

St. Andrew's School

Author shares Afghanistan story of hope

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Wednesday's long lunch period offered students the opportunity to learn of the cultural struggles in Afghanistan for women, as told through the context of athletics. St. Andrew's students think it routine to practice each afternoon in the athletic pursuit of their preference, but for girls living in a country where religious fanaticism degrades the role of women, the freedom to play, compete, and display physical talents is almost unthinkable.

Awista Ayub's book, *However Tall the Mountain*, shares the story of young girls in Afghanistan who seek out the reaffirming and rewarding power of athletics to break free of the gender restrictions their society has imposed. Awista was born in Afghanistan in 1979, the same year the Soviet Union invaded and began its 10-year brutal occupation. Her family fled to the United States in 1981, and Awista grew up in American popular culture, though a strong Afghan ethnic culture was instilled at home. As with most immigrants, Awista experience some identify crisis between the two worlds. In high school sports, Awista found her "voice and passion," particularly in tennis. Her personality and confidence blossomed. She cherished the hard work and resilience the athletic experience provided.

After college and graduate school, Awista had been working as a research chemist, but felt a calling to use sports as a transformational vehicle for the women of Afghanistan. The fall of the oppressive Taliban fundamentalists following the U.S.-led military action in 2001 provided the opening she sought. She founded the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange, an organization dedicated to nurturing Afghan girls through the camaraderie and competition of soccer.

While she wasn't a soccer player herself, Awista chose the sport because of its global appeal and the minimalist requirements for equipment. What she did not realize at the time, however, was that while there were some athletic opportunities for girls in Afghanistan, soccer wasn't consider an acceptable activity in their culture. Basketball and volleyball had made some inroads, but soccer had not. Fortunately, the international governing body for soccer, FIFA, had made it clear to the Afghan federation that support of women's soccer was a prerequisite for additional funding for the men's team. The challenging part was finding girls who could play or even those with an interest.

After much logistical effort, Awista brought eight girls over the United States for an intensive six-week training program. These would form the nucleus of the soccer program in Afghanistan. While the girls encountered some cultural difficulty upon returning to their country, five of the eight ended up playing on the 2005 Afghanistan women's national team. In Kabul, the girls must still take security precautions, playing on a field within the international security force base. The field is walled off and removed from public sight. Still, the effort has paid off. Fifteen teams now compete in an organized league, with hundreds of girls participating through the Afghanistan soccer federation.

Following a short ESPN film that chronicled the story, Awista shared additional insights into the political stability of the region, and concluded by signing copies of her book.

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