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Sowing fields of hope

Nonprofit plants soybeans in Afghanistan

By Marshall Allen , Staff Writer

PASADENA -- By day, Steven Kwon is a senior nutrition scientist for Nestle USA in Glendale.

At night, the Pasadena resident runs Nutrition Education International (NEI). He established the nonprofit in 2003 to save lives in Afghanistan, where he says one in five children die before age 5 and one in six women die during childbirth.

Kwon pulls double shifts because he believes many of the deaths could be easily prevented with proper nutrition he says most Afghan people subsist on a diet of naan bread and chai tea.

Kwon aims to introduce them to soybeans.

In the past two years, he has spent his own money and vacation time on multiple trips to Afghanistan. He has solicited donations from friends and businesses, advice from agriculture experts and endorsements from the highest levels of the Afghan government.

"Seeing poor people, suffering people, you are compelled to do something from a humanitarian point of view," Kwon said.

Kwon has a soft smile, gentle demeanor and speaks quietly, with a Korean accent. Observers say his dedication, people skills and vision have led Afghan leaders to endorse NEI's efforts.

Last year, NEI successfully cultivated soybeans on 5 acres in Mazar-e Sharif. The project gained momentum and a planting was done in a dozen Afghanistan provinces in April. If the harvest is bountiful in October, Afghan leaders plan to test the protein-rich plants in all 32 provinces. Hopes are high that a national industry will be born.

Afghan officials say soybeans could improve health, provide jobs and perhaps become an alternative to the country's most notorious crop, the opium-producing poppy.

Hundreds of millions of dollars in international aid are being spent to rebuild Afghanistan. NEI has spent about \$70,000 to develop the largest soybean program in the country. But Kwon said he has tapped his personal resources and support network.

Now, as the organization enters its most crucial phase, NEI must quickly raise about \$25,000 to pay for such equipment as threshing machines to aid the October harvest, Kwon said. The Afghan farmers have basic hand tools, but would greatly benefit from some machines to make the harvest easier, he said.

Mariam Nawabi, commercial and trade counsel for the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C., said Kwon's project has the potential to save many lives and have a



(Staff photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)

Steven Kwon, a nutritionist and founder of the nonprofit NEI, poses in front of pictures from Afghanistan Tuesday June 7, 2005 at his Pasadena office. Kwon brought a variety of soybeans for farming to Afghanistan for their nutritional benefits and now NEI in its second year has 50 acres in 12 provinces that will be ready for harvest in October.

broad-reaching effect on the country. It is especially noteworthy because Kwon had no previous connection to Afghanistan, and was not an experienced aid worker, she said.

In a short time, Kwon has taken an idea to a point that is amazing, without an existing organization or budget, Nawabi said. He saw what was happening in Afghanistan and reached out, despite the dangers and difficulties of working in an unknown country, she said.

"He had a vision for what could be possible if the people there are given a chance," Nawabi said. Experience of war Kwon's desire to help people in need stems partly from his experiences during the war in Vietnam and later when he came to the United States.

Between 1968 and 1970, Kwon served with the Korean Army, a U.S. ally, in Vietnam. There, he worked as a translator and made what he calls an odd observation. The construction workers were almost all women. The men had died in the war.

"I saw many people without fathers and how terrible life is to the children and women," Kwon said. "I always have some sensitivity and feeling for those people who have been through war."

Several years later, in 1976, Kwon and his wife Annie moved to the U.S., where he said they experienced the generosity of Americans. Kwon was studying for a master's degree at UC Davis when he and Annie took a road trip to Salt Lake City in their used Ford Pinto.

The Kwons ran into car troubles, compounded because the couple did not speak English. Kwon recorded lectures at school and listened to them repeatedly to get through graduate school. The car broke down on Interstate 15 and about five cars stopped to help the stranded couple.

Good Samaritans took them to a local motel, and the next morning introduced them to trustworthy mechanics, who fixed the car for an affordable price.

"We were so impressed; people are very generous here," Kwon said. "That made us feel that we owe to this society, we owe to people who are not as well off." A country in need Afghanistan's infrastructure has been destroyed by more than two decades of war. The country's population estimated to be from 23 to 29 million suffers without the most basic needs.

Kwon first visited Afghanistan in May 2003 to teach a health and nutrition seminar to community leaders in Mazar-e Sharif, located in the north of the country near the Uzbekistan border.

During the visit, Kwon introduced the leaders to both milk- and soy-based supplements, in case they were lactose intolerant. Every one of 20 leaders preferred the soy. Soybeans have more protein than any other crop, build strong bones and improve cognitive function, and soy fiber staves off hunger.

Soybeans have never been grown extensively in Afghanistan, said Oval Myers, an internationally known plant-breeder and agronomist from the University of Southern Illinois. Efforts were made about 30 years ago but were derailed by war, said Myers, who serves as an NEI advisor.

Now the Afghan government has endorsed NEI's cultivation of soybeans in 12 provinces. Hopes are high among government officials and other observers.

Myers, a scientist and farmer, says that he is cautious by nature and profession.

"That does not mean I don't think we should be optimistic," he said of the project. "After this year we'll have sufficient data where we can be cautiously optimistic or recognize that there are some areas that are not likely to be successful."

Myers said it's likely that soybeans will never be the principle crop planted in Afghanistan. But they could be a second crop grown in the same season, as is the practice in the Midwest, he said. Alternative to the poppy When Kwon first visited Afghanistan, he said he saw beautiful flowers everywhere. He was amazed that people who had suffered so much had such love for flowers, he said. Then someone told him the flowers were opium poppies.

An opium survey conducted by the United Nations shows that while Afghanistan became more democratic in 2004, opium cultivation increased by two-thirds, and spread to all 32

provinces. It has become the main engine of economic growth.

Nawabi, of the Afghan embassy, said the NEI project could help combat narcotics because it will provide an alternative to farmers. Now farmers depend on the poppy to make a basic living, she said.

In April, Kwon spent several days training leaders from the 12 provinces where the soybeans are being grown. There, the Afghan leaders voiced serious doubts about soybeans.

"The people were even more skeptical because they might be growing poppies themselves,' Kwon said. "They didn't want to listen to me about the profit of soybeans.'

Then one of the provincial leaders admonished his peers, Kwon said. The man said that instead of thinking about money they must consider the women and children who were dying. The leaders should care about the welfare of their country, the man said. From that moment on, the mood in the room changed, Kwon said.

By the end of their training sessions, the group was laughing together. Regardless of religion or ethnicity, the group had a goal and came together as one family, Kwon said.

"These people, they are making history for their nation,' Kwon said, his voice growing more intense. "I never spoke a word about the opium poppy. I talked about saving the women and children. They are doing it for their nation. They are doing all that effort by themselves.'

Arthur Lee Quinn, a Washington, D.C., lawyer, is a consultant in the field of government relations, agriculture and international development. When Quinn heard about NEI's project, and met Kwon, he agreed to help in any way he could. Quinn said he's never met someone like Kwon, who has "taken on the nutritional plight of a war-ravaged people in a war-torn country.'

Kwon is incredibly good at bringing people together, Quinn said. People support him because he seeks to build partnerships and is a humble man, Quinn said.

"It's his altruism, his goodness, his drive and determination,' Quinn said. "This quiet approach that he has. He's just so convinced that this is what we need to do.'

Quinn said that money is essential to make NEI's work continue, and he will be making funding proposals to the USDA and USAID, and seeking partnerships with other organizations.

Kwon is most concerned about the immediate funds he needs to provide equipment to help with the October harvest.

For more information about NEI, go to the organization's Web site at www.nei-intl.org

Marshall Allen can be reached at (626) 578-6300, Ext. 4461, or by e-mail at marshall.allen@sgvn.com.