

PASADENA STAR-NEWS

Monday, September 26, 2005 ♦ www.pasadenastarnews.com

50¢
plus tax

Monday Business **A13**
Movies **U2**
Opinion **A16**
Our World **A10**
Television **U14**

Local nonprofit spurs soy crop production in Afghanistan

By Marshall Allen
STAFF WRITER

PASADENA — Nutritionist Steven Kwon is flipping through pictures from Afghanistan, where he is orchestrating a nationwide project to plant soybeans that could save the lives of the country's malnourished women and children.

Kwon is executive director of the Pasadena-based nonprofit Nutrition Education International and the pictures, taken in late July, show leafy green soy plants that he says are thriving in 10 of the 12 provinces. NEI (www.nei-intl.org) worked with local farmers and Afghan officials at the regional and national level to plant the seeds in April.

'Where else do you get to write out a check and three or four weeks later see beautiful pictures of green leaves where it was once barren?'

Paul Corvino, businessman and philanthropist

In some pictures, locals wearing traditional robes stand among soy plants that are up to their chests. These plants will provide much-needed protein when they are harvested and processed.

"That brings hope to the nation," Kwon said quietly. "We are so happy to see these kinds of pictures."

The NEI efforts crossed a crucial barrier this summer, when nearly \$40,000 was raised to send six threshing machines to farmers for the October harvest.

Now, the NEI team faces a bigger challenge. They must raise \$3 million to ship and install a ready-made and portable soy processing plant in the country. The fund-raising component is a new hurdle for NEI, which has been financed thus far by about \$30,000 of Kwon's money and \$70,000 from others.

Beneath Kwon's gentle demeanor is a drive to meet the nutritional needs in

Please turn to **SOY / A6**



Staff photo by GREG ANDERSEN

STEVEN KWON of Nutrition Education International calls the soybean the "wonder bean" because of its nutritional value.



LA.COMCONFIDENTIAL: Hot gossip! The blog's on fire: www.LA.com/Blog

www.pasadenastarnews.com

© 2005, San Gabriel Valley Newspaper Group
Printed on 100 percent recycled paper.

DAILY



SOY

Nonprofit funds crop in Afghanistan

Continued from A1

Afghanistan, where one in five children die before age 5 and one in six women die during childbirth. Kwon, 57, already has a day job as a senior nutrition scientist at Nestle USA in Glendale. And NEI, which he founded in 2003, is gaining momentum.

The soybean project faces a time crunch imposed by nature's steady growth and the upcoming planting cycle. Among other things, Kwon must coordinate logistics to harvest and process the current crop; seed and equipment donations from various companies; training local farmers thousands of miles away; and negotiations with the highest levels of the Afghan and U.S. governments to ensure the long-term viability of the project.

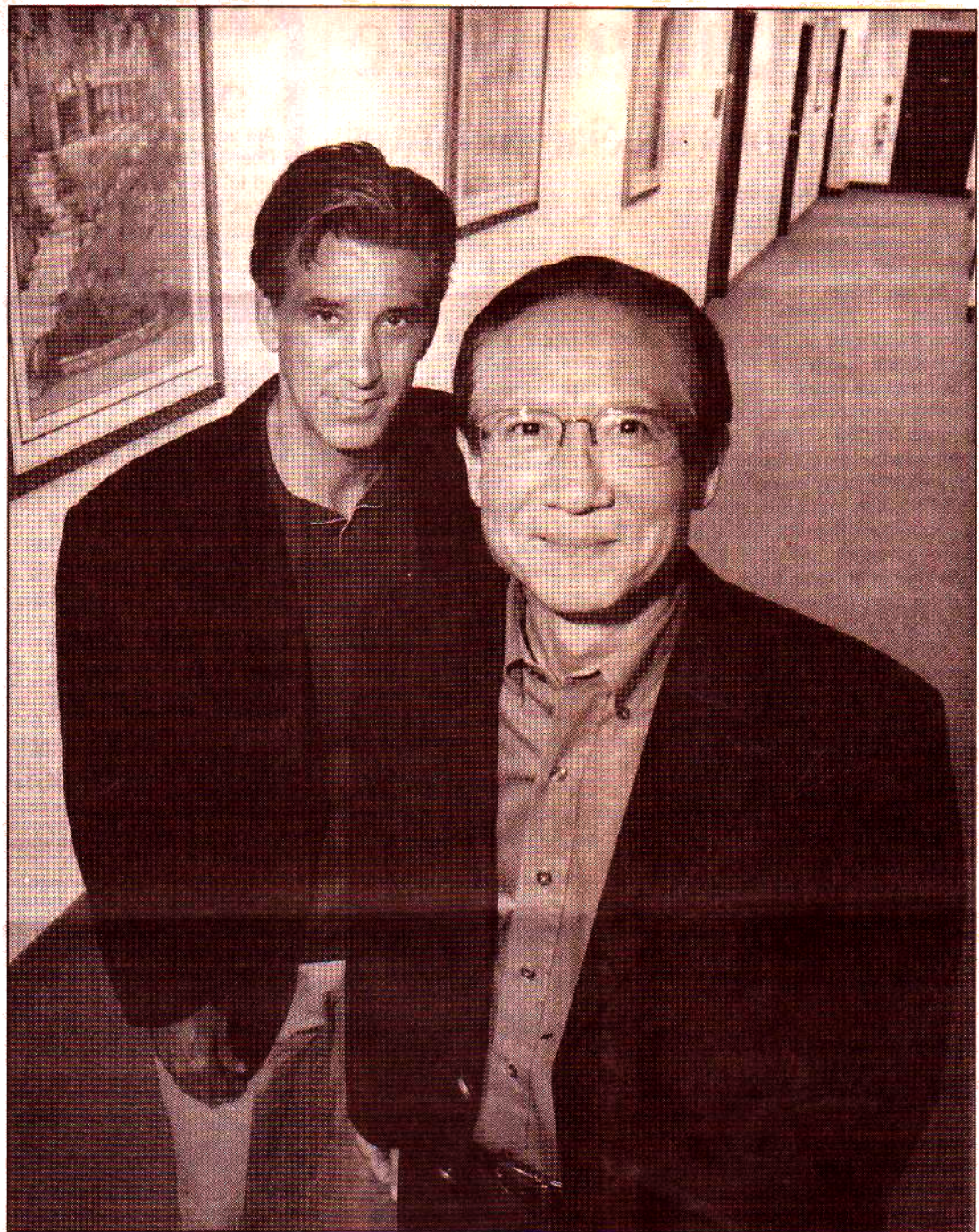
Kwon's project is especially noteworthy, according to experts familiar with it, because it's a humanitarian effort led by one man that's reached the highest levels of government.

Kwon had no previous connection to the country but felt compassion for the suffering people after a May 2003 visit. Now, his soybean initiative is being considered as part of a national agriculture development plan in Afghanistan, said Miriam Nawabi, commercial and trade counsel for the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C.

In addition to the nutritional benefits, Nawabi said Afghan officials hope the soybeans can become commercially and economically viable so they can provide an alternative to the country's most notorious cash crop, the opium poppy. A recent United Nations report shows that in 2005 poppies are being cultivated in about 20 percent fewer acres in the country, but the existing plants have higher yields. Total poppy productivity was reduced by about 4 percent from 2004 to 2005, Nawabi said.

Soybeans are part of a greater plan to reduce the dependence on poppies, Nawabi said. But what makes soy unique is its much-needed nutritional benefits, she said.

Dr. Leroy Hansen, an NEI board member and president of Insta-Pro International, an Iowa-based company that



Staff photo by GREG ANDERSEN

BUSINESSMAN and philanthropist Paul Corvino, left, has teamed up with Steven Kwon and Nutrition Education International to help introduce soybean crop production in Afghanistan.

makes the soy processing plants, said that soybeans are inexpensive and nutritious but they cannot be eaten raw. The current crop will be roasted, but future harvests must be processed so they can be turned into foods for people and livestock. Hansen estimated that one processing plant could feed about a million people a day.

Hansen is one of many expert volunteers who have joined Kwon's effort. Sierra Madre resident Paul Corvino is an important recent addition to the NEI board. The 48-year-old businessman and philanthropist is a former executive at the New York Times and America Online who currently runs a real-estate holding company and finances movies.

Corvino will be a spokes-

man for NEI and said he will soon launch a campaign to raise funds. He said he has always given to charity, but he has never been more excited about a project. With NEI, he sees tangible results for the money he's invested, he said.

"Where else do you get to write out a check and three or four weeks later see beautiful pictures of green leaves where it was once barren?" Corvino said.

While NEI launches its fund-raising effort, officials have also held meetings with the U.S. Agency for International Development, which networks and finances multiple non-governmental organizations in Afghanistan.

Scott Christiansen, senior agricultural development adviser for USAID in Washing-

ton, D.C., said there are many aspects of the NEI project that intersect with the agency's goals and make it competitive against other proposals. Corvino's pledge to raise money for NEI could help the process, Christiansen said.

"If you have other partners who are bringing resources to the table you get the attention of the mission," Christiansen said.

USAID generally matches dollar-for-dollar the money raised for different projects, up to a certain threshold, Christiansen said. NEI officials hope the agency can double the money they raise.

Marshall Allen can be reached at (626) 578-6300, Ext. 4461, or by e-mail at marshall.allen@sgvn.com.