We're back, having "traveled safe", per the admonition of many of you who wrote. Notwithstanding the governor's pessimistic oratory, during the ribbon cutting ceremony at Farza, (click here for details), it was a very successful trip.

To follow up on the Farza saga, the villagers have already begun digging the foundation. Ehsan has told Zorah over and over again how happy the villagers are. Politicians should know better than to bet against their flock. Memo to file --play the video of the mayor's ribbon cutting speech when the school opens next year. No, I'm not that crazy. In any event, in all likelihood, the mayor was only trying to obtain more funds from us, something the villagers would support.

Trust, or the lack thereof, is a major problem in Afghanistan. Everyone suspects everyone else of being on the take. It's hard to believe that people aren't, when baksheesh, a bribe, is routinely extracted by officials providing services for which they already receive a salary. It's one of those "cultural differences" that we try to ignore.

TIE has committed $95,000 toward the construction of the school. By all estimates, it should be enough. Issues to resolve included, how to prove what was spent, and how and when to disburse funds. Here's the system that was agreed upon. The project's engineer provides a list of
materials that will last for two weeks. He and the villagers designate the suppliers they recommend and disclose the prices they were quoted. Basir, our program director, has the ability to shop for better prices and recommend other vendors. Once a vendor and prices are agreed upon, the materials will be purchased with Basir and Ehsan present. They will both walk away with a receipt signed by the vendor, Basir and Ehsan. Ehsan has already been accused of profiting from this project, which he isn't. The accuser didn't try to expose Ehsan. He just wanted a cut. No good deed.....

When they need another delivery of materials, the engineer will provide a list to Basir. Basir will then visit the job site, verify the need for additional materials, take photos of the progress, and send the list of materials and photos to us. If it looks good, we will then send money by carrier pigeon, since we can no longer trust the banking systems (ours and theirs). Did you know there are 187 pigeon rest stops between here and Kabul, including two weeks spent on a cruise ship that docks in Dubai?

The digging begins. Never underestimate Afghan resolve.

The First Annual Spelling Bee

The spelling bee took place as planned, without incident. There were three brackets (4th-5th, 6th-7th, 8th-9th), and a total of 48 contestants, from three villages. It was agreed they could miss two words before being eliminated and that they should write their answer on the chalk board. It took four and one half hours to complete all three brackets.

During the 4th-5th and 5th - 6th competition, the judges couldn't resist the temptation to coach the contestants. They frowned, groaned, and shook their
He came in third and was the crowd favorite.

Farzana had written words on small pieces of paper, which were folded and placed in a small tin can. Each contestant drew a piece of paper from the can and went to the board. Farzana then unfolded the paper and read the word they were required to spell.

Farzana ran out of words for the last two contestants in the 8th-9th group. Her desk was littered with small pieces of paper. The audience joined in, shouting out words for the girls to spell. First the teachers called out words and when they ran out, the contestants joined in. This free for all lasted for at least ten minutes and no one could find a word these young women could not spell.

Finally, the room was completely silent, and I was about to recommend that we declare a draw. At that moment, Nabi called out "spell Intercontinental". That is the name of our hotel. Everyone realized that the word should be disallowed. First and foremost it was the name of a hotel and if anything, an English word. Nonetheless, one of the girls gave it a try, failed and the other girl succeeded. The competition was over.

Each of the contestants received a backpack that had been donated by one of TIE’s supporters, Kelly Grismer. The first, second, and third place winners received a monetary prize and a solar flashlight donated by One Million Lights click here. The solar flashlights will enable these children to read well into the night, long after lights out. These lights were more treasured than the monetary prizes.

We'll hold the competition again next year. I suspect there will be some rule modifications. One of the things you discover right away is that if children are grouped by grade, there are significant differences in ages. The older children were able to spell more words than the younger children, even though they were in the same grade. We'll also need to set some parameters on judges coaching the
Intercontinental, the final word that separated the winner on the left from the 2nd and 3rd place winners to her right. All of them are holding the coveted solar flashlight.

Tomorrow we send out the Packing Party announcement for October 24th. Some of you have already begun, sureptitiously, to load my porch, after dark. Randy and I took six loads to the warehouse this weekend. Jeff Lee, Spencer Piatt and I filled and delivered three U-Haul van loads, yesterday. Me thinks we may have awakened a sleeping giant, a nation with a lot of stuff that people no longer need.

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Best Regards,
Budd
Jeff and I fading, along with the photograph. Is volunteer work covered by Worker's Comp?