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THE AFGHAN JOURNAL



CONNECTING COMMUNITIES · CELEBRATING HERITAGE

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UPSKILLING

WOMEN IN ST. LOUIS

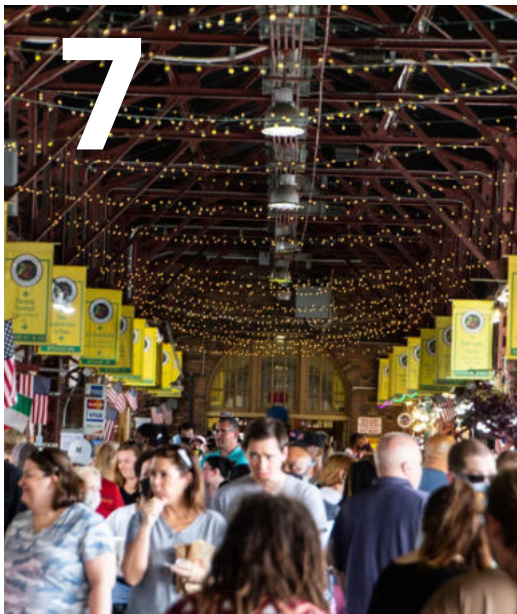
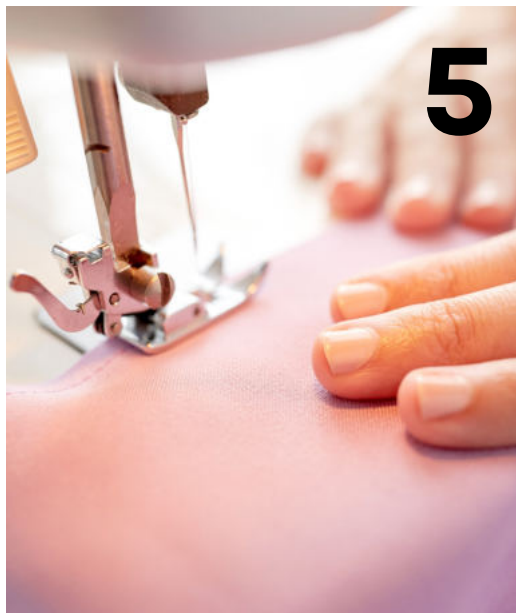
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**EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY
WE JUST HAPPEN TO CAPTURE A THOUSAND AT ONCE**



THE AFGHAN JOURNAL

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AFGHAN SUPPORT PROGRAM



Welcome to The Afghan Journal, a publication of the Afghan Support Program at the International Institute of St. Louis.

The Afghan Journal is a monthly publication rooted in the heart of St. Louis, Missouri, and created as part of the Afghan Support Program at the International Institute of St. Louis. This journal was established to serve as a trusted platform for stories, voices, and experiences that reflect the Afghan journey—past, present, and future. In every issue, we aim to capture the resilience, culture, and dreams of Afghans as they build new lives while staying connected to their heritage.

The Afghan Support Program is dedicated to helping Afghans thrive in their new home. Through access to housing support, job placement services, small business grants, legal guidance, healthcare enrollment, and more, the program offers critical resources to support families during resettlement and beyond. It also focuses on preserving culture and community through educational classes in Pashto, Dari, and Quran studies for children, as well as sewing and vocational opportunities for women. Soccer teams, driving classes, and support with school enrollment are just a few of the ways the program strengthens everyday life.

Importantly, this initiative has also supported the development of key institutions such as the Afghan Community Center and the U.S.-Afghan Chamber of Commerce—spaces where Afghan identity, enterprise, and unity are nurtured. Thanks to the collective effort of the Afghan community itself, St. Louis is now home to Masjid Abu Bakr Sediq—a proud symbol of faith and self-determination.

The Afghan Journal is published in English, Pashto, and Dari, in print and online. It exists to empower, inform, and inspire. This is your voice, your reflection, and your community. Sign up to receive future issues by scanning the QR code or visiting AfghanCenter.org.

“Together, we are not just rebuilding lives – we are building a thriving community, rooted in dignity, culture, and collective strength.” Hamdullah Hamdard, Director of Afghan Support Program

Everything You Need to Know About the Afghan Entrepreneurship Grant



The Afghan Entrepreneurship Grant offers \$20,000 USD to support individuals who want to start or expand a business. This program encourages entrepreneurs to turn their ideas into real businesses and create opportunities for themselves and their communities. It is a one-time opportunity, and expansion means that the business has already been established and is applying for the grant for the first time. Several application cycles will be announced, and we expect to receive many applications for this valuable program.

Before applying, it is important to make sure that you meet all eligibility requirements. Applicants must have a business license, and if applying from another state, they must have a valid license from that state. An EIN (Employer Identification Number) is also required. These documents are usually easy to obtain and can often be completed within about one hour using a computer. After submitting the application, applicants must also provide the required supporting documents. It is important to clearly state whether you are the owner or co-owner of the business. Businesses such as franchises or models like Amazon that require fees are not eligible; the business must be local.

Some businesses require special certifications, depending on the type of work. For example, technical fields like plumbing may require official licenses. It is recommended to obtain these certifications before applying to strengthen your application. A strong business plan is one of the most important parts of the application. Applicants must clearly explain how they will use the grant and how their business will operate.

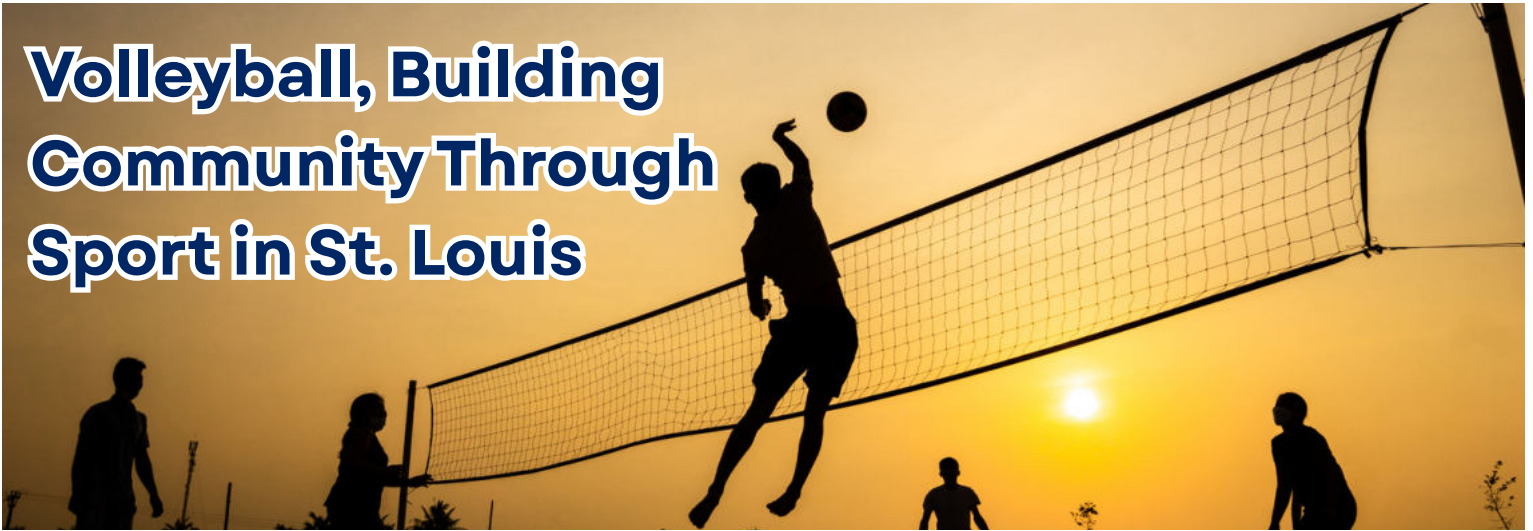
This includes daily activities, products or services, and future goals. A detailed plan helps reviewers understand your idea and its potential for success. After applying, it is helpful to prepare for Pitch Day. Applicants should practice presenting their ideas clearly and confidently. Since time is limited during the pitch session, good time management is important. Answers should be clear, short, and focused.

For 2026, eleven grants will be awarded. Applicants must have entered the United States after August 2021. Afghan applicants from across the country are eligible, but they must be willing to relocate to St. Louis, Missouri. The program also provides strong relocation support, including help finding housing, covering three months of rent and one month security deposit, and paying utilities such as electricity, gas, water, sewer, and trash for three months.

In addition, participants receive household furniture, essential items, and \$50 ALDI gift cards per person, along with city bus tickets. The program also supports long-term success by helping participants find employment and connecting them to job opportunities. Women can benefit from sewing classes, and both men and women can join volleyball programs that strengthen community engagement.

The application process includes submission, review by a committee, shortlisting, and final presentations in front of judges who select the winners. To stay updated, follow Afghan Support Program on social media or visit afghancenter.org/grants

Volleyball, Building Community Through Sport in St. Louis



For the first time, a girls' volleyball team made up of Afghans has been formed in the St. Louis area. This team represents an important milestone for the Afghan community, especially for young women who are interested in sports and community engagement. The team is composed of participants from various backgrounds, bringing together girls with different experiences and perspectives. Through this team, they will have the opportunity to expand their social networks, build friendships, and increase their understanding of one another.

The official launch of the girls' volleyball team took place on March 6, 2026. During the event, supporters and partners gathered to celebrate this new initiative and its positive impact on the Afghan community. The Afghan Support Program funder, Jerry Schlichter, praised the initiative and emphasized the importance of sports activities for Afghan girls and women. He noted that programs like this encourage participation, confidence, and community engagement among people living in the region.

According to him, when young people participate in sports and community activities, they not only improve their skills but also develop leadership, teamwork, and communication abilities. These experiences can help build stronger communities and contribute to a more stable and supportive society. Initiatives like this, he added, also help make St. Louis a more vibrant and flourishing city for everyone.

This volleyball initiative is the result of a strong partnership between several partners,

Jerry Schlichter, the funder, International Institute of St. Louis, the U.S.-Afghan Chamber of Commerce, the players themselves, and Welcome Neighbor STL. The leadership of the International Institute of St. Louis emphasized that these partnerships make it possible to create programs that benefit the Afghan community and support newcomers as they build their lives in the United States.

In addition to the girls' volleyball team, there is also a volleyball team for boys. The Afghan Support Program encourages participation from both teams and provides opportunities for them to practice and play volleyball four hours every Saturday throughout the year. These regular activities allow participants to stay active, develop their athletic skills, and spend time together in a positive and supportive environment.

The main goal of the Afghan Support Program is to strengthen the community by launching initiatives like the volleyball program. In the past, the program also successfully organized a soccer initiative. During that program, teens and youth played soccer for more than 20 hours at the TOCA Soccer Center in St. Louis. It was not only a great opportunity for players to enjoy the sport, but also for families to meet each other, build friendships, and expand their networks.

The volleyball program is run by the U.S.-Afghan Chamber of Commerce, with funding from the International Institute of St. Louis and support from Welcome Neighbor STL. If you are interested in joining the program, please contact sayedis@iistl.org



Sewing Classes, Creating Skills and Opportunities

St. Louis is a city of opportunity for many communities, particularly for diverse and newly established groups. One of these opportunities is the sewing classes offered through the International Institute of St. Louis at the Afghan Community Center. These classes provide a supportive environment for women who want to learn practical skills and explore ways to earn income.

The sewing classes are held four hours, twice a week, and are supported by a dedicated team of staff members. This arrangement makes the program especially accessible for women who might otherwise find it difficult to attend classes while managing family responsibilities.

On March 6, 2026, the International Institute of St. Louis celebrated the graduation of 12 participants who successfully completed the full course.

During the program, the participants learned both theoretical knowledge and practical sewing skills, gaining the confidence and ability to produce clothing and other items. By the end of the course, these women had developed valuable skills that can help them become more economically independent.

The graduates are now better equipped to use their sewing skills to earn income and increase their self-sufficiency. For many participants, sewing offers a practical and accessible way to begin earning money in a relatively short time. The program provides hope and opportunity for women who are seeking meaningful work and a way to contribute financially to their families.

Blake Hamilton, President of International Institute spoke at the event and highlighted the importance of partnership and collaboration. He encouraged graduates to consider working together or partnering with local businesses, friends, and neighbors. Such partnerships can help strengthen small businesses and contribute to the growth of the local economy.

During the graduation ceremony, Hamdullah Hamdard, the program director, also emphasized that completing the course is only the beginning of the journey. He encouraged the graduates to continue practicing their skills and to think about starting small businesses, even from their homes. With dedication and creativity, he explained, these skills can grow into sustainable sources of income.

Another important part of the program is the childcare space provided for participants' children. This area is equipped with toys, books, and other resources designed to keep children engaged while their mothers attend class. A trained caretaker supervises the children, organizing activities such as storytelling and reading, ensuring they remain safe and entertained.

The sewing program runs for 12 weeks at the Afghan Community Center, located at 3611 S Grand Blvd Suite 105, St. Louis, MO 63118. Women who are interested in learning sewing skills and becoming part of this supportive community are encouraged to apply.

For more information or to join the program, please contact sayedis@iistl.org or visit the center. Additional details are also available at afghancenter.org.



Mir Maftoon is a respected folk singer and musician who was born in 1964 in Bazgir village of Eshkashem district, Badakhshan, where he continues to live. He is widely known for his deep connection with traditional music and for his mastery of the dombra. From a very young age, people were drawn to his voice and musical talent. Even without formal music education, his strong passion and natural ability helped him become a prominent and beloved artist among local communities. Maftoon believes that meaningful lyrics, a heartfelt voice, and the ability to emotionally connect with listeners are the most important qualities of a true musician. Throughout his long musical journey, his close friend and fellow artist Haji Malik Parwani has supported him for more than thirty years. Their friendship and collaboration have played an important role in sustaining Maftoon's artistic path and performances.

Music runs deeply in Maftoon's family. His grandfather was a singer who performed using the daf, and his father was also a singer. As the only son in the family, Maftoon naturally followed the musical tradition of his ancestors. Today, he is continuing this legacy by guiding his own son, who has also shown interest in music. He proudly says that the love and support of the people shaped him into the artist he is today.

Maftoon completed high school in his village and later worked in government service for nearly a decade. Despite his professional responsibilities, he remained dedicated to music by performing at weddings, local gatherings, and cultural celebrations.

Many of his early recordings were captured on cassette tapes and shared widely across northern Afghanistan and even reached listeners in other parts of the country. He is skilled in several traditional instruments, including the dombra, harmonium, and ghaychak. His music blends the unique sounds of Badakhshan with influences from Central Asian cultures, creating a rich and diverse musical style.

Maftoon gained broader national recognition after participating in the fourteenth season of popular Afghan Star music competition, which helped introduce music talents to wider audiences across the country. He has also performed internationally, including concerts in Europe, Arnhem in Netherlands, and appearances at regional music events in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 2001, he received an international cultural award honoring his role in preserving northern Afghanistan's musical heritage.

Despite periods when music was restricted in the country, Maftoon remained committed to his art. He performs songs in Persian, Uzbeki, and Pashto, and in recent years has collaborated with various national and international singers. One of his well-known songs "Ajab dunayst..." gained millions of listeners online and became widely shared across different regions. Through lyrics inspired by poetry, personal reflections, and everyday life, Mir Maftoon continues to spread messages of peace, resilience, and cultural pride, keeping the musical traditions of his homeland alive for future generations.



A Taste of Community at Soulard Farmers Market

Photo credit: petersbigadventure.com

Soulard Farmers Market is one of the most vibrant and historic marketplaces in St. Louis. For many community members, especially newcomers, the market feels very similar to the traditional bazaars they remember from their home countries.

The Soulard Market is a famous St. Louis landmark. It is located south of the downtown area. Named Antoine Soulard, an early French settler, the market opened in 1979. Local framers came to the market in horse-drawn wagons. They put their wagons in a circle, with the horse in middle, and sold their goods to people living nearby. Soulard's wife, Julia, gave the land to the city of St. Louis in 1842, seventeen years after her husband's death. She said that the land must always be used as a public market. The market building was built in the 1840s and enlarged with a market hall in 1865. A tornado destroyed the buildings in 1896. The market was soon rebuilt with new sheds. It was later improved, and by 1929 the main building and its four wings were completed. The main building was inspired by the design of a building in Florence, Italy.

One community member recalled the first time they heard about the market. While living in Pennsylvania, some friends visited their home and began talking enthusiastically about a place they called "Mandawi," referring to a lively marketplace where people could buy everyday goods. They explained that in St. Louis they often shopped for groceries and other items at a farmers market known as the Soulard Farmers Market. Visitors to the market can find a wide variety of items.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are among the most popular products, along with juices, meats, and other food items. In addition to food, many vendors also sell jewelry, handmade goods, and other unique products. Because of this variety, the market is a convenient place where people can find many of their everyday needs in one location.

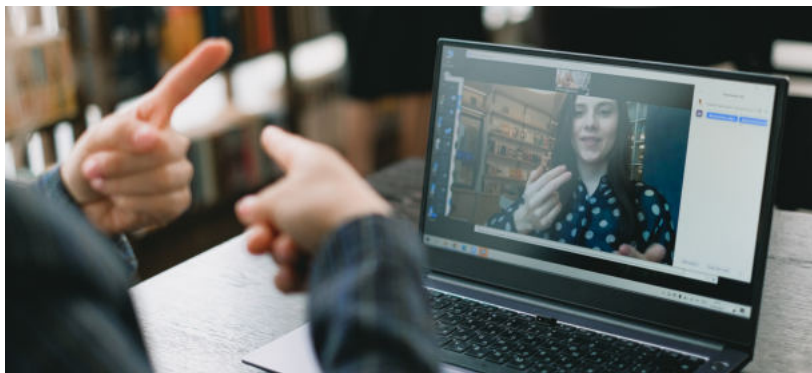
The market is especially busy on Saturdays, when it opens in the morning and continues through the afternoon. During this time, the market becomes filled with shoppers, vendors, and visitors exploring the many stands and stalls. For many people, a trip to the market is not just about buying food, it is also a social experience.

When you walk through the market, it is very common to meet friends, family members, or colleagues. Conversations start easily, and people often stop to greet one another or share recommendations about where to find the best products. This sense of connection makes the market feel welcoming and lively.

Because of its energy and friendly atmosphere, Soulard Farmers Market often reminds visitors of traditional bazaars. The sounds of conversation, the colors of fresh produce, and the busy movement of people create an environment that feels warm and alive.

Sources:

Food in Missouri, A cultural Stew by Madeline Matson, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London



Language Learning and Opportunities

The third week of April is recognized as a time to reflect on the importance of the English language. Learning English has always been an important topic and sometimes a serious concern for many members of our community, especially for those who had limited opportunities to study or practice the language in their home countries. Since 2021, our community has continued to grow, bringing new experiences, responsibilities, and challenges. Our children are enrolled in schools, youth have gained access to colleges and universities, and many adults work daily from morning to evening. At the same time, some community members, particularly women who spend most of their time at home, may find fewer opportunities to practice English regularly.

A large portion of our community, especially children and teenagers, have strong chances to develop their language skills through school and social interactions. However, for others, learning English remains a significant challenge. An important question to consider is: what happens when a person can communicate comfortably in English? First, English is the language of everyday life in St. Louis. We use it constantly, while shopping, speaking with neighbors, attending medical appointments, or communicating with schools and workplaces. Strong language skills allow individuals to navigate daily responsibilities with confidence and independence.

Language ability also creates access to economic and professional opportunities. Individuals who speak English can pursue employment, start businesses, and participate more actively in workplaces such as schools, factories, offices, and service industries. Communication becomes smoother and more meaningful.

For example, when calling to schedule an appointment, individuals no longer need to wait for an interpreter and can manage their needs independently. This independence builds confidence and encourages greater participation in society.

Every community member has the opportunity to improve their English skills. Ignoring this need may only make challenges more complicated and long-lasting. The best approach is to begin learning as soon as possible and take advantage of available resources. Organizations such as the International Institute of St. Louis offer valuable support through educational programs. Their education department provides not only citizenship preparation classes but also English courses at different levels, including GED preparation and practical language instruction for daily life.

In addition to in-person programs, online platforms such as Engen provide flexible learning opportunities with materials ranging from beginner to professional levels. Partner organizations, community centers, and public libraries across St. Louis also offer ESL classes, book reading groups, and conversation sessions that create safe spaces for practice and improvement. Community colleges are another excellent resource, offering structured ESL programs designed to help learners progress academically and professionally.

Ultimately, learning English opens doors to opportunity. With language skills, individuals can become entrepreneurs, teachers, social workers, skilled professionals, and active community leaders.

Sources:

<https://www.iistl.org/education/>

<https://www.slpl.org/>



Panjshir Province is one of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan, located north of the country's capital, Kabul. Known for its breathtaking natural beauty, strong cultural identity, and historical importance, Panjshir holds a special place in the hearts of many Afghans. The province is divided into seven districts and includes more than 540 villages, where communities live closely connected to nature, traditions, and one another. Panjshir officially became an independent province in 2004 after separating from Parwan Province. This administrative change helped strengthen local governance and allowed more attention to be given to development, education, and infrastructure in the region.

Geographically, Panjshir is surrounded by several provinces that contribute to its regional importance. It borders Baghlan Province and Takhar Province in the north, while Badakhshan Province and Nuristan Province lie to the east. To the south, the province connects with Laghman Province and Kapisa Province, and to the west it meets Parwan once again. This strategic location makes Panjshir a natural bridge between central and northeastern Afghanistan.

The province consists of seven districts: Anaba, Bazarak, Darah, Khenj, Paryan, Rokha, and Shotul. Each district has its own unique landscape, with green valleys, flowing rivers, and mountain villages that reflect the traditional lifestyle of the people. One of the most remarkable features of Panjshir is its stunning natural scenery. The province is famous for its deep valleys, clear rivers, and towering mountains that are part of the Hindu Kush range.

These natural resources not only provide beauty but also support agriculture and livestock, which remain essential sources of income for many families. Beyond its geography, Panjshir is widely recognized for its strong sense of unity, resilience, and cultural pride. Families maintain close relationships, and community gatherings, celebrations, and local traditions continue to play an important role in everyday life. Hospitality is highly valued, and visitors often experience the warmth and generosity of local residents.

Toot Festival is another summer event where people come together to eat toot, play music with the daf, and perform Qarsak (a local traditional dance). Besides this, reading books such as the Shahnama, Rumi's Masnavi, and Jangnama during the fall and winter seasons is traditionally popular among local residents. Such events are led by elders and youth as well. Like other places, Panjshir has been an interesting picnic destination for everyone and is amazing for tourists.

Between 2001-2021, education and development have gradually improved, with schools and local initiatives helping young people pursue brighter futures. Many youth from Panjshir were motivated to continue their studies and contribute positively to their communities, both within Afghanistan and abroad. Overall, Panjshir Province represents a combination of natural beauty, cultural richness, and community strength. Its peaceful valleys, proud history, and determined people make it a symbol of hope and resilience.



My Journey at Saint Louis University

By Sara Mosavi; photo credit: slu.edu

Hello, my name is Sara Mosavi, and I am a student at Saint Louis University (SLU) studying Nuclear Medicine on the pre-dental track. Choosing to attend SLU has been one of the best decisions I have made in my life. SLU is not only a strong academic institution, but it is also a welcoming and supportive community. The students and professors here are kind, intelligent, and always willing to help. Being surrounded by people who value education and personal growth inspires me every single day. I truly feel grateful and proud to be part of this environment.

As a young Afghan, I understand the many pressures that we often face. There are financial challenges, family expectations, cultural norms, and sometimes even language barriers. Many of us carry responsibilities at a young age, helping our families while also trying to focus on school. It can feel overwhelming. I know how difficult it can be to prioritize education when there are so many other concerns and obligations. However, I want to speak directly to all young Afghan girls and boys: your education must always come first. The journey is not easy. There will be long nights of studying, difficult exams, moments of self-doubt, and times when you question yourself. There may be sacrifices you have to make, whether social, financial, or personal. But despite all of this, education is absolutely worth it. Education opens doors to opportunities that once seemed impossible. It empowers you with

knowledge, strengthens your independence, and gives you the confidence to make decisions about your own future. It also allows you to become a voice for your community and to contribute in meaningful ways.

For Afghan youth, especially those who feel pressure from family or community expectations, I want to say something important: putting yourself and your education first is not selfish. It is necessary. Back home (Afghanistan), many young people, especially girls, do not have the same access to education or the same freedom to pursue their dreams. Here, we are fortunate to have opportunities. We must take advantage of them, not only for ourselves but also for those who cannot. When we succeed, we represent our families, our culture, and our community.

I hope my journey at SLU can inspire others to believe in themselves and follow their dreams. College is not only about getting good grades. It is about discovering who you are, building resilience, forming lifelong friendships, and gaining the tools to make a positive difference in the world. Stay focused, stay determined, and never underestimate the power of education. The challenges are real, but the rewards are far greater.

* Sara Mosavi, a medical student at Saint Louis University (SLU) has published numerous articles in the Afghan Journal.



Celebrating Creativity and Innovation in St. Louis

Every year on World Creativity and Innovation Day, people around the world are encouraged to think differently about how they live, work, and create. Celebrated on April 21, this day reminds us to reflect on what we do, how we do it, and how we can improve our ideas and actions to enhance the quality of life for ourselves, our neighborhoods, and our communities.

Creativity and innovation are not only important for businesses and technology, they also play a powerful role in education, community engagement, and personal growth. For families and young people in St. Louis, there are several local places where creativity can be explored in fun and meaningful ways.

One of these places is The Magic House, a well-known children's museum that offers interactive programs designed to inspire imagination and learning. Through initiatives such as the MADE for Kids makerspace, children and families can experiment with building, designing, and creating using different materials and tools. These activities encourage curiosity and help children learn through hands-on experiences.

Another creative space in the city is Macklind Maker and Play. This community makerspace gives children and families the opportunity to explore art, engineering, and creative projects together. The environment encourages experimentation and collaboration, allowing participants to turn their ideas into real projects while developing new skills.

Families can also explore creative learning opportunities through the St. Louis Public Libraries.

In addition to providing books and learning resources, many library branches offer programs related to technology, art, innovation, and education for children and teenagers. These programs create opportunities for young people to discover new interests and develop valuable skills in a supportive environment.

Creative spaces like these provide much more than entertainment. They help children and young people develop important life skills that will benefit them in school, future careers, and everyday life. Participating in creative activities helps children develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, learn about technology, innovation, and design, build confidence, teamwork, and communication abilities, and express their ideas through art, engineering, and creative projects.

These experiences are especially valuable for young people who are interested in fields such as science, art, entrepreneurship, and technology. By exploring creativity in a fun and interactive environment, children can discover their passions and build skills that will support their future success. As World Creativity and Innovation Day reminds us, creativity is not limited to artists or inventors, it is a skill that everyone can develop. Communities that support creative learning help inspire the next generation of thinkers, problem-solvers, and innovators who will shape the future.

Sources:

<https://www.magichouse.org/made-home/>

<https://www.macklindmakeplay.com/>

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-  www.afghancenter.org

