

TEACHING WHAT SHE



# LIVES

BY TERESA HENDRIX

SINCE THE FALL OF THE TALIBAN in Afghanistan in 2001, ethnic studies Professor Maliha Zulfacar has been leading a cross-continental life.

She spends the academic year at Cal Poly, teaching classes about global ethnic conflict and geopolitics. She spends her summers teaching social science at Afghanistan's Kabul University.

Electricity, heat and running water remain sporadic there, walls are still pockmarked with bullet holes, books are in woefully short supply, and female students risk kidnappings if found alone outside the university gates.

Despite the challenges, Zulfacar wouldn't trade her summers for the world. "The students are like sponges – so thirsty for knowledge. They will follow you around, asking for books and asking how to learn," she said.

She welcomes students to her Afghan classroom, as many as will fit, some sitting on the floor. In summer 2005, two students were young women she was unable to forget. Both 19, Ulker and Farida had been forced out of middle school when the Taliban closed all girls' schools. When U.S. troops entered, the two had just managed to finish high school.

That summer, before she returned to Cal Poly, Zulfacar promised to find a way to help the girls continue their studies.

The chance came last November when the Afghan Ambassador to the United States, Said Tayeb Jawad, visited Cal Poly for International Education Week. Jawad and Cal Poly President Warren J. Baker discussed ways to help Afghanistan educate its students; it was decided that Ulker and Farida would be the first to come. With help from U.S. Rep. Lois Capps' office in securing visas, the two Afghan students arrived in December.

Their education could serve as a model for other U.S. universities, Baker said. "Cal Poly has an opportunity to reach out to a new generation of Afghan students in a novel way, to



Professor Maliha Zulfacar shares a hug with Ulker and Farida of Afghanistan.

help them make up important lost ground," he said. "If just 50 universities were to bring two Afghan women students to the United States, it would make a difference."

The two students initially lived with Zulfacar before being placed with host families. They are studying for a required English competency test and hope to enroll in Cuesta College, with the ultimate goal of transferring to Cal Poly.

Taking in the two young women is just part of Zulfacar's personal mission. Since March 2002, she has been working with Afghanistan's Education Ministry. She also organizes fund-raisers for Afghan schools and has made a second documentary about her native country. Funded by a grant from the Open Society Institute, she's now training and equipping Kabul University students to conduct a new oral history project.

"Afghanistan's population is 90 percent illiterate, and not much has been done to preserve the experiences of ordinary people during the past three decades of constant warfare," she explained. "We are trying to gather as much material as possible about the perseverance of the Afghan people – what the ordinary people have gone through, what they have been exposed to, how they managed to survive."

She will be back in Kabul again this summer – despite the increasing concern of her grown children. "My son told me once, 'If anything happens to you, they will replace you with another teacher. But we only have one mother – we can't replace you,'" she said.

*Cal Poly has established the Afghan Educational Outreach Project fund for the two Afghan students. Donations may be made payable to the Cal Poly Foundation and mailed to Cal Poly, University Advancement, Room 111, Heron Hall, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407. □*