

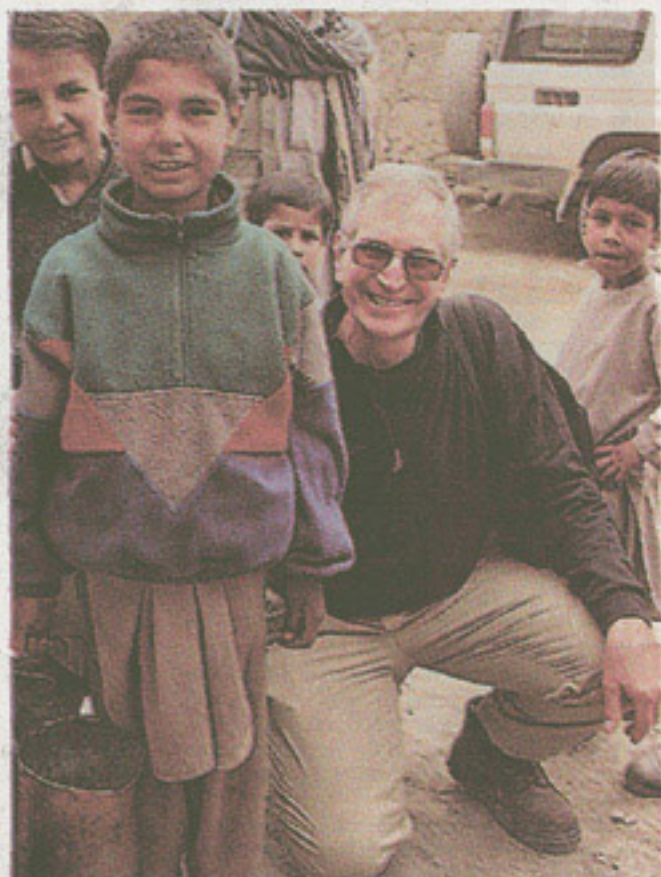
PHILANTHROPY



From Scarsdale to Kabul, For a Fruitful Future

Diane Wolf

Bruce Freyer, fifth from left, a founder of Global Partnership for Afghanistan, with residents of Guldara, Afghanistan. Right: Mr. Freyer with Waliullah, 12. Last year the partnership helped 69 farmers in the Guldara District to plant 50 fruit saplings each, including apples, pears, peaches and plums.



By CARIN RUBENSTEIN

SCARSDALE

FORMER rabbi, retired entrepreneur and father of two grown daughters, Bruce Freyer looks every inch the well-to-do Scarsdale grandfather.

But that hasn't kept Mr. Freyer, 67, from pursuing his pet mission of greening Afghanistan, one orchard at a time. He and his wife, Dana, co-founders of the nonprofit Global Partnership for Afghanistan, say their goal is to help farmers replant croplands, orchards, vineyards and forests so that they can become self-sufficient and not have to rely on poppy-growing for the drug trade. (To learn more about the organization, see gpa.org.)

If that ambition seems idealistic in a profoundly damaged, remote country almost the size of Texas, consider the Freyers' motivation: memories of 40 years ago, when Ms. Freyer first became involved with the country, as an assistant to the Afghan representative to the United Nations.

Parts of Afghanistan then "were fertile, very green and lush," Ms. Freyer recalled. "Everybody was well fed and had enough to eat. The babies were fat, and the children were chubby."

Today's Afghanistan, said her husband, who has visited three times since the project started, has no remaining electrical grid, no

postal service, no land-line telephones, no sewers and no water system. The effects of the Soviet occupation in the 1980's and the American invasion four years ago — added to a long period of drought — have left hardly any trees standing.

"With the deforestation and the drought situation, trees become a very important part of a national development strategy for Afghanistan," said Patricia Rosenfield, an environmental economist with the Carnegie Corporation who is familiar with the partnership's work.

Ms. Freyer explained that trees from the country's many poplar forests were once used to build the ceiling beams, doors and window frames of most houses. "Afghanistan used to be known as the orchard of Central Asia," she said, adding: "Kabul was a city of gardens and trees, but it's a dust bowl now. Everyone is walking around coughing."

The Freyers inaugurated their group in 2001 on a small scale, but that has begun to change. Last month Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton announced the inauguration of the New York Partnership for a Green Afghanistan. With the Westchester-based group at its organizational heart, it is to consist of the State University of New York; Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences; American Forests, a nonprofit conservation agency; and International Paper.

The Freyers' love affair with Afghan

fully blossomed during a six-week driving trip in 1972. Their 27,000-mile voyage in a powder-blue Volkswagen Beetle when began in Wolfsburg, Germany, and ended nine months later in Katmandu, Nepal.

"We had many Afghan friends from those days, and they came here as refugees," said Ms. Freyer, 60, now a partner specializing in international arbitration at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom in Manhattan.

"Over the 25 years of war, we shared their pain, and hardly dared to dream that they would be able to go back," she added.

Last year, the Global Partnership helped 69 farmers in the Guldara District, about 30 miles north of Kabul, to plant 50 fruit saplings each, including apples, pears, peaches and plums. Each farmer took out a loan of \$129 for the trees, to be paid back over four years; the money will go to buy more trees in the future.

The group also taught farmers to intercrop — or plant tomatoes, wheat and potatoes between the trees — so that they will have income during the two to three years it will take for the trees to bear fruit.

The partnership's budget in 2004 was about \$218,000; that amount will increase this year to about \$350,000, according to Mr. Freyer. The expansion announced by Senator Clinton will mean added money, he said, though it is not yet clear how much.

"A little bit of money goes so far there," Ms. Freyer said.

Although most farmers in the original project area did not grow poppies, she added, many of those farther from Kabul have begun to rely on them. The partnership plans to move into those areas, so that farmers can substitute highly valued orchards and trees — which eventually should provide a commensurate source of income.

Meanwhile, she said, although the American government is providing infrastructure aid, much more long-term assistance is needed for farmers whose crops will not yield immediate profits. "It will take a long time for the country to rebuild," she added, not venturing to guess just how long.

To speed up harvesting of poplars — Afghan varieties take nearly a decade to mature — the partnership imported 450 faster-growing poplar cuttings from Oregon, with the help of a Vancouver forester, George Nercessian.

The group will plant 40,000 poplar cuttings in 2005 and help another 70 to 80 farmers plant a total of about 4,000 fruit trees, as well as helping the original group plant 3,500 new trees, Ms. Freyer said.

The newly announced expansion will afford the group an extra 10,000 donated willow trees, as well as the advice of agricultural experts at SUNY and Cornell.

"From April to October, the poplars grew from pencil-sized cuttings to 10-foot-tall saplings," Mr. Nercessian said.

"What is unique is the enthusiasm of the Freyers, that's what I really admire," he concluded. "They have no financial benefit from this, it's purely humanitarian and philanthropic."