THE EASTSIDE’S MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE

Amin Shaykho
CEO of Kadama
Bellevue’s Mona Foundation, through a decolonized approach to giving, strives to improve lives, communities, and countries by supporting global partners focused on education — especially of girls.

Actor Rainn Wilson has witnessed the positive effect Bellevue-based Mona Foundation has on educating communities around the world, and he enthusiastically supports it with his time, money, and voice, while extolling the virtues of Mona’s founder and leader, Mahnaz Javid.

“They really broke the mold when they made Mahnaz,” said Wilson, who played Dwight Schrute in The Office sitcom. He calls Javid completely and entirely devoted to the cause of education of children, especially girls, and dedicated to the foundation’s mission, which is to alleviate global poverty through the levers of education and gender equality. “Her wisdom around the topic and the issues is absolutely extraordinary.”

Wilson, who was born and raised in Seattle, got involved with Mona Foundation in 2007 after he looked to leverage his success for an education cause with impact on the ground and with an organization he could help grow. He began as a spokesperson for Mona Foundation, later served on Mona’s board, and is now on its advisory committee.

“This is an organization (where) you don’t vaguely raise money for some generalized cause,” said Wilson, who has seen classrooms built and filled with students learning in places such as Haiti,
"We have poverty in the world — not because we don’t have resources, but because we corrupt the resources that we have in our hands."
	hanks to support from the Mona Foundation. “I really like that kind of meat-and-potatoes approach and the fact that the way they look at education is really from the grassroots; it’s not a top-down model.”

The nonprofit Mona Foundation partners with proven grassroots organizations globally to, as it says, educate children, empower women and girls, and enable them to transform their own communities. Mona relies on its partners to determine the best way to reach the most students and have the most impact, then supports them to help reach those goals, grow, and achieve scale. It’s not a West-knows-best approach, but one that is community-led, with Mona providing long-term support to sustain change, and establishing trust and collaborating with partners to implement innovative programs that enable individual and community transformation.

Last year alone, Mona directly educated 801,311 students through 23 partner organizations serving 223 communities in 14 countries, including Haiti, Panama, Brazil, India, Vietnam, China, Mongolia, The Gambia, Sierra Leone, and the United States. These efforts included providing food and shelter; launching digital literacy classes to enable employment opportunities, including in urban slums; providing access to available resources to prevent violence against women and girls; and training 138,427 teachers and 60,000 parents on COVID prevention and online education access.

It did that on a total in-the-field operating budget of less than $2 million, thanks to Mona’s operating model, where partners pay to hire and employ staff, and because dollars stretch further than in the U.S.

This year, Mona is involved in 26 projects in 15 countries after adding partner projects in Colombia, Guatemala, Sierra Leone and the United States. Since its founding in 1999, Mona Foundation has granted $16 million to 51 partner organizations in 25 countries. Its annual reports online detail work with each of the partners.

Its projects include working with schools and others in economically disadvantaged areas “(that) focus on quality of learning and teaching, fine arts, and character development to train capable, ethical, and altruistic leaders who contribute to the betterment of their families, communities, and ultimately their nation,” the foundation says.

Character development through partners’ work is part of the foundation’s successful formula, Javid said.

“We have poverty in the world — not because we don’t have resources, but because we corrupt the resources that we have in our hands,” she said. “So I think that also developing the ethical and the moral capabilities of our students to be trustworthy, to have integrity, to care for each other, and to give back to their community and serve the best interests of their community has to be part of the educational framework and model.”

That’s why educational initiatives Mona supports not only focus on academic excellence in areas such as science, math, and technology, but also in arts and humanities, and ethics and service.

“Then you create this virtuous cycle where you educate me, you help me to become an engineer or a doctor, or whatever, (and) you also provide me with the skills I need and the training I need in order to give back to my community and help my family or my extended community.

▲ Students of Jaiama School, which is funded by Mona Foundation in Jomborhun, Bo District, Sierra Leone, and other area students stand outside their community gathering place to celebrate the opening of the Muloma Women’s Technical Vocational Centre, the expansion of which was funded by Mona.
to become better," Javid said. "I think that that is how you see impact."

Mona has supported some partner organizations for decades in ways that include capital for building classrooms, technology for remote learning, scholarships, teacher training, supplies, and more. The foundation prioritizes funding learning, teaching, and program development over infrastructure, but when infrastructure is needed, the foundation is willing to step up, Javid said, noting a case where it paid for wells to be dug to bring clean water to classrooms.

Kristen Dailey, executive director of Global Washington — a Seattle-based network of nonprofits, for-profits, and foundations with a Washington presence that do work to improve lives in low- and middle-income countries — highlights Mona Foundation as an example of effectively funding projects in such countries.

"There's a trend right now called decolonizing aid, and it's the concept of, we can't go in as founde's and pretend like we know everything and that we know what's best for people," Dailey said. "It's kind of the white knight syndrome, and Mona Foundation has never had that approach. Their very founding has been to go into communities and find out the needs and work with partners there and really be on equal footing."

Mona combines that philanthropy with smart use of technology to expand the reach and effectiveness of its support and advance its mission.
"We are not limiting ourselves to K through to 12, but to educational initiatives that build capacity in people to create better lives for themselves, their families, and communities."

That's partly why Mona, on its modest budget, can impact so many lives, said Javid, who in 2017 gave up a nearly 20-year career as an executive with Microsoft and then Avanade, a joint venture of Microsoft and Accenture, to focus full-time, beginning in 2018, on running the foundation she started while completing her doctorate at Seattle University.

**FOCUS ON GIRLS**

Mona Foundation works with partners who provide universal education, but with a focus on educating girls.

"The potential of our humanity is like a bird with two wings: One is a male, and one is a female; if you want the bird to fly, you've got to strengthen both wings," Javid said. "So far, we've been flapping with one wing, and it's still, to me, earthbound. I think that the future of humanity and our prosperity is dependent on a strength in the other wing so that the bird can fly, and then we are no longer earth-bound; then we are heaven-bound. Then our vista and the rules that govern us are going to be entirely different than what govern us now. And it is then that we will fully realize the potential that we all have, and I think that has always been our motto."

The foundation cites statistics that every $1 invested in education translates to $10 in economic growth, and that every girl who's educated positively impacts the lives of 100 others over time. Citing UNESCO data, Mona said better-educated women tend to be more informed about nutrition and health care, have fewer and healthier children, marry later, are more likely to earn more and put that money back into their families and communities, all of which can help lift households, communities, and countries out of poverty.

Global Washington's Dailey said, "It's been said before in the global development community that there's no silver bullet to a lot of the problems that are facing low- and middle-income countries, but if there was a silver bullet, it would be education — and what (Javid's) doing lays the foundation to so many other opportunities, for economic development, for global health."

Statistics show that education, especially educating a girl, could be the most impactful thing to do within a community, Dailey said, and Javid "does it in such a beautiful way that's in partnership with what that means, and it could be skill-set building or just primary education, but it is one of the most effective things you can do in global development."

While Mona focuses on K-12 education, educational initiatives can take other forms, too.

In Cameroon, Mona supports Emergence Foundation, which teaches agricultural best practices to the rural villagers to address malnutrition for children, which is widespread, Javid said.

A Mona-supported project must have an educational angle, she said, citing another example of environmental preservation in Colombia for food sovereignty.

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**MONA FOUNDATION'S NAMESAKE**

Javid was inspired to name the foundation after Mona Mahmudnizhad, who was executed by Islamic fundamentalists in Iran.
for her Bahá’í faith, a minority religion in Iran, and for teaching children. She had begun teaching children at age 12 in an orphanage, and openly supported human rights and freedom. She was 17 when she was killed in 1983.

Bahá’í faith is about oneness of God, oneness of religion, oneness of people, and it is very progressive in terms of education and gender equality, Javid said. After the Islamic Revolution, Bahá’í’s were prevented from attending school, so Mahmudnizhad started a home-based classroom. That, combined with her outspokenness on freedom, led to her arrest, imprisonment, then execution. She was given the opportunity to free herself by saying she was Muslim, but she refused to deny who she was, Javid recounted.

In a book about her imprisonment, Mona said the only time she cried in prison was because she could not see her kids at the orphanage, Javid said.

“I just felt like, ‘OK, if there is anyone that we would want to be remembered through the work of the foundation, it would be Mona,’” Javid said.

Javid also grew up in Iran in a Bahá’í family and lived a comfortable life. Her father was a physician, and he and Javid’s mother stressed the need of caring for others, which they did often, including giving food to people who would knock on the door for help.

One day, when Javid was 12, her mother took her on a taxi ride to the slums of Tehran. They spent about a half-hour driving without her mother speaking. Javid remembers being stunned at the squalid conditions: children with protruded stomachs, and no clothes or shoes. When they returned home, Javid’s mother looked her in the eyes; she remembers her saying, “Mahnaz, don’t forget.”

As the minority faith, her family’s education experiences were limited in Iran, so her parents shipped all six children to the United States as they reached their early teens to complete high school and attend college. Javid, at 14, landed in upstate New York in 1969 through an exchange program with an American family that raised her as one of its own. She didn’t speak a word of English when she arrived.

“My mother never finished high school, and she was very, very keen that all her kids, but particularly the girls, should finish their higher education” and be independent, Javid said. All six siblings finished high school and college and have tried to honor their parents’ memories in the work they do, she said.

Javid went on to get a doctorate in educational leadership, with a focus on the human-software interface, doing her dissertation on the impact of technology on learning. That, combined with her upbringing in a charitable family, exposure to poverty in Iran, and promise to her parents not to forget and to do something about it, inspired her to start Mona Foundation. She launched Mona before going on to teach for about two years in the University of Washington’s software systems department.

She then joined Microsoft in 2001 as an instructional designer, then became readiness director. In 2007, she joined Avanade as senior vice president-global learning and talent management, then became SVP-talent acquisition and integration. She left Avanade in 2017 to join Mona full-time in 2018.

“I’m about working myself out of a job,” joked Javid. “Now we have a wonderful team in place,” including a chief operating officer, Laura Baerwolf, and three other full-time staff. The team works out of a modest office off Bel-Road Road decorated with myriad photos of smiling students and adults in programs Mona supports.

“I feel very proud that Mona Foundation is one of the leading technology-driven nonprofits in our sector, really, because we are 100 percent managed through the best platforms there are,” Javid said. That
"I knew that for the organization to sustain its work and to take it to the next level that we really needed to build the organization as a business in a way."

includes using Salesforce for donor management and other platforms that allow Mona to generate the analytics it needs to make informed decisions.

The foundation four years ago also started an endowment, which now has about $2 million and total assets at the end of 2021 of $4.3 million.

EXAMPLES OF SCALE AND SUCCESS

Mona Foundation has numerous success stories, all detailed in its annual reports online, but one project Javid is especially fond of, perhaps due to her mother’s advice to “never forget,” is a project in an area of India where poverty is widespread in urban slums and remote rural villages, where many parents are illiterate, and families live under tarps or cardboard.

Mona was approached in 2017 by its project partner there to start a tiny one-room school to begin to teach 30 to 40 children in grades K through 8 the skills needed to eventually transition into the broader school system. The initial $3,000 investment paid for the school, a teacher, books, supplies, and T-shirts for each child’s school uniform.

Five years later, Mona is supporting 100 such classrooms in that region, extending the reach of the partner, Study Hall Educational Foundation in India, and further scaling its work through children entering government schools. Thirty-seven schools were added last year alone.

The one-room schools now serve more than 3,000 children across six districts of Uttar Pradesh, according to Mona’s 2021 annual report on the SHEF project. The schools also are hubs of community transformation, holding meetings for mothers six or seven times a month, where a teacher and counselors train mothers on basic health and hygiene, teach them about domestic violence, child marriage, and other topics, and connect them with community services to help.

“As government schools closed during the pandemic, enrollment at the centers increased,” the report said.

“This was made possible by SHEF’s ‘Digital Saathi’ program in which qualified teachers were trained to use computers and cell phones and provide online instruction using Digital Study Hall lessons,” the report said.

The Digital Study Hall got its start in 2010 through a partnership of Microsoft Research India, SHEF, and Mona. Microsoft, with SHEF, piloted a program to leverage technology in a way to scale strong curricula from private schools and share it for free with underserved schools across a broad region, Javid said.

The technology for the program then consisted of a cell phone, TV, and video camera to record teachers’ lessons.

A Princeton University computer science professor who worked with Microsoft Research India at the time and with SHEF, reached out to Mona to mediate the trio’s partnership, in which Mona agreed to grant SHEF $10,000 to buy the recording equipment and begin building a digital library of great curricula.

“Ten years later, the digital library that started with that $10,000 investment became what is now known as Digital Study Hall Online,” Javid said.

When COVID hit, its benefit was scaled immensely, with students able to access lessons remotely.

In 2021, more than 652,000 users accessed Digital Study Hall Online’s instructional library, enabling thousands of students in closed government schools to continue their education online, according to Mona’s annual report.

It’s that kind of impact for little cost that impressed Wilson of The Office fame.

“The great thing about Mona is the money is only spent on these programs, and it really makes an impact,” he said. ■