months. After working with our pilot scholars, whom we picked up from Logan airport and hosted in Boston and Maine for five days before taking them to Gould Academy, we realized that we were not ready to bring 12-15 students for the fall of 2009. Therefore, we set our goal at a minimum of six and maximum of eight students. We believe that this number of students will give us the best ability to provide the support and attention necessary to successfully place and support each student.

At the beginning of the summer, we were planning to work with the Goodrich Foundation to manage our money and assist us in our fundraising efforts. We came to that decision for the most part because we did not have the funding necessary to incorporate. However, over the summer, we learned that our collaboration with the Goodrich Foundation would not come to fruition. After canceling our trip to the west coast, we realized that we had enough money to incorporate. Currently we are working with a lawyer from Delaware to incorporate the Afghan Scholars Initiative as a non-profit organization. We are also working with the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan and representatives of the schools involved to come up with a model for selecting the students. We are seeking a model that is acceptable for all parties involved and a model that generates the top students. Moving forward, we realize that this project would not have been possible without the Davis Projects for Peace program. All of us involved in the project -- Qiam, John, and our volunteers and collaborators -- look forward to continuing this work for the foreseeable future.
Figure 1. Meetra Ameni and Sikandar Ahmadi with Juliana Moore in Kabul

Figure 2. Qiamuddin Amiry and Juliana Moore Filming Outside of Kabul

Figure 3. John Campbell at the Madeira School