
Faculty Feature

Sept. 11, 2001, changed the lives of thousands of Americans, and Maliha Zulfacar is one of them.

Zulfacar, who has taught in Cal Poly's Social Sciences Department for the past 10 years, is known for her courses in sociology on ethnic studies, global ethnic conflict, global immigration movements, and the political and gender impacts of globalization.

Born and raised in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, Zulfacar was a sociology professor at Kabul University before fleeing the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 for Germany. In 1985 she settled in California to raise her children, joined the Cal Poly Social Sciences Department in 1992, and returned briefly to Germany to earn her doctorate in sociology in the mid-1990s.

On Sept. 10, 2001, her son was attending the New England School of Law and her daughter was just starting her freshman year at Smith College. Zulfacar was preparing for the fall term at Cal Poly.

Then the events of Sept. 11 struck. Zulfacar found herself in demand as a knowledgeable spokesperson for a country most Americans knew little about. She *See Zulfacar, page 8*

A Life Revisited

An Afghan woman goes home

By Teresa Mariani Hendrix



Maliha Zulfacar today
Photo by Jeff Greene

Zulfacar

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was interviewed on CNN, on NPR, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, and by international newspapers, and was invited to speak at panel discussions and universities around the country about Afghan history, Afghan ethnic groups, the Taliban, and Afghan women.

Her documentary film, "Guftago: Dialog with an Afghan Village," was shown outside the classroom. (The film was made in the summer of 2000 when she joined an international delegation of women touring Afghan mountain country held by the Northern Alliance.)

And in March 2002, she was invited to return to Kabul to consider a position as deputy minister for higher education in Afghanistan's new government to help restructure the country's higher education system.

After 23 years abroad, it was a different kind of homecoming.

Landing in Kabul

The first thing that struck Zulfacar as her plane landed in Kabul was the physical destruction. "You could see fields of twisted metal and leftover planes and tanks everywhere."

The airport is a striking example of what has happened to Afghanistan after two decades of civil and ethnic and turmoil. "When I left in 1979, the Kabul

airport was a modern airport with marble walls and floors. It had music and fountains and restaurants. It was a place where people would come in the evenings to gather and have dinner.

"Now, there were no windows. No doors. No electricity or running water. Everything was shattered. The floor was gutted and pitted. It was a shell."

As the daughter of a diplomat, Zulfacar freely admits she led a life of privilege as a child in the Afghanistan of the 1950s and '60s. She had private dance and music instructors. At student events sponsored by her all-girls high school, she played music, participated in sports, and danced. "It was not much different than American high schools," she says.



Top: Zulfacar, age 5 (front, center), with her family in front of their Kabul home

Above: Zulfacar's high school portrait and with classmates (center), 1965

Photos courtesy Maliha Zulfacar

"I played basketball. I rode my bicycle. And," she smiles, "I was the first female to drive a car in Kabul, at age 15."

After graduating from high school, she was also the first Afghan woman to pursue a college education in the United States, where she earned her bachelor's and two master's degrees – one in sociology and one in community planning.

"Having said that, that doesn't mean that all girls in Afghanistan had such privileges," she cautions. "But 30 years ago, I was not spit at on the street for driving or riding a bicycle. I was not stoned. I was not ridiculed. I did not suffer the punitive discrimination that millions of Afghan girls have suffered in the past decades."

As her taxi drove through the ruined streets toward her hotel, she asked to be taken to her old neighborhood. On what was once her family's property, three houses were left standing in the rubble, home to Afghan refugees displaced by bombing and ethnic warfare.

"They were just damaged houses," she says, "like thousands of other houses in Kabul."

Reconnecting

For the next four weeks, while touring the city and meeting with students, professors, government leaders, returning expatriates, and ordinary people, Zulfacar stayed at the Kabul Intercontinental Hotel.

"The elevators didn't function. The electricity was sporadic. The

floors were all damaged. There were very few walls without bullet holes. The windows were all shattered. I was fortunate to be in a room with running water. Every morning, the women guests on the

floor would take turns washing in my bathroom.

"But in the midst of all that," Zulfacar says, "I was relieved to feel that the dark era was

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Above: A Kabul reunion with a shoemaker Zulfacar knew in her childhood. He still has his cobbler's stand on the same street corner.

Right: The refugee family living in Zulfacar's childhood home

Photos courtesy
Maliha Zulfacar



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somehow behind Afghanistan. It was an opportunity to come back and be hopeful, to believe you could start something."

After initially touring Kabul, Zulfacar and other returning Afghans were overwhelmed at how much the country and its economy had been damaged.

"Afghanistan was always a mountainous country, a poor country, but a functioning country. Ninety percent of the people were subsistence farmers, but the country had a self-sustaining economy," she says.

Yet despite the destruction, Zulfacar says, "Life was still going on. Shops were open. People were out on the street. There was music playing. There were weddings. There were funerals. And there was a sense of hopefulness everywhere – a sense that things were going to change."

The sociology professor found that the residents of Afghanistan "were very positive, very uplifted. Every person I spoke to had bigger dreams and visions than before. I talked to female students and they don't just want an education. They want to be very important decision-makers. They want to be part of history. Their biggest desire is to rebuild their country.

"I was struck," Zulfacar marvels, "by how much the country has



been destroyed, but what has not been destroyed is the spirit of the people of Afghanistan."

The Future

In the end, Zulfacar decided to return to California and Cal Poly. She and her children are U.S. citizens. She enjoys teaching at Cal Poly. But most important, she says, "I feel like I have two homes. I have lived 23 years of my life here, and another 23 years of my life there. I consider myself a global citizen. I have a sense that I can serve both countries best by being here."

Since her March trip, Zulfacar has spoken at Purdue University, Indiana University, the University of Arizona, and Georgetown. She is working on a second documentary, using footage she shot in Kabul. She is also working to set up a sister city relationship between San Luis Obispo and the

Maliha Zulfacar in her Cal Poly office
Photo by Jeff Greene

Afghan mountain village of Bazarak, where she filmed "Guftago."

In June she initiated a textbook drive at Cal Poly to benefit Kabul University. The drive gathered 500 boxes of books donated by students and faculty here. She's currently working with Susan Currier, associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts, to raise funds for a day care center at Kabul University for children of students and staff there. And she is increasingly traveling the United States to speak about Afghanistan.

"In light of Sept. 11, I feel like the role I should play is that of a bridge between the most privileged country in the world, the United States, and Afghanistan, one of the poorest, most ravaged countries in the world," she says. "I think it's a very rewarding role."