

Lesson in hope and goodwill

MEGHANA SHARMA

AFGHANI refugee Ali Reza Yunespour was determined to contribute something of substance towards the education of his countrymen.

Since arriving in Australia in September 2005 he has taught himself English, was an exceptional student at Marsden High School and is studying at Sydney University.

Now he and Ryde Rotary Club have given 1000 children of Borjegai, a village in the remote mountainous region of Afghanistan's Ghazni province, the opportunity of a good education.

Village leaders felt the need to build a school and contacted Yunespour, a member of their community they knew had relocated to Australia.

Yunespour initiated a collaboration between the Indigo Foundation, an Australian non-government organisation that specialises in building schools in Afghanistan, and the Rotary Club of Ryde, which provided \$76,000 towards the cost and supervised the project. "I was very motivated to contribute in any way I could because of my own experiences," Yunespour said.

"Most of my schooling happened in tents and mosques, so I knew about the desperate need for this kind of infrastructure.



COST OF AN AFGHAN SCHOOL

Materials:	\$52,000
Land:	\$25,000
Labour:	\$15,000
Tools:	\$8500
Tradesmen:	\$9000
School staff for a year:	\$12,000
Stationery:	\$2000
Running costs:	\$15,000
Operational costs:	\$5000
TOTAL:	\$143,500

"I also believe the best chance we have for peace in the country is to have an educated population."

Borjegai is home to the Hazara people, an ethnic and religious minority which has been marginalised for centuries.

Even today they do not benefit from nation-building efforts by the United Nations and the US, which focus on more densely

populated areas and politically influential communities.

"Because this is a community that rarely receives the kind of help others do, we felt that our resources would make a difference," Ryde Rotary Club projects director Rob Mitchell said.

The people of Borjegai provided 40 per cent of the funding and the bulk of the physical labour for the stone and wood structure.

The school consists of 12 classrooms, a library, staffroom and storage room arranged around a large central courtyard.

Building was completed in October at about two-thirds of the cost a project of this size would normally entail because of the huge contribution made by the villagers.

"By dealing directly with the community itself, rather than

working through the Afghan government, we were able to circumvent corruption and the money went where we intended it to go," Mitchell said. "And because the community was so heavily involved in initiating and carrying out the project, we know they are committed to maintaining it and there will be long-term benefits."

The co-educational school will follow a secular curriculum designed by the government.

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