Attorney's program wins on two fronts

Lafayette man aids Afghans, helping bridge a cultural divide

HOMETOWN HEROES

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Budd MacKenzie knows most Americans and Afghans don't understand each other. Instead, many believe disturbing caricatures of the other — on one side, the image is of the guns, blood and terrorism; on the other, of arrogance, ignorance and greed.

MacKenzie is trying to combat this from both sides.

An attorney in Lafayette, MacKenzie is also the founder of Trust in Education, a nonprofit that provides education, economic development and health care in Afghanistan. Through his organization, he hopes he not only

See **HERO**, *Page 11*



BUDD MACKENZIE/COURTESY

Budd MacKenzie founded the Trust In Education program, which funded the construction of a school in Afghanistan. He visited the school and its students in November.

Hero

From Page 1

provides the capital to change lives, but the knowledge to change minds.

He says his new work is the most rewarding thing he's done in his life. But he didn't start out with that in mind.

In 2003, MacKenzie and his friends raised $60,000 to build a school in Lalander — a village in the Char Asiab valley, 15 miles south of Kabul — through Central Asia Institute, a Montana-based nonprofit.

It could easily have ended there, with the sizable donation satisfying his desire to make a difference. But instead, he says he changed his life with "the fatal mistake of getting informed" about the country ravaged by war for decades.

On one of his earliest trips to Afghanistan, MacKenzie was invited to visit the Kabul Children's Hospital and its malnutrition ward. The images of babies with arms like sticks, cradled in their mother's also-shockingly-thin arms, haunted him.

"That was the most shocking thing, seeing and being with people who in all likelihood were going to die of starvation," he said. "It's very difficult to turn your back on it. It's impossible."

Nabi Tawakali, the Afghan vice-president of Trust in Education who serves as MacKenzie's translator abroad, said the villagers' reactions to MacKenzie reflect the positive impact he has on their lives.

"They love him. They look at him like a hero," he said. "A lot of these people have been hurt, have been cheated, so they treat him really nicely because they know he's here to help."

Working closely with the villagers, MacKenzie also shows them that Americans care. In disheveled cargo pants markedly different from his starched attorney's suit, he stands out from Afghan villagers and other Westerners alike. When he returned to Lalander, a village elder pulled out a stack of business cards left by government representatives and nonprofit workers who never returned.



KARL MONDON/STAFF

Drawings made by students in Afghanistan adorn the office of Lafayette attorney Budd MacKenzie.

"I thought you were going to be the same," the elder explained to MacKenzie.

But the determination that keeps him coming back to Afghanistan despite increasing violence there is no surprise to those who know him well.

"That's the way Budd attacks everything," said Jay Lifson, a friend and CEO of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. "I think what Budd understands is that this is not something you do once; you don't walk away from it until they don't need our help anymore."

What began with a school in Lalander soon expanded into classes considerably more unusual for the Afghan villagers. An afterschool art class had parents excited that boys and girls share the same room and teacher — a first for most students there. Students showed up an hour and a half before school started to enjoy a new soccer field.

Trust in Education also sponsors street children in Kabul— paying them to attend school so they continue to bring in money to their struggling families.

Adults benefit from MacKenzie's efforts, too — economic development programs increase agricultural production in Char Asiab, and women who never received an education can learn with their daughters.

In Lafayette, MacKenzie gives presentations to school children about his experiences in Afghanistan, and carries their hand-drawn artwork with him when he returns. In this way, the Lafayette students connect to and help change a community across the world.

"Every time Budd goes over there, I worry constantly just because he's such a great guy," said Judy Zenoni, a fourth-grade teacher at Burton Valley Elementary in Lafayette. "But then he comes back with these pictures of him laughing, the kids laughing, and it's just amazing to get that personal perspective that you don't think about when you read the news."

Bruce Wodhams, principal of Springhill Elementary in Lafayette, said MacKenzie helps the kids connect to a situation that otherwise might be beyond their understanding. He added that MacKenzie solicits insight from the students to involve them in the process.

When MacKenzie first showed a group of students a picture of the new school in Lalander, he was met with silence, and then one question. "Where are the swings?" demanded a young student.

So when Budd MacKenzie returned to Lalander, he built a playground. Enrollment increased almost 15 percent after the playground opened — students who may not have gone to school save for a Lafayette youngster's suggestion.

"It's not just an academic thing, because they're allowed to participate," said MacKenzie. "The goal is not only to have them know about it, but to have them internalize something to change it."

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BUDD MACKENZIE

- **AGE:** 63
- **HOMETOWN:** Lafayette
- **OCCUPATION:** Attorney; founder, Trust in Education, a nonprofit organization providing aid to Afghanistan

Hometown Heroes, a partnership between Bay Area News Group-East Bay and Comcast, celebrates people in the Bay Area who make a difference in their communities. In addition to highlighting remarkable individuals, the Hometown Heroes feature aims to encourage volunteerism, raise visibility of nonprofits and key causes in the area and create a spirit of giving.

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