

UCSC Fulbright Student helps Afghanistan homeland

by Margaret Courtney

Two years ago in his home in Afghanistan, Zaki Mubarez wrote, "I want to be a good servant, to help the poor people of Afghanistan" on his Fulbright Scholarship application.

Now, with U.S. still bombing his country, the Fulbright student is already helping 1,000 schoolchildren in his homeland while a full-time student at UCSC.

His chiseled jaw is no longer covered by the Taliban-required beard. He wears jeans and nice t-shirts, but ditched his Afghan cap.

Mubarez is putting his diplomacy and international politics training to immediate use by giving talks about Afghanistan and, Mubarez raising money for Setara Primary school in Kabul where his mother teaches. He raised \$400 for notebooks and pens for 1,000 schoolchildren and 50 teachers.

"It's a big pride for me that I can help them," he says.

A benefit music concert June 11 raised another \$447, which will be sent to the school for more supplies: chalkboards, chairs, doors and windows, all of which were destroyed in the wars.

Afghanistan is now, arguably, the poorest country in the world. During the Soviet invasion, 1.5 million Afghans died. Under the Taliban the country was terrorized" Mubarez says, "schools were burned. One third of the people, mostly the highly educated – the brain of Afghanistan -- left in exile. Millions were wounded disabled or lost their families, homes. Afghanistan's police and army were destroyed.

Mubarez is one of the first Fulbright students from Afghanistan in 25 years. Following U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and collapse of Taliban rule in 2001, the U.S. State Department in 2004 restarted the Fulbright Scholarship program for 20 Afghan students to study at U.S. universities.

Out of hundreds of Afghan students applying, Mubarez and the other winners were chosen for their leadership potential and commitment to improving cross-cultural relations

He has already spent 2-1/2 years training as a diplomat in Afghanistan's State Department before coming to, first Omaha, Nebraska, and now Santa Cruz.

"Tank you so much for every-ting!" he tells new friends, in his deep rolling Afghan accent. He extends warm handshakes with a disarming smile.

It's hard to believe that, not so long ago, these same friendly hands also punched out a Taliban policeman who tried to arrest him in a neighborhood street for carrying a contraband DVD.

Before Taliban rule, Mubarez says, Afghan people was very Westernized. Women wore miniskirts. But under Taliban they were forced to wear head-to-toe burkas and forbidden to work outside the home.

Education was forbidden to girls. His mother, a teacher for 28 years, told her family "It's really painful for me to see the Afghan kids raised up uneducated and illiterate."

So she taught classes secretly in their home, despite the Taliban's investigation of her, and arrest of his brother. "I admire her braveness," Mubarez says.

Mubarez was himself arrested by the Taliban's religious police three times, once in his Senior year at university for not wearing a turban and for criticizing the Taliban during Politics class. "All the time I argued against the Taliban!" He recalls. "They took me to a military base, hit my back and the soles of my feet, saying 'why are you talking against the Taliban?'" They put him in a basement room with more than 100 prisoners sitting on the floor, so crowded they could not stretch their legs out.

Two other arrests were for not wearing his cap and his beard being too short. During his third arrest he miraculously escaped.

He slipped out during one of the 5 daily required prayer times. Just as he climbed over the prison wall, he spotted his family on the nearby street who were inquiring for him at the prison entrance.

From his hiding place in the dark he called out to them to leave their bicycle behind. They hid their bicycle in a ditch for him, then left. He waited awhile, then ran for the bicycle, hopped on and rode away for his life. The prison guards had no vehicle to chase him.

Other prisoners told him later that another man tried to escape that same night but was caught and punished. The prisoners heard him screaming all night long.

The Taliban "were animals," he says. "They were not even human." Their brutality only hardened his resolve to fight back – but instead of fists, this time with political power.

Encouraged by the heroism of his parents, Mubarez dedicated his career to rebuild his country by working for the Afghan

government as a diplomat, "to captivate and motivate help from especially U.S. and Western developed countries," he says

He believes the best way to help his people is to attract both exiled Afghan intellectuals, and the investments of multi-national coalitions.

Afghanistan needs help in reconstruction, security, education, and economics, medicine, politics, he says, but its greatest need is "bringing back higher educated people."

Now at UC Santa Cruz he has improved his English, studies international relations, international law, political theories, and loves the up-to-date library resources. "In my country most of the books are from 30-40 years ago."

Although computers and the internet are old hat for him, electronic banking and streetcorner crosswalk buttons, are new. "We don't have those in Kabul traffic!"

Despite a recent threatening letter to his family from the Taliban about his Western education, Mubarez is following his father's advice -- "no matter how many times you fall, get up again until you achieve your goal."

Good advice for his country as well.

Afghanistan has been invaded many times, Mubarez says, but never conquered, because Afghan people are the bravest people in the world.

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