

Oct 20, 2010 3:54pm

Pique'n yer interest

Mission possible: playgroundbuilders.org

By Leslie Anthony

A typical dinner party, the main course a delicious if sating memory. Desert bowls streaked with chocolate stand empty, wine glasses slosh ruby dregs, and espresso cups clink solemnly around the table. The conversation has been wide-ranging. Books, babies, musical acts. But now we're onto current events, wringing out the politics of the slow-to-surface truth behind the recent death of a kidnapped female British aid worker in Afghanistan. It seems she wasn't executed by the Taliban, as previously believed, but killed accidentally by would-be-rescuers.

"I wouldn't want any kind of armed intervention if it were *me*," remarks Keith Reynolds, referencing the foggy military chaos behind the propensity for such operations to go suddenly and irretrievably south. "I don't want to be responsible for anyone else being hurt."

But while the rest contemplate what sort of ham-fisted, storm-trooper scenario might have befallen the woman, I'm thinking this: Reynolds' is a noble, considered sentiment-even if you weren't a target and stood no chance of being kidnapped. But given that he's leaving on his third self-funded trip to Afghanistan in a couple days, that he *is* a target with a street *bona fide* value in Iraq, and that on this upcoming trip he's actually been asked *not* to stay with his hosts for fear of reprisal by the Taliban, the comment is far more flinty. So convoluted are the territorial struggles of the Middle East that Reynolds has cultivated hostage-in-waiting status... for building playgrounds for kids.

This topsy-turvy reality hasn't deterred his Whistler-based organization, Playground Builders, or three of its other directors - dinner guests Kirby Brown, again accompanying Reynolds to Afghanistan, Mike Varrin, who had been on a previous trip, and Kelly Hand, PGB's communication director - from enacting one of the greatest success stories in all of global charity work: in only four short years this tiny, direct-action non-profit has built an *astounding* 62 playgrounds at schools and gathering places across the fractious Middle East - 29 in Afghanistan, 13 in Iraq, 17 in the West Bank and three in Gaza. All while flying under the radar of governments, militias, and every level of security imaginable, motivated by the simple axiom adorning the playgroundbuilders.org website: Creating Play, Building Hope.

One look at the photos of kids' ecstatic faces on their website and you get the picture.

The organization doesn't suffer the overhead problems of most foreign NGOs, with no offices, cars, phones, faxes, computers, security or staff. Personnel pay their own way abroad to scout locations and shake hands, putting a human face to their efforts. PGB also eschews photo ops and politicization ("We're 3G - no god, no guns, no governments"), and the monies it raises aren't filtered through a morass of agencies. Reynolds handpicks partners: a few buddies in Whistler, and, on the ground, established NGOs (pre-funded and pre-outfitted) already working with women and children.

It takes \$5,000 to \$10,000 to build a playground. Locals receive jobs preparing land, welding play structures, painting and installing benches so parents can watch their kids play. The economics feed into the sense of ownership and community: where the Taliban pay a man \$10 USD/day to fight and possibly be killed, PGB pays a man \$7 USD/day plus lunch to build a playground for his kids and go home at night. Jobs and pride are a powerful carnet - a way to cultivate fewer people with an appetite for the conflict stream - something that Canadian and coalition forces are just grasping, despite all their hard work and considerable sacrifice of the past few years.

In Afghanistan alone these playgrounds are used by a total of *100,000 children*. With the known link between learning and play, the importance of this cannot be underestimated, especially when school-life expectancy here for women is only four years versus eleven for men - one of the country's many problems. After decades of conflict, this landmine-riddled country of 28 million remains one of the world's poorest. Adult literacy is below 30 percent; life expectancy less than 45 years; 44 per cent of the population aged 14 and under. With over two million war widows, children are often the breadwinners.

"If Afghanistan were a person it would be 17 years old," Brown levels. "But full of disease and malnutrition, lacking drinking water or education. And since it's the last way to get oil out of central Asia it's also being pulled apart by global forces with nothing to hold it together. The help it's receiving is insignificant compared to the need."

You could look at PGB's success story as Canada's own *Three Cups of Tea* - with a twist. "There's plenty of time to drink tea later," says Reynolds. "Right now, we're just trying to get things done." As a person who wants to help this effort, I like the odds of my money finding a guaranteed target.= *Donate online at playgroundbuilders.org through either Canadahelps or Paypal. And from now until November 11, all donations to a total of \$10,000 will be matched by an anonymous donor. You can also donate through your Nesters card (ask at the till) or with Husky loyalty cards (two per cent of each purchase goes directly to PGB). A PGB fundraising event is scheduled for Friday, December 17th, 2010.*