

From the issue dated November 4, 2005

A Student From Kabul Finds Opportunity at Brandeis

By SARA LIPKA

Nadia Behboodi, of Kabul, Afghanistan, spent several days in September traversing the streets of Waltham, Mass., in search of a quiet apartment where she could study. Without meaning to, "I became so popular in the city," she laughs.

A Fulbright recipient and master's-degree candidate in sustainable international development at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Ms. Behboodi now nods yes when passers-by stop to ask her if she found a place. "It's really funny because they remember me!" she says.

Ms. Behboodi, 28, is not used to such recognition and support from her neighbors. Instead she has struggled to create opportunities for herself. Her family sought refuge in Pakistan in the early 1990s, but she later returned to Afghanistan alone to finish her bachelor's degree. Ms. Behboodi then earned an M.B.A. in Pakistan and began working with the United Nations back in Kabul. She monitored the organization's Millennium Development Goals for Afghanistan, and later tracked health and education programs for Unicef.

The U.S. Department of State re-established academic exchanges with Afghanistan in 2003 in an effort to strengthen ties with the Muslim world, and Ms. Behboodi first heard of the Fulbright Program when a friend brought her an announcement in a magazine. "I went to the embassy and I asked the procedure," she says. When she was informed of her selection, she continues, "I really didn't believe it was me." Fulbright placed her at Brandeis because her interest in an international-development degree matched the Heller School's offerings.

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Determined to continue her studies, Ms. Behboodi negotiated with her parents for six weeks before they granted her permission to accept the Fulbright grant she had been offered. "They were saying, 'You have a bachelor's, you have a master's, you have a good job in Unicef, why are you going to America? What will people think?'" she says. But, she told them, "I'll go and learn more things and come back here and work for this society." Her parents insisted that she get married, but she resisted. "That is something that I don't really want right now. I have my own objectives." Ms. Behboodi's parents, with whom she is in regular contact, are now pleased that their daughter is here, she says.

Before arriving at Brandeis, Ms. Behboodi spent seven weeks with fellow Fulbright grantees at the University of Pennsylvania studying English and attending seminars on adapting to American culture. At the Heller School, her grant pays her tuition, as well as \$1,515 per month for living expenses. Her rent takes up about half that amount.

Ms. Behboodi, one of 25 Afghan Fulbright students currently in the United States, plans to stay at Brandeis for two years to complete her master's degree. She hopes to return to Afghanistan in the summer of 2007 to work either with the United Nations, on women's issues, or with the Afghan government, on economic development.

"To be contributing to the education of someone who is going to be able to go back home and make a difference is truly rewarding," says Susan H. Holcombe, associate director of academic affairs for the Heller School's sustainable-international-development program.

In the United States Ms. Behboodi is still surprised when cars stop to let her cross the street and continually fields questions about the Afghan perspective on the American presence there. (City dwellers tend to value American aid, she says, but rural villagers think the United States is there to dominate Afghanistan and destroy Islam.) "It's really, really important to have good relationships with foreign countries and international communities in order to be developed," she says. Coming to study in the United States, she adds, "is the most exciting story of my life."

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