

Rotary builds Afghan school

BY BILL CLARKE

DALHOUSIE ► There's a new school in Afghanistan, and it's providing learning experiences for students right here in Canada. Understanding how that can be requires a bit of a history lesson.

Canada's first Rotary Club started in 1910, so last year marked a hundredth birthday. Canadian Rotary clubs celebrated not by receiving gifts, but by giving one: they created a brand-new school in a part of Afghanistan where, before that, children got their education outdoors, sheltered from the elements only by trees.

Planning for the project started in 2008; construction got underway in January of last year, and in September, classes began using the two-storey 20-room building.

Rotary's involvement didn't end with when the school opened. It's continuing, and across the country, Rotarians are bringing a message to high schools. Julie Bernard of Dalhousie is one of those Rotarians.

Following visits to Ecole aux Qua-

tre Vents, Dalhousie's Francophone high school, Bernard discussed what she had experienced there.

She said that, when asked what they thought about Afghanistan, the students talked about war and instability.

She said that they were surprised to learn that not all the country is caught up in the violence that makes the international news, that students in most places don't want war, that they have aspirations much like those of teenagers here: to be teachers, doctors, dentists, or engineers.

And she's able to point to progress. She tells the students that, in 2008, only 700,000 boys and no girls were going to school. By 2010, the numbers had changed dramatically: four million boys and two million girls.

And what about that Canadian Rotary-sponsored school? It is attended by some 4,000 kids, attending in shifts. The girls go to school in the morning; the boys in the afternoon; high school students at night.

The school even has running water and indoor toilets. As Bernard points out, that makes it state-of-the-art by Afghan standards. The commitment continues: already there are plans to add recreation facilities and even a child care room, so more female teachers can work there.

But Canada's Rotary clubs want students here to be involved in a program. With that in mind, they've set up the Afghanistan Education Challenge.

It's for Canadian high school students and involves studying Afghan culture. Projects may be in one of three media: audio/video, written text or visual or graphic arts.

They will focus on education, art and music, humanitarian efforts, women's and girls' challenges or men's; and boys' challenges.

That's part of the message that Bernard is taking to area schools; the other part deals with caring and with involvement in the world.

There's a website that tells all about the program: www.Afghanistan-School.ca.



Julie Bernard, left, spoke recently to a class at AQV school in Dalhousie about the efforts of the Rotary Club to build a school in Afghanistan. Right is teacher Manon Savoie. (Michel Gourd/L'Etoile Restigouche)