



Students urged to connect with Afghan peers

EDUCATION: A Rotary built school in Afghanistan aims to provide hope

By RANDY RICHMOND, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

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A London aid group is set to launch a national campaign Friday to connect students across Canada with 4,000 counterparts in a new Canadian-built high school in Afghanistan.

Through a national writing/video/art contest, a Guinness world record attempt, virtual tours, bracelet fundraisers, speaking tours and an interactive website, Rotary's international development arm hopes to keep the Afghanistan school thriving and at the same time teach Canadian students about the war-torn country, and their own.

"We're too busy right now to be proud," organizer Morgan Shortt said with a laugh Tuesday. "Maybe in a year we'll have time."

Shortt is the program officer for the Canadian Rotary Collaboration for International Development (CRCID) in London that shepherds overseas projects for Rotary clubs across the country.

About two years ago, the Canadian International Development Agency asked Rotary to help out in Afghanistan.

After doing some research, Rotary's international development wing decided to build a two-story school in Nangarhar province.

"We learned the students have to study outside. The winters are very cold and the summers are very hot," Shortt said. "It became obvious they needed a school."

Besides improving the quality of life for Afghan boys and girls, the school will improve the economy of the region and offer hope for the future, Shortt said.

"It is kind of a stepping stone."

Led by Rotary Clubs in Calgary and Winnipeg, about \$280,000 was raised to build the school, matched by about \$518,000 from CIDA.

The school is nearing completion and is set to open in mid-September.

Soon after agreeing to the project, Rotary officials realized the high school provided Canadian students an opportunity as well.

"We are going to go into Canadian high schools to raise awareness of Afghanistan and to help Canadian students appreciate where they live and the culture we have," Shortt said.

The exercise is not without challenges, from protecting the safety of the Afghanistan students to moving cautiously over the gender issues in the Muslim country.

The school is in a relatively safe place, but Afghan students will not be identified and there will be no one-on-one communication with Canadian students, Shortt said.

Rotary is committed to gender equality, but in a school where girls and boys go in different shifts, “we have to be culturally sensitive,” she said.

Even so, the website for the project boasts videos of women’s soccer teams, and one of the topics for the Canadian student contest is the challenges faced by Afghan girls.

That contest is open to all grades at Canadian schools and 12 winners will get a free laptop.

Rotary will also send speakers to schools and provide classroom kits and organizers are hoping for a million signatures on the Rotary guestbook.

Students can also download the official song for the campaign, More I Want to Know, composed and sung by Londoner Janie Grand.

For more, see www.afghanistanschool.ca

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