Helping Afghan Girls Get to School

BY CLOTLILDE DEDECKER, 18

Last year, workers in Afghanistan finished construction on the six-classroom brick-and-concrete Zarghona Middle School in Kandahar, and 300 Afghan girls who had never gone to school before are now students there.

The school owes its existence to a talk at the YWCA in Buffalo, N.Y., that I happened to attend with my mother in March 2002. It was a panel discussion on "Afghanistan, Women, and Islam," and the speakers introduced me to the plight of Afghan women and girls.

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From 1996 to 2001, Afghanistan was ruled by a conservative Muslim group called the Taliban, whose rigid interpretation of Islam stripped women of their rights. Girls were not allowed to go to school. The Taliban were ousted in November 2001 by U.S. and allied forces and Afghan rebel groups, but women are still struggling to regain their rights.

One of the speakers at the YWCA was Susan Safi-Rafiq, an advocate for Afghan women. She said that before the Taliban, women had made up a significant portion of the country's professors and doctors. That surprised and impressed me. She made a plea to help Afghan girls get the education they had been denied under the Taliban.

The thought of being denied an education because you were a girl was horrifying. I went to an all-girls school, and it was a very empowering experience. My school always seemed charged with a feeling of sisterly support that I know will always remain with me.

I thought that Afghan girls, after years of oppression, were entitled to the same sort of experience. I hoped an all-girls school would provide a supportive environment where they would see that women have value.

After her talk, I introduced myself to Safi-Rafiq. I told her I wanted to get involved, and that all-girls' schools could help by doing what they do best: promoting the education of girls. She encouraged me to pursue the idea.

That spring, I presented a proposal to raise money to build a girls' school in Afghanistan to the principals of eight nearby girls' schools, and six agreed to participate. The "Western New York Girls Schools' Coalition: Afghanistan Project" was born.

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We organized car washes, bottle drives, dances, and bake sales to help raise money. We also received some generous donations. Our goal was $12,000, but building the school ended up costing about $18,000. To date, we have raised more than $21,000.

We sent the Afghan students a photo of all the girls in the coalition. We haven't heard back from them, but that's perfectly fine: As long as they have their school, we're happy!

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