BY TERESA MARIANI HENDRIX

AND

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 dreams: 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 agriculture degrees.

Aklar and Batoro 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.

“Taliban regimes 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 and made their way from to the December commencement at 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 reopened 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 Malika Zulficar was teaching. (Zulficar, an Afghan native and former Kabul University professor, has returned to Kabul to teach most summers since the entry of U.S. forces.)

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 guerrillas were kidnapping female college students off the streets, trying to intimidate young women and the families sending them to school.

and were determined to get a college education. Zulficar said they stood out in her classroom. and would follow me to talk to me after class,” she said. “They were hungry for learning.”

Zulficar 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 Zulficar suggested bringing and 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.

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

When Zulficar was named to serve as Afghanistan’s ambassador to Germany from 2006 to 2009, and 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 and in math and English while they attended Cuerna. The two young women arrived on campus as transfer students in 2008.

Now, bachelor’s degrees in hand, and 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.

who minored in water and irrigation technology and interned with Capps’ office in summer 2010, has already returned to 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.”

minored in food science and nutrition. Last summer, she started 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,” 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