

GJ-based organization provides humanitarian aid to Central Asia

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Decade of Aid



Bob Hedlund (center) of Grand Junction and president of Joint Development Associates International stands in a field of poppy flowers in Afghanistan with his Afghan friend and his sons.

Bob Hedlund went to Central Asia looking for mining opportunities, and instead found “hearts of gold.”

Hedlund grew up in Telluride, the son of a miner. He graduated from the Colorado School of Mines and became a miner for the next 20 years.

He managed a gold mine in central Nevada, and mined uranium in Colorado before traveling in 1992 to Uzbekistan in Central Asia, a country just north of Afghanistan.

“I saw poverty for the first time,” Hedlund said. “I got out of mining,”

and formed a nonprofit to develop clean water projects and help farmers and villagers climb out of poverty.

Uzbekistan won independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and was ripe for “joint ventures” in development. Hence, the name of Hedlund's Grand Junction-based nonprofit — Joint Development Associates International, a company currently operating in Afghanistan.

Hedlund left the financial security of mining and moved his wife and two children, then-ages 8 and 9, to Uzbekistan in 1992 where the Hedlunds spent the next 16 years.

“I fell in love with the country, the people,” said Hedlund, who returned to Grand Junction in 2008 with

wife Cathy.

One of Hedlund's first projects was dealing with Uzbek leprosy patients who were then-isolated, and sent far away from family.

Joint Development Associates hired physicians from India — leprosy specialists — who trained 500 Ministry of Health doctors across Uzbekistan on how to prevent and treat leprosy.

“It was a problem at the time. If someone got it, that person was isolated — put in a leprosy center and never saw his family again,” Hedlund said. “We brought in the first medicines,” and laws were changed to eliminate the unnecessary quarantine of leprosy patients.

Hedlund started a micro-credit program where small loans reap huge benefits. A loan of \$70 to \$360 can purchase goats, a calf, or provide the capital necessary to open a small shop. Seventy percent of the loan recipients were women.

“There was over 97 percent repayment of loans,” Hedlund said.

AFGHANISTAN

A bridge over the Amu Darya River, along the border of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, reopened in 2001, and Hedlund, made his first trip to Afghanistan to see how he could help the people there.

Joint Development Associates opened an office in Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. The nonprofit currently operates in five of Afghanistan's 34 provinces where it has projects in agriculture development, clean water, poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, community health education and emergency aid and relief.

Military forces fighting Taliban-led insurgents occurs south of Kabul and along the Pakistani border, Hedlund said. It is relatively safe in the north where business is thriving and construction is booming, he said.

Joint Development Associates has built six schools to combat the nation's high illiteracy (women 90 percent; men 40 percent).

“We were surrounded by men, the elders, when we came to the first village,” Hedlund said. “We were greeted with ‘please build schools. We want our children educated. We want our girls educated.’”

Currently, JDA is focused on agricultural development and water sanitation and hygiene in Afghanistan.

“Eighty-five percent of Afghan families are involved with agriculture,” Hedlund said. “So it was a natural place to start to help the economy.”

In 2005, JDA began importing from China two-wheel tractors to teach appropriate mechanization to farmers. In two days a farmer can plow and prepare land with a two-wheeled tractor — what would

take oxen 11 days to do, Hedlund said.

Farmers are gradually seeing the benefit of using the tractors which allow for tilling, harvesting and cultivation of larger tracts of land. Farmers are able to buy the tractors through a credit program.

“And when they're not harvesting — it has a trailer — they use as a taxi,” able to carry 6-10 people, Hedlund said.



Afghan Farmers attend a field-day demonstration of a two-wheeled tractor that some farmers are using instead of oxen.

JDA demonstration plots have shown hundreds of farmers how to grow peanuts, mung beans, flax, sesame and safflower, different varieties of wheat — alternative crops to the opium plant that Pakistani merchants buy, then convert into heroin for export.

The nonprofit organization also teaches integrated pest management for melon fly reduction, irrigation techniques, and helped set up plant science laboratories at a university in

Afghanistan.

GRAND JUNCTION CONNECTION

Joint Development Associates closed its Uzbekistan office in 2006, after the government there expelled all western organizations following a disagreement with the U.S. government. Hedlund and his wife were able to remain in the country for two additional years when Hedlund began manufacturing plaster of Paris from a gypsum deposit.

Since 2008, Hedlund has continued to oversee projects in Afghanistan from his Grand Junction office, located at 1133 Patterson Road, where photographs of his Afghan and Uzbek friends, plus JDA projects hang on the walls, and Afghan rugs lie on the floor.

Hedlund travels to Afghanistan at least twice a year, spending a total of two to six months there. Afghans primarily run the 60-person organization.

Mindy Harmeling of Grand Junction returned from Afghanistan in July, after spending four years there managing the tractor businesses, a private enterprise that earns money for the nonprofit. She also worked as administrator and finance manager for Joint Development Associates.

Harmeling, 29, learned to work with a culture that operates under a different, slower sense of time.

“You have to ‘go with the flow’ all the time,” she said.

She extended credit to farmers, wondering if they would or could pay.



School girls in Afghanistan pump water from a new well.

Harmeling learned to speak the Afghan language Dari by studying with a tutor two hours a day.

While armed Afghan soldiers guard banks and some businesses, Harmeling wasn't exposed to violence. Her biggest concern, she said, was abiding by gender customs. Even as a foreigner, women are expected to keep a certain physical distance from men, and not be too friendly in casual relationships. Harmeling always wore a scarf over her head when outdoors.

WASH AND BLISS

Birth Lifesaving Skills (BLISS), along with water sanitation and hygiene (WASH), is another area where Joint Development Associates is focusing its efforts.



Afghan women attend a seminar on water sanitation and hygiene taught by Joint Development Associates.

Afghanistan has the highest infant mortality rate in the world with one out of four children dying before age 5. Health care workers are teaching women about germs, bacteria, and how people become ill. The organization has taught sanitation and hygiene to 800 women over the past three years.

“It's revolutionized these women who had no connection to the outside world,” Hedlund said. “They had no idea flies were carriers for germs — the Mullahs (a Muslim man trained in religious law and doctrine) say otherwise.”

“There was no diarrhea (in that community) this past summer — a great change.”

Joint Development Associates operates with the approval of Afghanistan's Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture.

“Their extension agents work with us. They see us as partners,” Hedlund said.

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

Before JDA staff could begin teaching the women sanitation and hygiene, they were first required to gain permission from village elders.

“The elders had never before seen or tasted strawberries,” a crop the organization found could grow well in northern Afghanistan, Hedlund said.

At a meeting with the village elders Hedlund placed a plate of strawberries on the floor where he and the elders were seated. “I thought it would be a great ice-breaker,” Hedlund said. “We were eating them, then the oldest elder picked one up and took a bite. Soon all the strawberries were gone and then they gave approval to work with the women.”

Joint Development Associates is the main non-governmental organization (NGO) working in Afghanistan. The United States Agency for International Development provides funding for some of JDA's agriculture projects. The nonprofit has also received funding from Swedish and Norwegian organizations and British and German governments.

“They recognize us as a leader in agricultural development,” Hedlund said.

The organization seeks donations from private individuals and foundations for its WASH and BLISS programs where Hedlund said it is having tremendous impact. An Afghan woman directs the all-female WASH team, which includes well drilling and hand pump installations for the delivery of clean drinking water. It costs \$5,000 a month, or \$7 per woman, per month for the WASH training, Hedlund said.

International development projects work only by developing relationships, Hedlund said.

He remembered his first day in Afghanistan when he and a staff of four, including an Afghan translator, traveled to a small village where they were greeted by the village elder.

They were immediately invited to lunch where Hedlund was given the seat of honor at the head of the table.

“A bearded man got up to make room for me,” Hedlund said. “Then I realized that man had just returned to the village after being gone four years after fighting the Taliban with the Northern Alliance.

“It humbled me.

“I've been working in that village and around it for 11 years. I have lots of friends in the village. I love the Afghan people. They're very cordial.

“We're giving opportunities to thousands of farmers. We'll be there as long as we can.”