The ARK Newspaper Biannual Special Section GENEROSITY
scan of page (cropped), "Roots of Change" ~ June 27, 2018 ~ Tiburon, CA
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Transforming the landscape

Tree-planting project honors Strawberry teacher's Afghan roots

Asma Eschen stands in her backyard next to a cherry tree that is about the same size as the trees she plants in Afghanistan with the Bare Roots Project. The longtime Strawberry Preschool teacher and native of Afghanistan founded the project in 2005; since then, with the help of other Marin County residents, she has planted more than 10,000 trees in some of the poorest parts of the country.
Asma Eschen is changing lives one tree at a time. Mulberry, apple, apricot and pear are just a few of the types of trees Eschen has planted on her many trips to her native country of Afghanistan as part of the Bare Roots Project.

Started in 2005 by Eschen, a longtime teacher at Strawberry Preschool, and her friend, the late Ash Wood, the project has resulted in more than 10,000 trees planted in some of the poorest parts of Afghanistan. But Eschen and Wood haven’t done it alone. A small group of Marin County residents tag along with them on the tree-planting trips.

Eschen, 62, grew up in Afghanistan, moving to the United States in her early teens for her education. It was after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, which launched America’s War on Terror and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, that Eschen was inspired to do something for her home country.

“I was looking at images on TV and couldn’t believe I was looking at the place where I grew up,” she says. “I wanted to go back.”

After not having visited Afghanistan for almost 32 years, Eschen made a trip home. Although the trip rekindled her identity, or, as she says, “being reborn of an Afghan,” she was also taken aback by what she saw — a country in ruin. There was no running water, no electricity and very few people in the streets, she says. The mother of two was determined to do something that would beautify the area and provide food to locals. She also wanted it to be something Afghans could connect to.

“In the Islamic religion, trees are very holy,” she says. “They give shade and feed people. This is something that matches with their own culture and understanding.”

Since then, Eschen has taken 11 trips to Afghanistan as part of the Bare Roots project, two on her own and nine with a group of Marin locals. The group, usually about 10 people, travels to the capital, Kabul, and stays for about two weeks at the house of one of Eschen’s friends. The group fundraises the entire year prior to help purchase trees and other plants from nurseries or farmers in Afghanistan.

On past trips, groups have planted trees on Maranjani Hill, Kharoti Valley, on school grounds and in symbolic spaces like mortar craters. To help educate the Marin County residents, Eschen has had her team meet with leaders from the country’s Ministry of Forestry, Department of Women’s Affairs and Department of Agriculture.

Every year, Eschen, who lives in San Rafael, can see the impact she and her group have made on the people of Afghanistan.

“I see the change,” says Eschen, who is also a volunteer with Afghans4Tomorrow, a nonprofit dedicated to the development of the country. “The people have come up to me and said, ‘The pears, they are so big’ and (are) thanking me for the apricots.”

For Eschen the trips aren’t just about helping the people of Afghanistan; they’re also about mitigating the negative stereotype many in the U.S. have about Afghanistan — that it is a dangerous, scary and war-torn country.

“Afghanistan is not scary,” she says. “There is life, the fear is no longer there.”

San Anselmo resident Mary Waetjen and her husband, Herman, traveled with the Bare Roots Project to Afghanistan in 2005. Waetjen first met Eschen at the church they both attend. She became interested in visiting the Middle East after hearing about a friend’s visit to the area.

She says her trip with the Bare Roots Project opened her eyes to the culture of Afghanistan.

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"It was such a welcoming, warm and friendly community," Waetjen says. "It was so wonderful to be in someone else's country and to be welcomed like that and to learn more about what makes them who they are."

Eschen says she also makes it a point to bring her Afghan culture into her Strawberry Preschool classroom. Her students bring in seeds that she takes with her on her trips, and she has organized an annual "World Day" for her students where each of their cultures is celebrated and studied.

In doing so, she has taught kids the concepts of giving and kindness, say the parents of some of her students.

Arjun Gupta, owner of Tiburon publishing company 36 Views, has two children who have been taught by Eschen. He called her an "incredible woman."

"I really felt so privileged and lucky to have someone who is a human-rights advocate and (has) such a varied experience teaching my children," he says.

Jen Moss, a stay-at-home mom whose daughter is currently in Eschen's class, says Eschen has taught her daughter about "giving back to the community" and "thinking about other people."

Moss called Eschen "the warmest person I have ever met."

Eschen has traveled to Afghanistan for Bare Roots by herself in April, and she's already gearing up for another trip next year. She's also in the midst of writing a memoir titled "Your Story, My Story," which will in part detail her return to her native country and the tree-planting trips.

She says she has a simple motivation for continuing her work in Afghanistan year after year.

"There is hope. We live in hope. Life is based in hope."

Contributing writer Alex Madison is a Bay Area journalist and writer. She specializes in feature writing but has chops in hard news and investigative journalism.

Asma Eschen, second from right, and community members from Bala Kobe Afshar are seen with some of the trees they planted in the area last April. As part of her Bare Roots Project, Eschen has been working to green the community, a rocky area on the west mountainside of Kabul, since 2006.