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Changing the World

Local activist and bestselling author work to dispel misconceptions about Afghanistan

By Lou Fanher



Bestselling author Khaled Hosseini recently spoke to a Lafayette audience about his books and Afghanistan. Photo Elena Seibert

MacKenzie's growing process - learning about Afghan culture and people - has had magnificent results. Raising \$60,000 in a one-night fundraiser at Diablo Valley Country Club 10 years ago, TIE lifted hundreds of Afghan children from the cramped room, mud floor of their previous classroom. Photos of the newly built, expansive school, students seated at desks, showed what money - and Afghans, who do all the construction of TIE-funded projects - can achieve.

MacKenzie's presentation revealed immense, breathtaking change: 12,891 fragile seedling fruit trees planted in 2006 are now sturdy; two bridges crossing small streams save 18,000 people from unnecessary roundabouts to get to markets or schools; learning centers in villages wipe out hardline fathers' objections to their daughters' educations as unsafe by eliminating travel; playground equipment and soccer clubs attract students by making school fun; a local teen's ideas to send credit card-sized computers spurs corporate matching funds; blankets and knitted wool garments fill the pallets of supplies TIE sends after every well-attended "packing party"; Larkspur's Corte Madera School sponsors four street children and holds a Skype encounter with their distant beneficiaries; clients of Lafayette-based Futures Explored, an organization supporting adults with developmental disabilities, strip Peet's Coffee bags of their Mylar lining, which becomes life-saving, water-pasteurizing solar cookers used in Afghanistan's too-numerous refugee camps.

A book changed MacKenzie: Mackenzie, East Bay residents and the Afghan people are changing their future worlds.

MacKenzie invited Hosseini to explain what is "wrong" about how Americans perceive the Afghan people. "The news is such a limited way of learning about another place and another people," he said. "It's about a war, casualties, the latest suicide bombing. It relates little about people populating a country. People might be surprised that Afghan is not a country stuck in the 12th century. Even in the village with a mud hut, the guy on the donkey has a cell phone."

Hosseini said there is a tremendous hunger for education and the "lid is slowly being lifted" by access to technology and the education of females. Even so, he argued, the only true way to change course is to have a

Mysteriously, majestically, a book can change the world.

The power of fine literature and reading were on full display at a Trust in Education fundraiser featuring an appearance by New York Times bestselling author Khaled Hosseini at the Acalanes High School Theatre on Dec. 13.

For TIE founder Budd MacKenzie, the Lafayette lawyer's life-changing pivot point leapt from the pages of "Charlie Wilson's War." The 2003 book by George Crile scooped up Mackenzie's mistaken belief in the purity of the United State's intentions in the Middle East and dashed them against the jagged rock wall of American action in Afghanistan. He now spends 80 percent of his time working to improve the lives and futures of young people in Afghanistan.

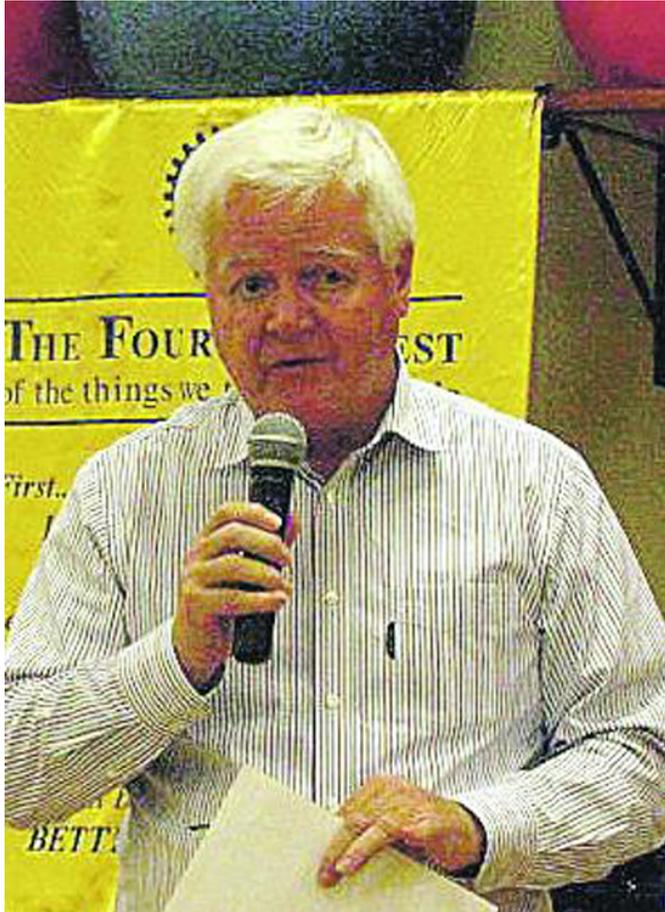
For Hosseini - whose "The Kite Runner," "And The Mountains Echoed," and "A Thousand Splendid Suns" have sold close to 38 million copies and entrenched his name on bestseller lists - books have changed his career, family life, position as a human rights advocate and his influence on countless people in America and across the globe. Born in Afghanistan, living in Paris at the time of the Soviet Army's occupation of his homeland, Hosseini and his family were granted political asylum in the United States.

He grew up in San Jose, became a medical doctor, started a family - but all the while, he was writing. Fifteen months of Monday-through-Friday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. staring out a window and sometimes scribbling, resulted in "The Kite Runner," which sells today in over 70 countries. "I'm kind of envious of that number," Hosseini said, about his debut book's start-to-finish timing. Asked by MacKenzie about his slower-to-produce subsequent books, he said, "You become more discriminating: tougher on yourself. It is, hopefully, part of the growth process."

cultural change and as much as he'd like to "fill up a hypodermic needle with gender equality and inject it," foreign masters - Americans muscling in and forcing progress - will never succeed. "The people of Lafayette can't change it. You can't change it," Hosseini said to MacKenzie. "It has to come from inside."

Hosseini hopes American troops will serve as safeguards to keep the country from "sliding back to militia wars," but admits, the future holds a "worst case scenario" of "a failed state, complete collapse and an all-out militia." The Taliban is clever, he suggested, and threatens the traditional centrality of family and self-definition as part of a peace-loving ensemble at the heart of Afghan life. "We have an expression here (in America), 'down time.' It's alone time. In Afghanistan, their down time is when there are 50 people in the room."

Answering audience questions, Hosseini said his books are available in Afghan cities, but not in the outlying, rural villages. Passing Afghan culture to his children is challenging, but achievable, if he avoids lecturing. And tapping into young readers' desires to help Afghan refugees aligns him with MacKenzie, whose encounter with a book, like their reading of Hosseini's novels, ignited a passion for enlightened relations with the people of Afghanistan.



Budd MacKenzie Photo John Sherry

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