

Women, Afghanistan, the Future

By Roz Rustigian

I want to introduce you to Nadia, a young lady from Afghanistan with whom I, along with some of my best friends, spent an evening dining together.

I had met her for the first time in the fall of 2007 when she invited me to join her for dinner and a breaking of the fast during Ramadan. While her natural tendency to lead was apparent on that night, I was far from prepared for the young woman who whisked into my kitchen recently and took command of the dinner operation like a five star general a mere two years later. But let me not get ahead of myself...some background is in order.

Nadia is a smart, resourceful and capable young woman who is here in the United States for four years of rigorous undergraduate work at a nearby university in Rhode Island. Nadia is now in her senior year and has achieved academic recognition by attaining a spot on the Dean's list in each of her years of study. A campus activist, she serves as a Student Advocate and as an Admission's Ambassador while she tutors and is President of the Muslim Club. She does all this as she handles five full credit courses a semester.

But there is even more that distinguishes Nadia, and the story behind her current success and her hope for a bright future is equally impressive.

Nadia is from the city of Herat in Afghanistan. She is in the United States through the visionary and herculean efforts of a woman – Paula Nirschel – who was profoundly disturbed by the events of 9/11 and by the horrifying oppression of the Afghan women – an oppression that finally emerged into the national consciousness here in the States after that terrible day.

Paula recognized that education is the way out of darkness and that education is the finest and best way to empower women individually and collectively. Against all odds and while being told that her mission was impossible, Paula persevered: She garnered the necessary institutional commitments, raised enough private funds, and plunged through horrendous and bureaucratic Visa maze.

She founded the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women (ieaw.org) and in 2002 she brought four Afghan girls to the US for a full four-year education at four different institutions.

My favorite part of the story, as Paula tells it, is that she was being told by the State Department that her goal was impossible at the exact moment that the plane carrying those first four women was taking off from Afghanistan bound for the United States.



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States. Four years later, Laura Bush presided at the graduation of those eager pioneers as the commencement speaker at Roger Williams University in the spring of 2006.

There are now 42 women in the US at colleges and universities throughout the country. Participating schools include Mt. Holyoke, Tufts, Sweet Briar, the University of Richmond and Simmons just to name a few. They have all conquered English as a second language, achieved honors in their academic endeavors and won the hearts and support of a vast and growing network of women and men alike in the United States. One of the first young women actually told Katie Couric on the Today Show that she had full intentions of becoming the President of Afghanistan!...and she said it quietly and firmly.

BUT BACK TO NADIA

Nadia and her comrades in learning and cultural exchange have entered into an agreement with the Initiative that they will return to Afghanistan to take high level government and industry jobs that will contribute to the advancement and future well being of their country and of the women in their country.

Another Aghan girl in the program, Marzia, a student currently studying in North Carolina, expresses the goals of the Initiative beautifully by saying "I believe that to educate a man is to educate only one person, but to educate a woman is to educate a family. Women make up more than half of Afghan society and are the ones who shape the minds and lives of future generations."

Within the nurturing arms of a learning environment, Nadia has become fully empowered in her journey here and brings to her interpersonal relationships the easy charisma of a cultural ambassador with an acutely insightful mind and a trained intellect. At the dinner party I had envisioned that we would cook together. Instead, she took full control, prepared everything for my guests, became the photographer for the evening and then entertained the assembled adults with the grace of a seasoned hostess.

AND THE ICING ON THE CAKE?

Four of the women in the party happened to all be in the

kitchen after the meal. In the dining room were Nadia and our two male guests. One, Mike, is a high powered financial innovator; the other, Richard, a seasoned criminal attorney. These two men could not be further apart politically and both are lawyers with a "take no prisoners" manner of insisting that their way is the right way. The topic was Afghanistan and the war: voices were raised.

And there was Nadia...refusing to reveal her hand or be compelled to agree, polite in every way, listening acutely, making points as she saw fit.....smiling, comfortable and confident. It was a sight to behold for a young girl who can not leave her house in Afghanistan without a male relative or a husband.

There is a long waiting list of qualified girls wanting to have similar opportunities to grow intellectually and emotionally. Nadia, her pioneer companions and these aspiring candidates back home are vitally needed to shape the future of their country.

Currently thirteen girls have completed undergraduate studies. Five are in graduate school studying international relations, business and political science. Five have high level government or NGO positions in Afghanistan.

If you would like to learn more about the Initiative, please go to the web site at www.ieaw.org.

One person can change the world...now what will these 55 young women do?

Roz Rustigian, Board Member

The Initiative to Educate Afghan Women, founded 2002

Roz Rustigian began her career as an Operations Analyst in the Hotel Division of Prudential Insurance Company's Real Estate Department in Newark, New Jersey, following graduation from Connecticut College, and being one of the first three women to attend the Cornell University Graduate School for Hotel Administration. Now the owner of V. George Rustigian Rugs, a store specializing in the sale and service of handmade Oriental rugs and wall-to-wall carpet she has also twice been President of the Oriental Rug Retailers Association of America.

Ms. Rustigian currently sits on the Boards of the RISPCA and the Rhode Island Donation Exchange Program. She is on the advisory board for the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women and is a fund raiser for AIDS Project RI a division of Family Service.

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