

Sanam Quraishi: From Revolution to Education

By Mariah Quinn

Education means a great deal to Sanam Moramed-Vaziri Quraishi. Quraishi was born into a life of privilege in pre-revolution Iran: her father was a deputy minister in the Shah's government and a professor at Tehran University. "We really had a very wonderful life, and that changed very abruptly," she said. "I ended up in one studio with six other members of my family for about four years."

And, she says, it was education that allowed her family, who moved first to Paris and then the United States, to find its footing when they were forced to flee Iran in 1979 after the Islamic revolution. "It's about education. Had my father not had the education that he had we would not have been able to survive," she said.

It was those formative experiences that pushed her on to a course of philanthropy, with a particular focus on education in developing nations. The part-time Water Mill resident's latest project was serving as an executive producer for a series of documentaries by Students of the World, a group run by college students dedicated to raising public awareness about social concerns at the international level. A fundraiser in support of SOW was held at her Water Mill home in July.

The efforts of SOW — working on sustainable village development in India, conducting grassroots campaigns against HIV-AIDs in Africa, providing

micro-business loans for women in Mexico, and organizing a Playing for Peace basketball camp for Palestinian and Israeli children — benefit the students as well as the people they are helping, Quraishi said. "They transform their perceptions of the whole world and they come back enriched with everything they've learned."

Quraishi, who is a lawyer, also runs her own foundation, which is dedicated to alleviating poverty and improving education in the developing world, in partnership with the Clinton Global Initiative, Bill Clinton's community action organization. Her own experiences in Iran led her to believe the importance of secular, universal education cannot be underestimated. "If we concentrated on educating the whole world and do it without religious nuances and political overtones then perhaps we wouldn't have so much fanaticism in the world," she said.

"It is easier to develop the mind of a five-year-old or a 10-year-old than to change the mind of a 50-year-old," she added.

The bulk of the foundations efforts have been focused on India, with an eye on engaging nations that are becoming increasingly prominent on the geo-political stage. "It would make a lot of sense if we start to invest in countries that, whether we like it or not, we're dealing with the most," she said.

The guests at the July fundraiser saw very clearly where their investments

went. "They could, for example, sponsor the cost for one child to participate in a Playing for Peace club for one year," Quraishi said, creating "very tangible solutions."

The activist said her own life, from the luxuries and loss she experienced in Iran to the struggles her families en-

dured as they remade their lives after the revolution, taught her "life is about more than what you have." For her, she explained, "It's happenstance that some of us have more resources than others and it would only be fair to share it with the rest of the world who is not as fortunate."