



Hanford employee brings education to his native Bangladesh

When Muhammed Islam of CH2M HILL Hanford Group was growing up in the tiny village of Hashil, Bangladesh, he read about Western Union founder Ezra Cornell, who vowed to found a university in his hometown of Ithaca, N.Y. That institution became known as Cornell University.

"Ezra Cornell had to leave home to go to college and he didn't like it — so he said he would build a college there," Islam said. "That inspired me because I, too, had to leave the village I loved very much to attend school."

Islam's family moved about 10 miles to the larger town of Jamalpur, where Islam attended school. "I told my brother someday I was going to build a college in Hashil," Islam said. "Of course, when there's no school in the village you don't need a college, so I knew I had to start by building a school."

Islam went on to earn a bachelor's degree in civil engineering in Pakistan and a master's from New York Polytechnic Institute. He began working at the U.S. Department of Energy's Hanford site in Washington in 1979, but he never lost sight of his goal.

"It took me 17 years to convince the community of Hashil that a school was needed there," he said. In a poor country of 50 percent illiteracy, "the parents and children never thought of anything beyond working in the fields."

In 1997, Islam bought a small piece of property in Hashil and built a tin shed for use as an elementary school. When the shed was destroyed by a cyclone, he built a brick-and-mortar building to replace it. He eventually purchased 10 more acres and mortgaged his home in Washington to build a middle school.

Islam travels to Bangladesh three or four times a year to hire teachers, supervise new construction and meet with parents. The school is the cultural center of the village, serving all the children of Hashil and many from surrounding areas, as space permits. There now are more than 500 students in kindergarten through 10th grade. In Bangladesh, education beyond 10th grade is equivalent to an American junior college, and all 21 students in Hashil's first graduating class have gone on to college.

Islam has had the support of CH2M HILL and many of his co-workers. Because he was involved in a creative-problem-solving course called Odyssey of the Mind, colleague John Propson was asked to travel to Bangladesh to encourage kids to stay in school. But when Propson saw the need, he went far beyond that initial involvement. He helped Islam set up the Poorest of the Poor Foundation, a 501(c)3 charitable organization, and he serves on its board of directors. With new donor support through the



Muhammed Islam and John Propson worked together to create the Poorest of the Poor Foundation.



foundation, the school has thrived and expanded.

"The foundation has extremely low overhead," Propson said. "It does not pay transportation costs or salaries for the board members, so every dollar is spent on the education of the children."

A \$1,000 donation to the foundation will support 10 students for one year, including tuition, books and a uniform. To donate, visit the foundation's Web site at: <http://www.popef.org/>.

Donors are urged to get personally involved as well, and some of Islam's co-workers have traveled to Bangladesh at their own expense. Cheri DeFig-Price encouraged her 17-year-old son, Alex Price, to visit Hashil, and he spent a week helping set up computers for the school.

Students receive instruction in the native Bengali language, and the school teaches English as a second language along with a strong math and science curriculum. The students do well on standardized tests, and school-district administrators consider the Hashil school a model for others in the district. When the village children attended a public school three miles from the village, the drop-out rate between grades three and six was 95 percent, Propson said. "Now the retention rate is 95 percent."

Most important, girls who would typically marry at the age of 12 and boys who would be working in the fields at an even earlier age, now aspire to careers in engineering and medicine.

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