



BY TERESA MARIANI HENDRIX

FARIDA AKBAR AND ULKER BATOOR were bright elementary school girls in northern Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power in the 1990s and shut down their schools. But the two never gave up on their dream: a college education.

Now, thanks to a unique coalition of faculty, administrators, a U.S. Congresswoman and private donations from Cal Poly supporters who also didn't want to give up on that dream, the two have earned Cal Poly agribusiness degrees.

Akbar and Batoor are the first graduates from Cal Poly's Afghan Educational Outreach Program and Fund – though administrators past and present hope they won't be the last.

"If every university in the United States reached out to engage its community to foster the education of two Afghan women," said President Emeritus Warren J. Baker, "imagine the impact these women would have upon returning to Afghanistan."

The story of how Akbar and Batoor made their way from Kabul to the December commencement in Mott Gym has

touched a growing circle of Cal Poly supporters.

The pair studied at home between the time the Taliban shut down their elementary schools and U.S. forces arrived and re-opened education to girls and women. By summer 2005, the 19-year-olds were among dozens of young women sitting on the floor in a bullet-pocked Kabul University classroom where Cal Poly Social Sciences Professor Maliha Zulfacar was teaching. (Zulfacar, an Afghan native and former Kabul University professor, has returned to Kabul to teach most summers since the entry of U.S. troops.)

Kabul University still had no running water, only sporadic electricity, and no women's restrooms. Armed security guards and walls kept students and faculty relatively safe on campus. But Taliban guerillas were kidnapping female college students off the streets, trying to intimidate young women and the families sending them to school.

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Longtime Cal Poly administrator Dan Howard-Greene and his wife, Paula (front), with Farida Akbar and Ulker Batoor.

Still, Batoor and Akbar were determined to get a college education. Zulfacar said they stood out in her classroom. "Farida and Ulker would follow me to talk to me after class," she said. "They were hungry for learning."

Zulfacar promised that if she could find a way, she would help them continue their studies. A meeting with then-President Baker and Afghan government official Said Tayeb Jawad that autumn provided the chance. Jawad asked Baker about the potential for a partnership between Cal Poly and Afghanistan. Baker and Zulfacar suggested bringing Akbar and Batoor to Cal Poly as a pilot program.

U.S. Representative Lois Capps and her office jumped in to arrange student visas. Cal Poly set up the Afghan University Outreach Program and Fund and found private support.

Akbar and Batoor arrived to stay in Zulfacar's home on Christmas Day 2005. With her help, they enrolled as students nearby at Cuesta College, where they completed CSU general education requirements to transfer to Cal Poly.

When Zulfacar was named to serve as Afghanistan's ambassador to Germany from 2006 to 2009, Akbar and Batoor went to live with the family of longtime Cal Poly administrator Dan Howard-Greene. His wife, Paula, who holds a Cal Poly teaching credential, tutored Akbar and Batoor in math and English while they attended Cuesta. The two young women arrived on campus as transfer students in 2008.

Now, bachelor's degrees in hand, Akbar and Batoor want to share what they learned with developing nations. They're looking for work with non-government aid agencies (NGOs) serving undeveloped countries in Eurasia and Africa.

Akbar, who minored in water and irrigation technology



and interned with Capps' office in summer 2010, has already returned to Kabul to look for work.

"I cannot give up hope on my country," she said before leaving. "I want to help the farmers by creating some kind of international market for the unique fresh fruits and dry fruits grown in Afghanistan. I also want to work with the government to help provide our people with clean drinking water and make use of rain, snow and well water for agricultural products."

Batoor minored in food science and nutrition. Last summer, she married a fellow Cal Poly agriculture grad. Now they hope to find work together with international aid agencies, to bring U.S. agriculture techniques to developing countries, including Afghanistan.

"I want to go back to Afghanistan – it is my home and my family is there," Batoor said. "But I also want to continue my education and work and live in many places around the world." □

EDUCATING A LOST GENERATION

CAL POLY AFGHAN OUTREACH PROGRAM
GRADUATES ITS FIRST TWO STUDENTS