

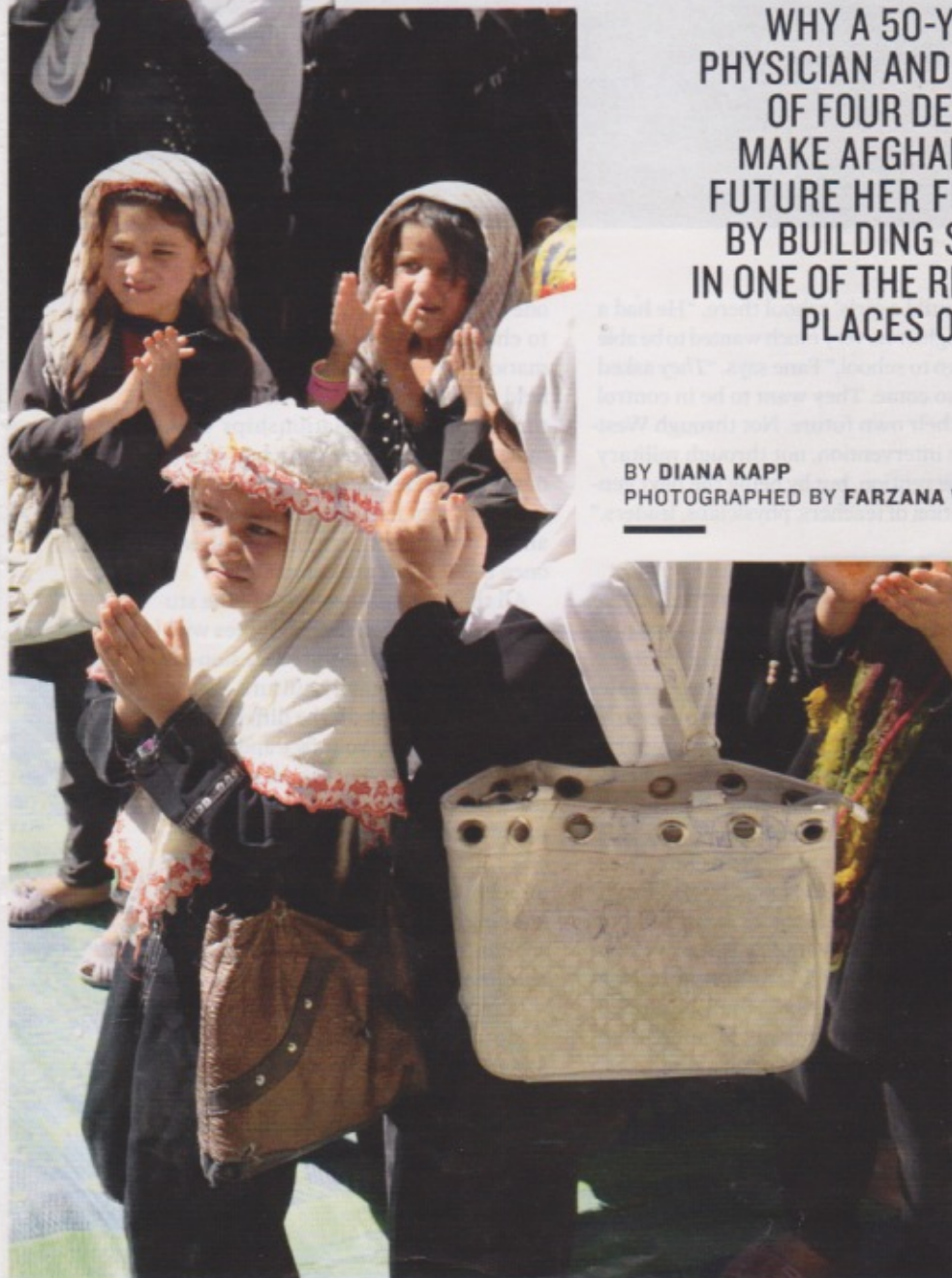




A SECOND ACT IN AFGHANISTAN

WHY A 50-YEAR-OLD PHYSICIAN AND MOTHER OF FOUR DECIDED TO MAKE AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE HER FUTURE—BY BUILDING SCHOOLS IN ONE OF THE REMOTEST PLACES ON EARTH

BY DIANA KAPP
PHOTOGRAPHED BY FARZANA WAHIDY



FROM THE AIR, Kabul looks as if a thick coat of dust has been sifted onto it. The view upon touchdown is no better. We taxi along a cracked runway littered with decrepit Soviet helicopters and pods of U.S. military aircraft painted a depressingly lifeless tan, vestiges of three decades of war and destruction.

But with her bags collected and her SUV transport waiting, Sarah Katherine Fane, who will soon be visiting Buckingham Palace to receive an Order of the British Empire from Prince Charles for her humanitarian work here, chooses to focus on the flowers.

"Kabul has the most beautiful roses," she croons. Indeed, growing against the airport road's menacing loops of barbed wire are bushes dense with all sorts of yellow, red and pink blooms. A tall blonde in dark jeans, desert boots and a headscarf—"Most of the time I look bloody ridiculous, but [the Afghans] like that I'm trying," she says—Fane stretches out the word *beeeauuuutifuuuulll* in her lilting English accent. It's as if we've arrived in her quaint country village of Aldworth, an hour outside London, and she's leading us on a garden tour.

We are very far from London, however. Fane, who has provided education and athletics to some 50,000 Afghan kids under the auspices of her nonprofit, Afghan Connection, has returned to spend five whirlwind days visiting the schools she is transforming in the country's remote Takhar province. And as we travel, her swooning continues. The fried fish that are laid before us every morning, and which Fane eats with gusto, are "*absolutely lovely!*" Ditto the fried swallows' heads. Every scarf-wrapped schoolgirl, basket

AN AFGHAN EDUCATION

Previous page: Students greet Fane with garlands during her 2013 school tour. These pages, from left: A grade school funded by Fane's nonprofit, and a tent school Fane will be replacing with a new building.

of local apples and steaming cup of walnut-milk porridge elicits effusive exclamations. "She's having a love affair with Afghanistan," says my mother. (A retired English teacher, my mom, Jean Kapp, has come along as a new U.S. board member of Fane's organization.)

In the dozen years since its founding, Afghan Connection has, in partnership with the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, provided funding to build, overhaul or expand 41 schools in 11 provinces and offered training courses to more than 600 teachers. Fane has "twinning" Afghan schoolchildren with pen pal contemporaries in 20 schools throughout the U.K., and thanks to the encouragement of one of her sons, she has persuaded England's top cricket club to partner with her on creating cricket pitches for Afghan boys and girls. "If you exclude government support efforts, I'd be surprised if anyone was significantly bigger than she in terms of impact on basic education across quite a large swath of provinces," says Britain's ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Richard Stagg.

Fane's school projects range from cheery, built-from-scratch bright-blue structures with computers, libraries and lab equipment to community-based efforts—essentially "starter" schools—in remote locales, housed in mosques or private homes or even outdoors, serving children too young to walk to established schools. In between are facilities that she overhauls or expands in some way. Four years ago, Fane began concentrating her efforts in the mountainous Worsaj district of Takhar province, in northeastern Afghanistan, after a former commander of the mujahideen, who'd fought against the Soviets in the 1980s, approached her and asked her

to build a girls' school there. "He had a daughter he very much wanted to be able to go to school," Fane says. "They asked us to come. They want to be in control of their own future. Not through Western intervention, not through military intervention, but by being the next generation of teachers, physicians, leaders."

IN WORSAJ, Fane has funded the construction of 10 new schools and provided 541 teacher-training courses (mostly to women). Having female teachers is essential to keeping girls in school longer, because in many parts of the country, once girls reach puberty, they may not share classrooms with male students or teachers. Today this is Fane's model: Blanket an entire area until every child is in school. The Afghan Women's Project (a division of Laura Bush's Women's Initiative program) has lauded Fane's organization for providing a "safe, well-equipped learning environment" for more than 6,400 children in Worsaj alone.

My mother and I will spend a total of nine days with Fane on this journey,

one of the twice-yearly trips she makes to check on her schools, gather information for her donors, meet with her field teams and, perhaps most important, strengthen relationships with male village leaders whose buy-in she desperately needs so they'll provide land and labor for school construction—and so they'll encourage girls to attend once the schools are complete.

All the ritual of these visits—the student receiving lines; the meal or tea with the men, which occurs at every stop—is critical in this heavily culture-bound country. "It makes all the difference to go there and show your face and your interest," Fane says. But there's also something deeply personal driving her visits. At a dinner one night in Kabul, someone refers to a disorder often said to afflict many of the foreign do-gooders working in Afghanistan: SARS—serious Afghan return syndrome. "Oh dear, I absolutely have that!" chirps Fane.

Our traveling party—which now includes an Afghan photographer hired by *More*, Farzana Wahidy, and Afghan Connection trustee William Reeve—heads north in a 30-seat United Nations plane.





To ease her path on the ground, Fane cultivates connections with residents. "She has found a way to get the local community to provide quite a reliable system of protection," says Stagg. During the trip, we use drivers Fane has worked with before and move houses frequently so her whereabouts are difficult to discern. And we stay in the homes of locals. "Bathing will be a baby wipe in your sleeping bag," she forewarned us. "But the people will be the most generous and giving you've ever met."

"The Swedish Committee will look after you, and they have been in-country for 30 years, when most every other NGO pulled out," she says. "But please know that in Afghanistan there can be no guarantees."

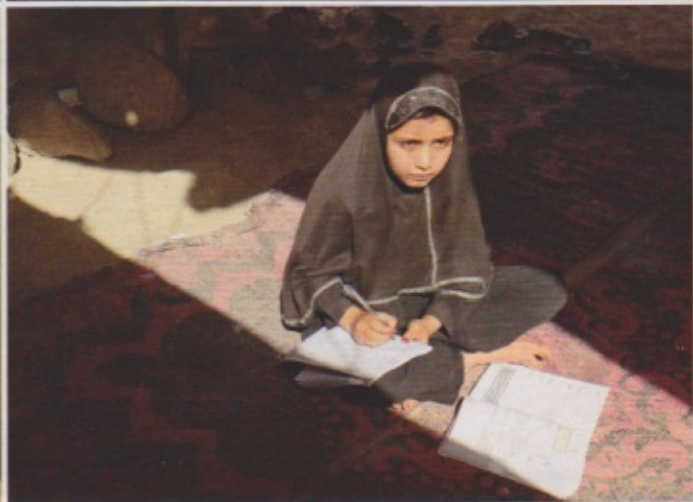
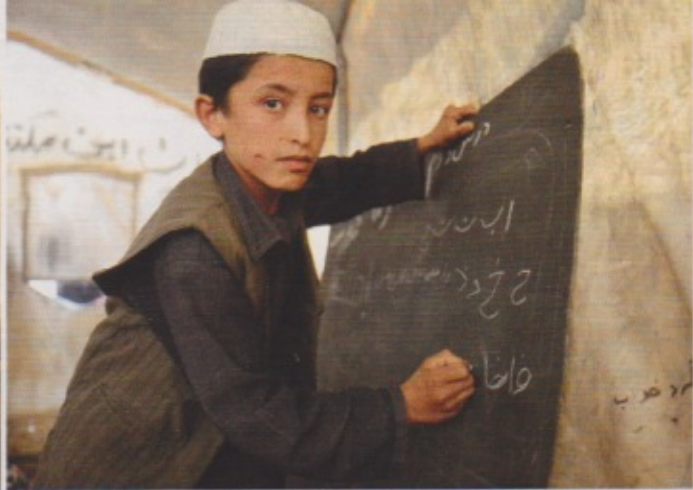
FANE'S CIRCUITOUS journey to this storied place began at age 18 when the daughter of a general practitioner physician and a stay-at-home "mum-mum" left her Beatrix Potter village for a mud hut near Hyderabad, India. ("A local would scare the rats out before I went to sleep," she recalls, laughing.) Educated

at a private girls' school, Fane was taking a gap year before beginning French and Latin studies at Bristol University, and the work she decided to pursue did not present itself in any well-known organization's glossy brochure. A priest she met through a family friend told her about a village charity he ran in India, a country her parents had often talked about wanting to visit. "Sarah was inspired to go, and she did, with the priest's blessing," says Fane's mother, Elizabeth Hamilton. "But it was quite a test for her, to put it mildly." Figuring she'd teach the children English and perhaps music—she brought along some recorders—Fane found herself in a place so remote, "I had to swim out during monsoons," she says. But that was fine with her. "All the best things that happen are the ones where I've been terribly frightened," she says. "I really believe the old saying 'If you stick onshore, you'll never see what's under the sea.'"

As Fane tells it, the only other Western visitor who'd ever lived in the village had been a nurse, so people assumed she was one, too. "[They] came in droves, wanting me to heal them and stitch them or deliver their babies,"

she says. "They didn't believe I wasn't a medic." Fane, who spent her time there not teaching but volunteering in the village clinic, felt totally helpless. "I learned right then that I can't change the world. The priest told me before I went, 'Sarah, you think you are going to change the world, but just watch—the world is going to change you.'"

AT THE FAR END of the Kokcha River valley, hundreds of neatly uniformed students stand in two straight rows at the entrance to Pastab School. Not built by Fane, it serves 1,100 students (more than half of them girls) who must attend in shifts because of overcrowding, and the invitation for her to visit is really a request for her to help them build a second school nearby. Beaming girls hold garlands of green and gold tinsel and colorful plastic flowers. Because Fane found it hard to pull away from the kids at the prior school (she says it's always hard), we are late, so the kids at Pastab, who assembled before we were due to arrive, have been waiting in the blazing sun for an hour. »



Fane proceeds down the makeshift aisle, bowing her head to let the children ornament her until she can barely see out above the many garlands. The headmaster introduces Fane, and three girls step forward to deliver poems in Dari. The last girl lingers, summoning the courage to make a plea. "Our school is located at the end of the road," she begins, with a local Swedish Committee field director translating line by line. "Rarely has anybody ever come to ask our problems, our schedules, our needs. So we apologize for being inexperienced to stand in front of you." She pauses. "We need a larger school, for the girls only. Please—help us build another school." She holds her gaze on Fane. Fane listens intently, placing her hand over her heart, an Afghan sign of respect.

"Are the girls getting too hot sitting in the sun?" Fane asks the headmaster. "Should we move inside?" Fane, who is wilting—she's wearing a polyester dress the girls at the last school sewed for her—but somehow upbeat, tells the students she is impressed that they want to learn and to serve their country in the future. But she does not

ignore the realities that they, and she, confront. "With the economy, it is very, very difficult to find money in England now," she tells them. "And down this road, there are kids who are still sitting in the dirt. The need is so great." Then she adds quietly, "But we will do our best to help you to build your school."

"Do you get distraught knowing you can't answer all the asks?" I inquire as we walk back to the SUV.

"I've gotten wiser now," she says. "I can only do my best." In terms of the girl's specific request, says Fane, "Two would be good, but one is better than none."

At the schools we visited the day before, there was the same type of intense question by a penetrating-eyed young student. At Bibi Zainab, a buzzing girls' school where Afghan Connection was completing a new wing, a girl requested computers and proper laboratories "so we can continue to learn, and pass the exam to attend university." Fane asked the girls in that classroom how many of their mothers could read or write. Not a single hand went up. But in 2012, 16 girls from Bibi Zainab went to college, the students and teacher tell

Fane when she inquires. That's three more than in the year before, which was already seven more than in the year before that. In this one classroom, all the girls say they plan to apply.

FANE WAS FIRST exposed to the needs of women and girls in this part of the world when she wasn't much older than the eager students at Bibi Zainab. After her revelatory year in India, young Sarah upended her own university plans, switching to pre-med so she could apply to medical school. "So much has been serendipity," Fane muses about her path to Afghanistan. In 1987 she'd hoped to do part of her medical training in Bangladesh, but "that clinic washed away, so I went to Bannu"—in Pakistan, near the Afghan border. She spent three months in the region, witnessing firsthand the heartbreak behind its abysmal maternal mortality rates. It was a profoundly moving experience. Fane helped treat the streams of wounded Afghan refugees, some of whom had traveled 10 days, fleeing their country's war with the Soviets. In summer 1989, she returned



with boys or male teachers after puberty. "All our schools are appropriate for their cultural situation," says Fane, making them "much more likely to survive."

told me later. "In her mind, the story is Afghanistan.") I steer Fane back to explaining how she got here. "There's something that kind of drives you, but you're never quite sure what it is," she says wistfully. "Ever since that first time I'd been, it doesn't leave you."

What she encountered on the return trip—the "sprawling acres of despair" that she says developed after five years of Taliban rule and decades of war—clarified her life's work. "There was barely a building that hadn't been bombed," Fane recalls. Dust storms grounded their helicopter flight to the clinic, so they waited out the weather visiting hospitals and refugee camps.

(They'd seriously considered crossing the Hindu Kush mountain range by car or on horseback—"The horses were the bit I was most excited about!" she says—but the snow was too deep.) For four harrowing days, Fane locked eyes with women who had lost husbands and children or were too ill to care for their families. "Once you are a mother, you understand the depth of their pain," she says. "I felt it all so acutely." Lamb says, "She saw somewhere that she could make a big difference. And then she started seeing the difference she was making."

Once she was back home in Aldworth, Fane began raising money for medical supplies and vaccines. It was just after 9/11, so Afghanistan had suddenly catapulted into people's consciousness. "We were ousting the Taliban," she says. "There was such opportunity to put [the country] back on the map." She threw a fund raiser for friends, and their modest donations added up, enough to merit launching an official charity, Afghan Connection, dedicated to improving the country's health and education.

Fane's early efforts were a mix of medical **CONTINUED ON PAGE 122**

to the area to join a surgical team that was devoting its holidays to the war wounded. They tapped her to work at the headquarters of the mujahideen, assisting women and children. A foreign woman could not move around safely there, so Fane tucked her ponytail under a hat and disguised herself—badly, she says—in a brown *shalwar kameez*, the baggy tunic-and-pants uniform of Afghan men. Each day she galloped on her Arabian horse to tend to starving women and children in nearby camps.

Fane returned home to England after her break and completed her MD. It would be more than a decade before she visited Afghanistan again—a decade so busy, it felt more like a lifetime. During that period, the intrepid young doctor married her university boyfriend and had four kids in six years. But she kept a foothold in medicine, working part time at a bowel-and-breast chemotherapy center after having her second child and in a cardiology center after having her third. Fane ascribes her 2001 return to Afghanistan, at age 37, to her inability to refuse some "wonderful, eccentric old [British] army boys" who cajoled

her into joining their mission to a clinic they'd built in the Panjshir Valley. "If they hadn't been so persistent, I likely may never have returned," she insists. But her willingness to head off for 21 days to a war zone, with no cell service for check-ins, when her youngest was a year old suggests that something more powerful than perhaps even she realized was happening inside her.

I TRY TO EXPLORE this theory during one of our many car rides, where I've been grabbing every chance to pump her for details of her life as we bump and lurch along. But instead of answering my questions, Fane points out the car window at the energetic river following the twists in the road. "Just loooooook at that blue water," she coos, and goes on to tell how at one time tourists came to these parts for adventure and hiking. ("She doesn't want to feel [the story] is about her," Fane's friend Christina Lamb, a London *Sunday Times* reporter and co-author of Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai's autobiography,

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promote energy expenditure by stimulating the activation of brown fat.

There appear to be other ways to potentially fight obesity. In June researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, published a mouse study that proved beige fat could grow if stimulated by a particular part of the immune system. "We found that immune pathways normally associated with fighting infections were what the mouse was using to protect against cold temperatures," says Ajay Chawla, MD, PhD, an associate professor at UCSF's Cardiovascular Research Institute. "We wanted to show that we could use that immune signal to create beige fat and bypass having to make an animal cold."

Researchers generated an immune response by injecting lab mice with interleukin-4, a naturally occurring protein that activates cells that fight parasites. "The mice burned more calories and lost weight," Chawla says. The link between the immune system and the ability to make beige fat still needs to be proved in people, Chawla explains, but if it pans out, he predicts the pharmaceutical industry will start looking for drugs that target obesity by stimulating beige cells.

At the same time, the University of Utah's Patel hopes to translate his discovery of brown fat stem cells into fat transplants—tiny scaffolds of human brown fat, grown from the stem cells, that would be implanted in the thigh or buttocks. Ideally, the cells would propagate more brown fat, boosting the body's innate ability to burn off white fat, and would work in conjunction with drugs in order to improve metabolism, Patel says.

A reality check is in order: These therapies are not coming to drugstores soon. For now most scientists say the best way to tip the balance of brown fat to white fat in your favor—and thus boost your metabolism—is to minimize the fatty foods in your diet, do aerobic exercise regularly (the standard prescription is 30 minutes five times a week) and turn down your thermostat. "There's no magic pill—not yet," comments Bredella. "So do what you can on your own. Just don't get too thin." *

Afghanistan

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aid and cultural-exchange projects. Her passion, though, was a project in which she partnered her younger children's school with an Afghan primary school in an expansive pen pal program. "Every time you asked English kids about Afghanistan, their single image was war," she says. "I loved the idea of giving them positive images and optimism. And it worked the same way for the Afghan kids." But when she traveled there to deliver letters and goody packs, she found that students were sitting not in classrooms but in the dirt. I've got to build these kids a school, she thought.

It turned out that for Fane's tiny upstart charity, building schools provided a better opportunity to make an impact than did health care, which was already flooded with heavyweight organizations. Today her work represents an important step in the progress toward primary education for every child by 2020, which is one of the country's nine Millennium Development Goals. She has cultivated a good relationship with the minister of education, notes Richard Stagg, and once Fane gets a school up and running, she turns it over to the ministry for management.

"She's tried to find a way—which is very sensible and right—to work with the grain of the Afghan system rather than aim to do things her own way," Stagg explains. "If the Afghan system doesn't support it, it won't work... That is one of the things so many people have got wrong here."

If Fane has had a positive effect on Afghanistan, it's clear that the reverse is equally true. Despite her best efforts to keep the spotlight off herself, a vision of that restless, searching girl and, later, woman does peek out.

"It's incredibly lucky that I had something I was passionate about, something that drives you and takes you out in the world and lets you see another side of life," she says. "When you go out to Afghanistan, if you're having a difficult time [and the people there] don't know what's happening in your life back home, they're really healing. I'm not sure I can explain why, but they just are. It gives you positive

optimism. It gives you the confidence to pick yourself up and get going."

As she tells me repeatedly in our many conversations, "I didn't save Afghanistan. Afghanistan saved me."

For example, when her marriage started to unravel. "Of course, I wish it hadn't happened," she says of the breakup. "I suppose it was a long time in coming, but I really tried to keep it together." In any event, she says, "the most fulfilling thing in my life is being a mom. You try even harder when you're on your own. And we've had quite a lot of fun and an eccentric life, my kids and I." The children, now ranging in age from 15 to 22, gave her a hard time after her last trip for texting all of them exactly the same update, so this morning she was up early, racking her brain for interesting tidbits to send each one.

"The older I get, the more I feel like I've done my best," Fane says. "There are lots of things in life I've got wrong. But my kids, I think, I've got right."

After multiple rounds of garland-laden school greetings, I ask Fane how she copes with the attention. "I'm really quite shy," she says. "But you go farther and farther until you are quite unrecognizable to yourself."

DARKNESS descends quickly as we wend our way up a sheer hillside to the village where we will sleep in a private home. We're delayed by a burned-out clutch, which our driver compensates for by careering around hairpin corners with undeserved confidence. We need to arrive as soon as possible; the Swedish Committee is very clear about the dangers of traveling after dark.

At the house—a Mediterranean-style, peach-colored home with red roofing, palatial for the region—we separate from the men and are led into the women's quarters, a lavender room covered in thick burgundy carpets and ringed with long purple-and-red cushions that later become our beds. Fifteen sets of dark eyes stare intently at us from the room's perimeter. I remembered Fane's warning. "Get ready for absolutely zero personal space," she'd said.

Dinner arrives, an overwhelming

number of platters piled high with stewed meats and oily rice, big bowls of watermelon, containers of sour yogurt and flatbreads as large as saucer sleds, all to be eaten with our hands. Pulling chicken bits off the bone, Fane attempts to work out which of the teen and twenty-something girls belong to which mom and which women are the three wives of the man of the house. She's most curious, though, to learn if any have attended her schools. Two girls' faces light up; one, who is about to graduate, wants to be a teacher.

Worsaj has little industry beyond agriculture. According to an Afghan Connection report, 80 percent of the men work construction in Iran to supplement their income. In contrast, most of the girls we meet in the classrooms tell us they hope to become teachers or doctors. Will there be jobs for them? I asked Fane recently. How does progress happen in a place like this if there's no economic growth? With a newly elected president, Ashraf Ghani, at the helm as the country starts this new chapter, will Afghanistan advance or spiral into chaos? And if the latter, could women's rights—and education for girls—slip back out of reach?

Fane doesn't think this way. "We have 6,000 Afghans working for our partner organization," she says. The communities requested the schools, bought the land and gave their labor; they "have ownership and are determined to protect the schools." Most of the girls we meet probably won't complete high school or work outside the home. But their daughters might. "Change will take time," Fane concedes. "The first time women were ever seen without veils here was only 50 years ago." But "the next stage is going to come. The road is coming. They've got mobile phones, so boys can talk to girls. There's telly, and they see soap operas. That school we passed yesterday was in the middle of nowhere. Now it's nearly on the highway." *

DIANA KAPP's work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and elsewhere. This is her first feature for *More*.

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