



## Capacitar Letter from Afghanistan—February 2016

### Youth of Afghanistan—The Borderfree Nonviolence Community

Dear Friends,

Greetings to you from Afghanistan where George Horan and I have been working the last 10 days. This is our second visit to the Borderfree Nonviolence Community and the Afghan Peace Volunteers in Kabul. During our time here we facilitated five workshops for youth, peace volunteers, the Borderfree Community, the women's sewing group, street kids and representatives of local organizations. Besides workshops, we also offered individual counseling sessions to a number of youth.

The Borderfree Nonviolence Community was founded in 2011 by Dr. Hakim Young, a medical doctor from Singapore, who wanted to empower youth from different tribal groups to learn how to live and work together in peace. Borderfree focuses on a variety of projects related to three values: Green—with work in peace parks, permaculture and gardening; Equality—with the street kids school, a bicycle club for boys and girls, and a national dance group; and World Without War—with teams in conflict resolution, education, media, mediation, psychology and communication. Borderfree responds to the needs of the Afghan people by supporting education for street kids and youth, as well as teaching skills to women through the sewing co-op that produces duvets and scarves. A new food pantry project provides staples for the families of street kids.



Pat Cane and George Horan with Dr. Hakim Young of Borderfree  
Below: Hakim and Ali with photos of the food pantry for families



Afghan Peace Volunteers at a Capacitar workshop at the Borderfree Center  
Below: Afghan hands of hope and healing doing the Tai Chi movements



This visit we offered counseling and therapy sessions to over 18 people and became very aware of the challenges faced by young Afghans. Sixty-four percent of the population of 32 million is under 18 years of age. In contrast to the problems of youth in developed nations, the normal adolescent psychological development of young Afghans is impacted by a legacy of war, occupation, presence of the Taliban, extreme poverty and on-going violence. In that context, the Afghan youth we met are trying to grow up and get an education in a very poor and often abusive social system. Some are earning university degrees hoping for employment, where the unemployment rate is over 40%. For young women, the situation is also compounded by social mores and tribal customs that limit freedom and personal opportunities.

According to a UNICEF report (2013), Afghanistan is the second worst place in the world to be born, with the second highest mortality rate in children under 5, and is the second least developed country (UN Development Index). Only 42% of boys attend secondary school, and 23% of girls. Approximately 40% of the population is married by age 18, and life expectancy is 50.5 years. The GDP per capita is \$1,100. In 2015, a representative of the





Ministry of Health said that over 90% of Afghan people are traumatized. And President Ashraf Ghani in his address to the US Congress in March 2015 said that Afghanistan was a mentally ill country.

With this backdrop of statistics, Capacitar recognizes the importance of working with the Borderfree youth to empower hope and possibilities. The following are stories about some of the youth we met, and for reasons of confidentiality, we are giving anonymous examples of their life experiences.

On one of our first days in Kabul, we met “M”, a young 15-year old girl covered in a black veil, who had a 6 month-old baby girl. She told us that she was very depressed and sad and wanted to change her life. We later found out that she had been sold by her parents to a mentally disabled man for marriage. Before the wedding, she begged for her freedom but was unable to change her fate. Now at 15 with a baby, there is no escape for her, and her parents refuse to let her go to school beyond the 8th grade.

“J”, a 17-year old, was beaten by his parents at home, and beaten with a stick by his teachers in school. He feels hopeless, without a future, and because of his depression and lack of self-esteem, is sometimes suicidal. He longs for a better life and success in school so he can live in peace with hope for the future.

“L”, a beautiful 16-year old, loves working with children. As she walks to school in the streets of Kabul, she is sometimes harassed by men who yell abusive comments to her. She often arrives at school or the peace center fearful and anxious for her safety. In a country obsessed with the protection and moral reputation of its women, harassment and abuse are of great concern to young women.

“R” is a 16-year old who ran away from his home and village because of the violence of his father. He recently arrived in Kabul with few resources, and he worries about how he will survive. He wants to go to school, but without financial resources is unable to study. He would like to flee from Afghanistan, but he has no resources, no contacts, and nowhere to go as a young refugee.

“S” is a 17-year old girl dressed in black who worries constantly about her mother and siblings and is unable to concentrate in school. Her older brother died because the family was too poor to pay for his medical care. Her younger brother who is 7-years old, is exhibiting signs of autism with many uncontrollable behaviors. The mother pays out a lot of money to incompetent doctors for inconclusive tests, inadequate diagnoses and medicines that do not help. Because of this the family has many economic pressures. “R” worries about her mother and brother and feels responsible for them.

In the midst of these overwhelming challenges, the Afghan Peace Volunteers are trying to improve their lives and their country. Through their projects and nonviolent actions, they are challenging oppressive systems in their culture and society. One such project that is pushing the edge to foster equality is the Borderfree Bicycle Club. In Afghanistan, girls traditionally do not ride bicycles. When several of the girls tried to do so, they were harassed in the streets. So to promote their empowerment as equals, APV leader Hoor (17 years old) started a bicycle club to encourage and support the girls. The girls



Photos: Afghan youth and street kids learning Capacitar practices



*Hoor, the Afghan Peace Volunteer who started the bicycle club, teaching some of the girls how to ride*



*Afghan girls waiting their turn to ride a bike*

now meet weekly in the peace center yard to learn how to ride the bicycles, and then on Fridays (the Muslim holy day when there is less traffic) the boys and girls ride together for protection, solidarity, and fun. Last Friday over 30 of the youth took an 8-kilometer ride through the streets of Kabul. We sat with several of the youth after the ride to listen to their experiences. They were exhausted from the ride and overjoyed with their accomplishment.

Riding through the streets of Kabul is indeed an accomplishment! Without a doubt, Kabul is one of the most challenging and crazy places to ride a bike or to drive—with cars going in multiple directions, road blocks, military tanks on corners, street vendors, traffic police, soldiers with assault rifles, street kids, beggars, and carts and donkeys clogging many streets and intersections. Added to this is always the possible presence of a suicide bomber. Two days ago, one man dressed like a soldier blew himself up in front of the Ministry of Defense, causing the deaths of 10 people and wounding 20 bystanders. Shafik, our personal taxi driver, calls the traffic chaos “buzkashi”, the name of the national Afghan sport. Buzkashi is likened to rugby on horseback. It is played with the carcass of a headless goat that serves as the ball. Teams of riders on horseback compete to grab the goat amid the thrashing of bodies, hooves and whips. This is akin to the Kabul traffic where drivers manoeuvre around each other honking horns to gain their positions and race through the chaos. “Car buzkashi” is not for the faint of heart and Shafik is a champ in his own right!

As our time in Afghanistan comes to a close, we are indeed blessed with the friendship of the Borderfree Nonviolence Community from whom we have received so much. And we are committed to return here in October to continue our work and collaboration.

With peace and blessings,

Pat Cane, Capacitar Founder/Director

George Horan, Capacitar Afghanistan Team

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