

## Afghanistan: Up Close and Personal

In March of this year the St. Joseph's Parents Association invited two parents to speak on Afghanistan. Mr. Ned Desmond, a former *Time Magazine* correspondent in Afghanistan, and Dr. David Mohler, a physician who has been on multiple medical relief missions in that part of the world, told a fascinated audience their stories. Both described a very dangerous place, not much changed over the last several decades, if not centuries. Both saw a country in ruins and the political situation in chaos. More importantly, they witnessed the suffering of the people. Mr. Desmond expressed his disappointment that news coverage today neglects foreign affairs and leaves the American people unaware and uninformed. Dr. Mohler told a story of contrasts between practicing medicine in the United States and in under-developed countries around the world. He showed slides of the sick and injured and the primitive facilities where the medical relief teams tried to treat them. Both men agreed that we cannot help when we do not understand the need. Most of the parents agreed that the evening was a call to awareness and action.

In April Dr. Mohler returned to campus to speak to the SHP freshmen and other interested students and parents. We asked him to summarize his remarks for the magazine.

### Freedom Medicine

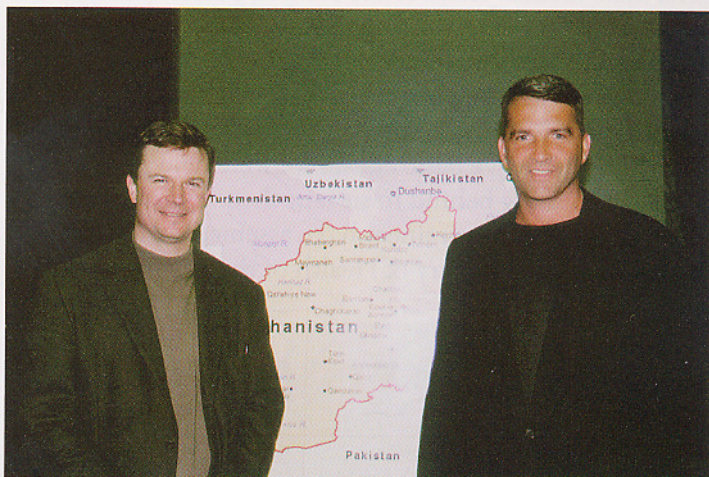
— David Mohler, M.D.

*In April, 2002, I was on a medical relief mission to assist the Karen people in eastern Burma, an ethnic group of Seventh-Day Adventists, Roman Catholics, and Southern Baptists, courtesy of some very brave missionaries who came their way in the late 19th century. Sandwiched between the dictatorial military regime in Rangoon, and the freewheeling drug lords of the north, the non-drinking, non-smoking Karens have been attacked from all sides for more than 50 years. As I was straining under a 40-lb. rucksack full of medical supplies, marching up and down mountains with 20 year-old guerrilla fighters from the Karen Liberation Army, hiding from government patrols, walking gingerly through mine fields, and suffering badly in the hundred degree heat, a question came to mind. The question was one that my friends and family back in California constantly asked me: "Why do I do this?"*

I was raised in a small farm town in Ohio as part of a family where you stood up for the small or the weak and did what was right, regardless of the cost. After graduating from Stanford University, I was still interested in helping people and went on to Cornell University Medical College. I spent two months in East Africa with the Flying Doctor Service and realized the extraordinary challenges and rewards of medical care in under-served areas. In 1982, during my surgical internship

at UCLA, a very brave emergency room physician spent his sabbatical in Afghanistan. He returned to Los Angeles, sold his house, and founded International Medical Corps, the first United States medical relief charity to aid victims of tyrannical regimes and invasion forces. I subsequently spent my month-long vacations with this organization, training Mujahedin combat medics and treating and evaluating victims of the fighting.

The Afghan war was a turning point in my life. The Soviet Special Forces and Afghan secret police stalked our teams, attacked our compounds, and threw hand grenades over the walls of our training facility and quarters in Pakistan. When they put out a \$10,000 reward for any of our team members, I knew we were having a significant effect. The high-tech medical skills I learned in New York and Los Angeles were supplemented by effective, low-tech methods appropriate for operating without lights or electricity while under fire from hostile forces. The old saying early in the Afghan war was "to be wounded in Afghanistan is to die." Thankfully, the intensive efforts of many volunteers and the assistance provided by the U. S. changed this gruesome reality. My own small contributions to this were intensely gratifying.



Ned Desmond, now President and editor of the magazine *Business 2.0* and David Mohler, Orthopedic Tumor Specialist at Stanford University Hospital.

When the last Russians withdrew, I celebrated with my Mujahedin friends and fellow American volunteers. It was clear to me, however, that tribal rivalries and international interference from Pakistan and other entities would promote Afghan-on-Afghan conflict. In addition, the major political players did not seem to be interested in rebuilding the infrastructure, academics, and economy of Afghanistan.