For almost as long as U.S. troops have been deployed in Afghanistan, a small group of San Diegans has traveled in and out of the eastern province of Nangarhar, near the Pakistani border, on what might be called a counterinsurgency mission.

While military personnel kept the province largely secure from Taliban violence, these civilians built friendships with local leaders, patiently working to open the region to the world and change ingrained attitudes about education and the role of women.

And while U.S. aid to the region ebbed and surged, a steady stream of dollars from San Diego financed not only the Rotary school in 2003, but also a computer learning center and a women’s residence hall on the campus of nearby Nangarhar University in Jalalabad, the provincial capital.

La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotarians Stephen R. Brown and Fary Moini raised most of those dollars—nearly a million over seven years. Veterans now of the long, hard journey from San Diego to Nangarhar Province, they’ve achieved a status unusual for foreigners in eastern Afghanistan.

“When Iranian-born Moini first visited the region in 2002, the very thinnest of threads connected Jalalabad to the rest of the world. Most Afghans had never seen a computer, or even a phone. To send an e-mail home, Moini had to drive 45 minutes to the nearest nongovernmental organization (NGO) office—and hope the system didn’t crash.

Winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan

Every morning, some 4,500 students fill its 20 white-washed, sparsely furnished classrooms. Flocking through the building’s square stone entrance, they pass under blue letters that spell out “La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club.”

One third of these students are girls—young Afghans who might never have entered a classroom were it not for the commitment of La Jolla Rotarians, the assistance of San Diego State University faculty, and the serendipitous pairing of San Diego and Jalalabad as Sister Cities.

organization, we’re not accountable to major institutions.”

Interloper at work

All that changed after a chance meeting between Brown and fellow Rotarian Steve Spencer, an SDSU faculty member in the College of Education’s Interwork Institute. With plans for the Rotary school already under way, Brown asked Spencer to set up a computer lab in Jalalabad and train local officials to use the Internet.
"You should have seen their faces when they first understood what those computers could do."

Going in, Spencer knew that he’d be considered a foreign interloper, at best, and, at worst, a government agent. So he worked to disarm such concerns, hiring a translator fluent in the local dialect to help with a meeting of the Jalalabad hierarchy. After setting up an Internet connection, Spencer registered the elders for e-mail addresses. Then, so skeptics in attendance wouldn’t see the computers as foreign propaganda tools, Spencer pulled up an online copy of the Qur’an written in Pashto, Afghanistan’s official language. Suddenly, the Afghans’ concerns dissolved, and with them, Jalalabad’s centuries of isolation.

“Weich Steve’s help, we connected the community to the outside world and all its knowledge,” Brown said. “You should have seen their faces when they first understood what those computers could do.”

International collaboration

Spencer’s visit was also the beginning of San Diego State University’s involvement in modernizing higher education in Afghanistan. Three years later, with SDSU President Stephen L. Weber’s blessing, San Diego State’s Interwork Institute officially partnered with Nangarhar University in a long-term program to educate faculty and provide curriculum support for a new bachelor of arts degree in English language.

More than 10 Nangarhar faculty have participated in the program. Each summer, a small group of these instructors comes to SDSU for intensive seminars focused on language development and teaching strategies. They return home with the skills to coach their colleagues and enhance the curriculum for approximately 300 Nangarhar students now working toward English language degrees.

Early success with the English program led to a second collaboration—this one between Nangarhar and SDSU’s College of Engineering. As a result, seven Afghan professors — “The illiterates in Afghanistan still have old ideas, (They) teach people to see the outside world negatively.” — are now earning master’s degrees in civil engineering here and at other universities, while working with SDSU faculty to rewrite Nangarhar’s undergraduate engineering curriculum, which hadn’t been updated in more than 20 years.

The two SDSU-Nangarhar partnerships are funded by the World Bank through Afghanistan’s Ministry of Higher Education, which sponsors the first programs at four Afghan universities. Such widespread efforts speak to shared aspirations that knowledge and constructive relationships with the outside world can help undo the effects of Afghanistan’s troubled past.

“International collaboration

Spencer’s visit was also the beginning of San Diego State University’s involvement in modernizing higher education in Afghanistan. Three years later, with SDSU President Stephen L. Weber’s blessing, San Diego State’s Interwork Institute officially partnered with Nangarhar University in a long-term program to educate faculty and provide curriculum support for a new bachelor of arts degree in English language.

More than 10 Nangarhar faculty have participated in the program. Each summer, a small group of these instructors comes to SDSU for intensive seminars focused on language development and teaching strategies. They return home with the skills to coach their colleagues and enhance the curriculum for approximately 300 Nangarhar students now working toward English language degrees.

Early success with the English program led to a second collaboration—this one between Nangarhar and SDSU’s College of Engineering. As a result, seven Afghan professors — “The illiterates in Afghanistan still have old ideas, (They) teach people to see the outside world negatively.” — are now earning master’s degrees in civil engineering here and at other universities, while working with SDSU faculty to rewrite Nangarhar’s undergraduate engineering curriculum, which hadn’t been updated in more than 20 years.

The two SDSU-Nangarhar partnerships are funded by the World Bank through Afghanistan’s Ministry of Higher Education, which sponsors the first programs at four Afghan universities. Such widespread efforts speak to shared aspirations that knowledge and constructive relationships with the outside world can help undo the effects of Afghanistan’s troubled past.

In a country that has endured decades of war, education is the key for changing from a culture of war to a culture of peace, democracy and positive growth,” said Emeritus Fred McFarlane, co-director of SDSU’s Interwork Institute and the administrator of the Nangarhar University partnership.

Updating ideas

But of course change seldom comes easily, especially in isolated cultures.

“The illiterates in Afghanistan still have old ideas, said Baryali Rasooli, head of Nangarhar’s English department. “Tribal chiefs teach people to see the outside world negatively. It’s like Afghanistan is caught in the tertiary stages of life.”

At 29, Rasooli represents a generation of Afghans who see new ideas as stepping stones to a better future for the country. Recruited to establish Nangarhar’s English language program from a post as director of an English school in Pakistan, Rasooli had previously completed medical training in the Czech Republic. That training proved valuable in Afghanistan. For months, the university couldn’t afford to pay him, so he started working part-time in a medical clinic. He still does. In fact, most of the faculty at Nangarhar hold second jobs.

Professor Gul Rasooli also worked gratis for a year after joining the Nangarhar faculty. He supported himself by teaching English to the staff of several NGOs working in the area. After studying at San Diego State this past summer, Rasooli expressed high praise for the SDSU-Nangarhar program. Frustrated for years by the slow pace of his students’ progress and his own inability to set effective curriculum objectives, he now characterizes his lessons as “100 percent successful.”

Spreading knowledge

But for Rasooli and his colleagues, it’s not all about syntax and sentence structure. The partnership between Nangarhar and SDSU also represents a victory in Afghanistan’s internal struggle to modernize and join the global community.

“Some of us professors knew a little about the outside world, but we never thought this knowledge would become widespread in Jalalabad,” Rasooli said. “Then Steve set up the computers, and it became a reality.”

Baryali Rasooli, the department chair, agrees. Afghans are learning how to modernize and adapting to new ideas.

“We teach public awareness as well as English,” he said. “The educated understand the world.”

As proof, Rasooli points to Afghanistan’s proudest achievement of recent years, an increase in the number of girls and women attending school. At Nangarhar University, more than 10 percent of students are women.

Home to uncertainty

On Aug. 15, the day before Rasooli and his colleagues left San Diego, their luggage stuffed with books, scarves, jewelry and other small gifts for family and friends, two bombs exploded in southeastern Afghanistan, killing 14 people, including three children.

The incidents came during a wave of increasing political volatility following the contested presidential election that looks likely to return Hamid Karzai to power. Creating uncertainty in Afghanistan and consternation in Washington, the surge in violence led to the bloodiest month in years for American forces fighting Taliban extremists and forced the Obama administration to reconsider its strategy in the ongoing war.

Jalalabad, however, has remained relatively tranquil in the midst of national upheaval. Nangarhar University students returned to classes in September as usual.

The World Bank continues financial support for SDSU’s partnership with Nangarhar University.

The World Bank continues financial support for SDSU’s partnership with Nangarhar, which the university’s new chancellor, Mohammad Saher, enthusiastically supports.

Meanwhile, Brown and Moos continue to raise money for education and infrastructure development in Nangarhar. Most recently, they’ve begun setting up networks to connect professionals in Jalalabad’s medical and public health fields with their counterparts around the world.

Eager to join Rotarians in working toward world peace and understanding, the leaders of Jalalabad have established a local Rotary Club to help their own citizens. Interestingly, there is no Pashto word for “volunteer.” But if the people of Nangarhar continue to follow the lead of their San Diego friends, they may just have to create one.