



## **Culinary instructor takes humanitarian aid into his own hands**

**By: Sam Hemingway**

Jonathan Hoffman was a long way from his Northfield home.

It was the summer of 1999, and he stood on a hill in Kosovo, a war-torn province in the Balkans. Spread out below him was a hamlet of ramshackle homes.

"It was raining, and there was not a roof on any of the houses," he recalled.

Hoffman, a chef, had gone to Kosovo to work in refugee camps and orphanages as a humanitarian volunteer. He'd been happy with what he'd done, but as he looked down on the roofless homes, he knew it wasn't enough.

"I realized that the work I'd done was just a drop in the bucket," he said. "I wanted to do something more permanent."

In that moment, Hoffman's life changed. He is still a chef -- he teaches culinary arts at the Essex Center for Technology -- but over the last six years Hoffman has also become a one-man international aid organization, working first in Kosovo and then Afghanistan.

He's done a little bit of everything, from delivering goats and firewood to needy families to building a small library -- and he's done it on a shoestring: Hoffman pays his own way and has spent all of the \$40,000 he's raised over the years on projects he's undertaken.

"A lot of the donations people make to charities doesn't go directly to the people, it goes to administrative overhead," he said. "I like to go where no one else is going, places that people have overlooked."

The remote town of Yakhshi, Afghanistan, is such a place. Yakhshi is so small it doesn't show up on most maps of the country. Located in the poorest section of Afghanistan, it is linked to the rest of the world only by a path. It has no electricity.

Hoffman first went to Yakhshi in 2002 to help dig a water well for the town. While there he noticed that the 83 young girls in town were being educated in a tent. Taliban rulers had prevented girls from acquiring an education. With the Taliban gone, the town was trying to provide the girls an education, but there was no

room in the boys' school for more students. So Hoffman helped build a school.

A year later, when Hoffman returned to Yakhshi, he was greeted by flowers, serenading students and a sign on the school that read -- in English -- "Welcome to our school."

"I was wiping my eyes and blinking real fast," Hoffman said. "It was a big moment for them."

Hoffman, 46, talks about his experiences in Kosovo and Afghanistan in enthusiastic, rapid-fire sentences. He shrugs off the dangers inherent with his work as no greater than what a Vermont police officer or firefighter might face.

Later this spring, Hoffman will go back to Afghanistan to build a health clinic or another school, depending on how much money he can raise. His organization's Web site is [www.directaidinternational.org](http://www.directaidinternational.org).

"I like to look at the big picture," he said. "I wonder what the ripple effect of this work will be five years, 10 years from now. I think about a girl from Yakhshi coming up to me and saying, 'I remember you.' I know my best moment hasn't happened yet. That's why I do this."

Contact Sam Hemingway at 660-1850 or e-mail at [shemingway@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com](mailto:shemingway@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com)

***Reference:***

<http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/Columnists/Sam/0320090838.htm>