
Elwood man brings New Year back with a bang

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Children join in the fun of Nawroz in Kabul. Photo: Reuters

In January, just days before Russell Field turned 50, a friend presented him with a huge mid-life challenge. Children join in the fun of Nawroz in Kabul.

The friend, Kylie Mohseni, a Melbourne marketing consultant, was looking for an event manager to organise the Afghan New Year, or Nawroz, celebrations in Kabul.

Mrs Mohseni's husband, Jahid Mohseni, is one of three Melbourne brothers who own Afghanistan's first commercial television and radio stations.

Mr Field, of Elwood, and his wife, Suzanne Olb, run an events company, Explosive Media, that has organised more than 10 New Year's Eve celebrations at Southbank.

Mr Field took a few days to think before saying he would go.

"It was around the time of my 50th birthday. I felt it was time for something a little bit different and a bit of a challenge," he says.

The gamble paid off. Almost four years since the ousting of the Taliban, which banned music, dancing and women leaving their homes alone - and Nawroz - 100,000 people flocked to Tapia Maran Jan, a hill in Kabul. There they enjoyed kite flying and a kite fighting competition, picnics, food stalls, a DJ playing Afghan pop and classical music, and dancing.

Mr Field says the atmosphere was friendly with plenty of family groups.

"I just think the response shows that they want entertainment, they want events," Mr Field says.

"There used to be cinema, theatre; there used to be concerts. Then came the Taliban and all that was stopped. And then the bombing of Kabul. Now celebrations have to be re-established. There's a whole generation not used to these things."

The centrepiece of Mr Field's plan was a fireworks display. But it was called off when a military aircraft was unavailable to transport the fireworks. There was also concern that militants would cause trouble.

But other celebrations he planned are going ahead, including six concerts over the next two weeks featuring classical and pop music. Colourful street banners have been erected "to add an atmosphere of celebration to city streets".

Mr Field said his time in Kabul was like doing six months' work in six weeks. "Recently I have heard advocated that people should do something new from time to time," he says. "Here I probably average 10 new things in a day."

Stages and sound systems, easy to find in Melbourne, are in short supply in Kabul. Potholed roads, mud, snow and poor telecommunications also do not help. And Mr Field relies on an interpreter for all negotiations.

He says many government offices suffer from power blackouts and a culture of elaborate meetings. "Letters are still delivered by hand as rows of computers sit idle," he says.

Russell Field with some of the happy crowd. Photo:Ash Sweeting

Mr Field has also been struck by "the smiles, the warmth of the people" and "the incredible beauty" of the snow-covered mountains circling the city.

"When I am asked if I will come back, I reply I am not sure, but they laugh and knowingly say I will return," he says.

Nawroz

Nawroz means "new day" and celebrates the equinox _ the coming of spring. Also celebrated in Iran and by ethnic Kurds.

It is part of the Persian solar calendar, which the Taliban ban ned, in which this is year 1384, taking its start from when the Prophet Muhammad left for Medina.

Traditions include buzkashi, where two teams of horsemen fight over carrying a headless goat to a goal.

Lavish meals include samanak, a dessert made of wheat and sugar, taking two days to prepare.