

FROM DREAMS TO DESTINY

Awista Ayub Brings Soccer to Afghan Girls

Awista Ayub is a remarkable young woman who believes that sports can be a “tool for inspiring social change.” She has transformed her vision into a reality as the founder of a program that brings the joy of soccer to girls who are normally prohibited from participation in any type of public activity. The Afghan Youth Sports Exchange (AYSE) uses the game of soccer to empower girls in Afghanistan with leadership skills, thus opening doors to empathy and global unity.

BY TAMKANAT NAVEED PHOTOGRAPHED BY SCOTT DUNCAN



It is uncommonly balmy weather as I wait at the park for my friend. I am shielded from the elements by a light trench coat. "Winter-white trench in a spring-like December," I whisper under my breath. "This is a pleasant change."

I stroll past the willow trees thinking that life is all about change and without change, it doesn't amount to much. It's at that moment that I reach into my pocket and grab my cell phone. As I dial Awista Ayub's number, a warm slab of sunlight drifts over my face and my eyes follow a trail of ducks bathing in the lake a few yards away. I'm pulled out of my reverie by Awista's voice on the other end of the line. It's a comforting voice, the kind of voice you could listen to for hours, even if you've never met before; warm and pleasant like a spring-time December.

Awista agrees to speak to me after she's free from an exacting day at work. From her laid-back approach, you wouldn't guess that this is a woman who has been juggling two demanding jobs simultaneously, one in Afghanistan and the other in Washington D.C. Formerly employed full-time at the Afghanistan Embassy in D.C., Awista also manages a visionary soccer exchange program that has changed the lives of girls in Afghanistan.

How does one become an engine of social change and a role model like Awista? According to her, it's all about being passionate about what you do in life. But it's Awista's special combination of passion and vision that has brought the sheer joy of play back into the lives of Afghan girls.

a new beginning

Like many Afghans who were displaced from their homeland by the Soviet invasion of 1979, Awista's family fled the country to come to the United States in 1981. The family settled in Waterbury, Connecticut, where Awista's parents struggled financially in order to establish a comfortable life for their three children.

Watching her parents re-establish themselves left a lasting impression on Awista. "Everything my parents achieved was through hard work and determination. I grew up seeing my parents embrace that ethic, so the value of hard work was instilled in me at a very young age." Her parents also encouraged their children to take pride in their heritage and religion by preserving their values. "We learned the language and read the Qur'an and that was something I truly appreciated when I went back to Afghanistan for the first time."

Awista's older brother and younger sister encouraged her as well. Only a year separates each sibling from the next one, and this closeness in age has forged an unbreakable bond. When asked what kind of impact she feels she's had on her brother and sister, Awista answers, "I brought sports to them. I got them into playing tennis and being more athletic. Hopefully, they take that as a positive thing." The impact she would have on her siblings would eventually extend beyond the tennis court and onto a new playing field years later. "When my brother and sister saw the work I was doing with young girls in Afghanistan they gained even greater respect for what I do, because it showed them that any one of us could easily have been in the same situation as those girls. It made us appreciate our own lives and the opportunities we have been blessed with that much more."



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Afghan girls attend a soccer clinic in Kabul.



Ghazi Stadium in Kabul.



Mohammed, Awista Ayub and Shamila Kohestani at Ghazi Stadium.



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Awista's passion for sports continued at the University of Rochester, where she majored in Chemistry. She formed the university's first all-female ice hockey team, which is still going strong today. She also founded the Northeast Women's Collegiate Hockey Association. In the first year, she recruited 25 girls for the team. She breaks off into a mischievous laugh as she admits, "The funny thing is I didn't even know how to skate. We went out to the ice the first day and since I didn't know how to skate, I was holding on to the boards. One of the players came up to me, and her jaw literally dropped when she saw me. She assumed that I knew how to skate but I told her, 'I don't, but now is my chance to learn.'"

As she relays this story, I realize that Awista's real legacy isn't about creating the hockey team, but more about instilling a sense of courage and determination in the players. "When other girls heard that I didn't know how to skate but had this passion to play hockey, they were encouraged to learn how to skate and play without any fear of embarrassment."

Acknowledgement of her efforts at college came in her senior year at the University of Rochester, when she was awarded the prestigious Susan B. Anthony Award for her exceptional leadership skills, academic achievement and pro-bono work. For Awista, the award solidified her belief in her own abilities. "I didn't realize people looked up to the work I did in a way that warranted an award, so when I received it, that inspired me to believe in myself and in my abilities. It taught me that if you do something with passion, people see that."

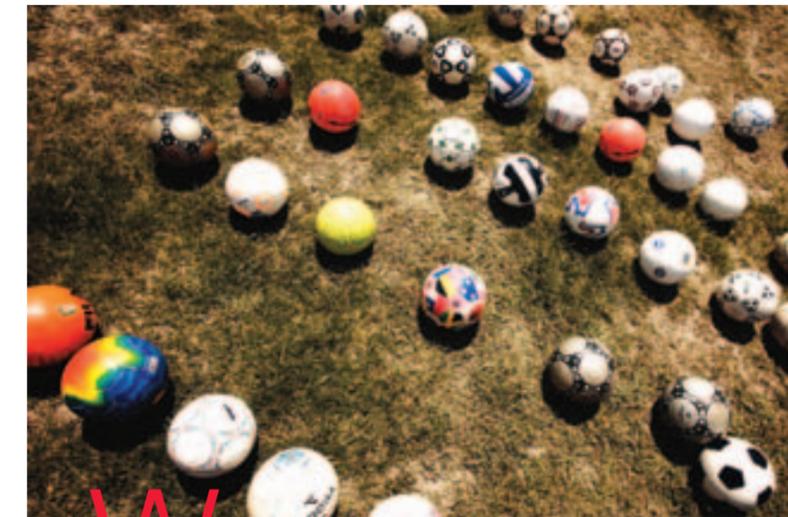
Awista's next leap forward was as a Take Five Scholar whose thesis centered on the beneficial effects of athletics on women, and the social implications of those effects. She volunteered with AmeriCorps, a non-profit organization designed to meet the educational, health, environmental and public safety needs of Americans. "The greatest lesson AmeriCorps taught me is how to give back to the community. It shaped my present thinking because I said, if I can give back to America, why can't I also give back to Afghanistan which has been devastated by over 25 years of war?"

The Afghan Youth Sports Exchange was founded in the fall of 2003. Awista collaborated with Duaine Goodno, whom she describes as a vital contact for her in Afghanistan. She also worked with the Afghanistan National Olympic Committee (ANOC) and the Afghan Football Federation (AFF). Guided by the old adage that if you want to change the world, begin with yourself, Awista set about devising a soccer exchange program that would encourage girls to play, while also teaching them more important lessons. "I've learned a lot of life lessons from playing sports, such as having confidence in myself, building up my self-esteem and being able to bounce back from failure. For instance, if I lose a match, it's not the end of the world. I've been able to take lessons like these beyond the playing field."

Awista believes that the greatest feeling of empowerment comes from the ability to make choices in one's life. This was a basic human right Awista wanted girls in Afghanistan to reclaim. Playing soccer taught the girls how to exercise this right, while also teaching them the value of owning up to decisions they make on the field, and in life. "When you're playing soccer on the field, you don't stop the game to figure out where or to

whom you're going to pass the ball. You have to make that decision on your own. If you don't make a good pass, you figure out how you can do it better next time. In this way, you learn to own up to your choices and actions, which is a necessary skill in life."

AYSE's basic motto is that one can bring about change through sports. As Awista explains this concept to me, it all begins to make sense. "Social change is really about evaluating your community and being able to take hold of it and take responsibility for it as team members."



We have received a tremendous amount of support from the American soccer community... The teams might not speak the same language, but they can still connect through playing soccer.





glory road

In 2004, AYSE's goals came to fruition when the first Afghan all-female soccer team was sponsored by the United States. The team consisted of eight girls from Kabul who were set to compete

at the International Children's Games in Cleveland, Ohio. As a result of AYSE's efforts and with the help of the Afghan National Olympic Committee and the Afghan Football Federation, there are currently 15 all-girls soccer teams in Afghanistan today.

Recognition of Awista's hard work through AYSE didn't stop with the games in Cleveland. In the summer of 2006, two of

the girls from the all-girls Afghan soccer team were featured on ESPN's ESPY Awards. Roia Noor Ahmad and Shamila Kohestani received the prestigious Arthur Ashe Courage Award.

Yet Awista's sense of accomplishment does not come from this type of recognition. She is most concerned with the impact of the program on the girls themselves. "When the girls came

to America, they were so amazed by the infrastructure of the United States that they went back to Afghanistan really wanting to bring what they learned back to their communities. The girls noticed that women here not only work at home, but also have full-time jobs. Because of this, they have options. They wanted to take this message back to their communities in Afghanistan and show them that a woman can really have it all."

new dreams, new destinies

Since its inception in 2003, AYSE has made tremendous strides in bringing about positive changes for the girls whose lives it has touched in Afghanistan. AYSE has opened soccer clinics throughout Kabul where girls can come and practice the sport. It has established 15 all-girls soccer teams which are registered with the Afghan National Olympic Committee. It has collected equipment for the girls, and with the help of major partners, it has invested in the training of coaches who then work with the girls.

Asked if she plans to expand her sports program into other realms such as tennis or volleyball, Awista agrees enthusiastically. I point out how demanding the task will be given her other commitments and she admits to feeling the pressure. "It's been very challenging for the past three years, but it's work that I love doing so it's not very hard to keep myself motivated or passionate."

Awista sees how the game of soccer has opened up possibilities for peace and justice in Afghanistan. "Sport really has the ability to get people in a community together to support a cause. When you have that kind of solidarity or unity established, it leads to peace and stability within the region. In many ways, sport is a gateway towards peace and reconciliation because it brings people together irrespective of their backgrounds or practices. It's a very simple concept."

And it's not just about peace in Afghanistan. Awista sees her work with AYSE as a means of building bridges between Americans and Afghans. "We have received a tremendous amount of support from the American soccer community. The teams might not speak the same language, but they can still connect through playing soccer."

Her vision has become a tangible reality. The regenerative power of sport has helped the girls in the AYSE program achieve a sense of identity and unity. They have come out of their shells and gained the confidence to become the strong Muslim women of tomorrow—living proof that dreams do have the power to change lives. Especially when the dreamer is Awista Ayub. ■

AYSE is expanding its programs in Afghanistan, but needs your help to continue making a difference.

To make a donation to AYSE, please visit www.afghansports.org.