



AGAINST ALL ODDS

Afghan women find hope in the freedom to dream big

STORY BY DIANE STOPYRA | ILLUSTRATIONS BY KAILEY WHITMAN

They call it a graveyard of empires.

The forbidding peaks and deep river gorges of Afghanistan have witnessed the collapse of five tumultuous regimes in four decades. The most recent coup, last August, saw a U.S.-backed republic dissolve like snow on the base of Nushaq mountain. As feral Taliban jihadists descended, women suffered the loss of their dignity, their access to education, their ability to leave home without a male chaperone, on penalty of death.

While a horrified world watched this nightmare unfold online, Scott Stevens, director of UD's English Language Institute (ELI), recalled an encounter on the east bank of the Nile River in 1979, when a disheveled girl holding a baby goat yanked on his camera case. He could take her photo—for a price. The 21-year-old Stevens had spent all of his savings on this trip, but as he handed over his last few dollars, the girl's expression relayed one thing: *You owe me*.

"This interaction has haunted me, because I *did* owe her," Stevens says now. "I knew that this girl, in that part of Egypt, would grow up with no more than a sixth-grade education. Her photo has been on my desk ever since, reminding me of the debt we owe half the world's population, to ensure that girls and women have opportunity for education, opportunity for a future."

Last summer, Stevens recognized one potential pathway for making good on this debt. In a news article, he read about 148 female college students who'd engineered their own escape out of Afghanistan, evading bullets and bombs before boarding a Spartan military transport. With the full support of

UD's administration, Stevens spearheaded an effort to help, establishing a collaborative of new academic homes around the country for the most vulnerable women.

Now, 14 of these students, the largest cohort, are reclaiming their lives as Blue Hens. Since arriving at UD in December, they've participated in a year-long program meant to prepare them for undergraduate matriculation. While the ELI has facilitated language and cultural education of students from 150 countries over the course of 40-plus years, this effort marks the first intentional focus on displaced war victims.

Known as the Women's Initiative in Service and Education, the WISE program includes intensive English-language coursework, individual tutoring and specialized workshops on financial literacy, time management and more. For everything else, there is Rebecca Boyle, WISE program coordinator. On call 24/7, she liaises with a partnering resettlement agency and counsels students, providing companionship, rides to the doctor, even personalized shampoo recommendations.

"I strive to convey: *You are safe here, you are welcome*," Boyle says. "But I am learning as much from these women as they are from me. They will change the world."

In the following pages, three of UD's Afghan students share their stories—of fear, faith and, perhaps most crucially, freedom.

For Stevens, these stories speak to a mission 43 years in the making.

"I think of her often," he says of the child from his picture. "I can imagine her children cheering on our UD Afghan scholars. And I can imagine their mother grumbling, with a wry smile: 'About time.'"



A SONG OF FREEDOM

From the peak of Forty-Girl Mountain overlooking Kabul, Hajar Ahmed* gazed upon symbols of progress in Afghanistan's capital city: universities, shopping centers and restored gardens lush with apricot trees and rose bushes. A high school student at the time, she'd made the hourlong ascent to celebrate the Afghan new year, Nowruz, which coincides with the start of spring. The sky was clear—residents had stowed their coal-burning furnaces for the season—and a friend encouraged her to take advantage of this moment and all its promise by making a wish for her future.

Perhaps inspired by the 40 girls who, according to Afghan legend, flung themselves from the side of this mountain one century ago to avoid slavery at the hands of a tyrannical government, Ahmed made an empowered choice of her own: She wished for knowledge, for fulfillment and for a scholarship to a university where she might achieve both.

"From a very young age, I had this idea of dreaming big," she says. "I was not afraid."

Ahmed was born a displaced person in Iran, the country where her parents fled after escaping the extremist Taliban movement in the 90s. When she was three, her grandmother's health deteriorated, and the elderly woman decided she wanted to die in her home country. The family moved back to their native Afghanistan, a nation no longer under jihadist control.

In Kabul, Ahmed grew up with many siblings (although she prefers not to reveal how many, she uses both hands when listing them). Coming of age in their patriarchal society, she and her sisters were expected to play house, to imagine themselves as mothers and wives. But Ahmed gleaned no joy from pretending to be something that, to her, held little aspiration. Instead, she pleaded with friends to join her for rounds of jozbazzi, a more physical game involving stones and a dirt court.

"I value family," she says. "But you are not meant to stay with your parents for 15 or 20 years, move into your husband's house, give birth and die without doing anything for yourself."

In her family's two-room home, as she grew older, Ahmed managed many tasks. She helped her mother make the daily bread in an outdoor clay oven, and she prepared jam from a crop of



apple trees in the backyard. When extended family visited for the Islamic holidays known as Eid, her father sometimes slaughtered a sheep for the meal (never a cow, as "that was for rich people"), while she kept a watchful eye on rambunctious, kite-flying cousins.

Between volleyball games and posting to Instagram, a teenage Ahmed developed a passion for learning. She joined a cultural group organized by a government official, which allowed for reading original poetry and essays in front of progressive community members. With a scholarship, she also took English language classes at a local educational center, eventually becoming so fluent, she taught these classes herself. The income helped support her family—a necessity, since partners in a sheep-selling business regularly swindled her illiterate father.

Ahmed's older brother, conditioned to believe women belong at home, repeatedly asked their mother: "Aren't you afraid of your daughter's big dreams?" But this matriarch encouraged her girls to pursue a life beyond cleaning and childrearing, a life more robust than her own.

Ahmed took the message to heart. After a three-month application process, she received a scholarship to Bangladesh's Asian University for Women (AUW), an institution dedicated to the empowerment of female leaders. The dream she'd manifested on top of a mountain just a few years before finally felt within reach.

"I watched each of my peers marry another illiterate man," she says. "But I am different. I see education as a powerful weapon."

The month Ahmed was set to leave for this new opportunity, the Taliban unleashed a wave of reprisal killings and regained Kabul. Her home, once the site of happy celebrations and kite flying between apple trees, became a prison. As the streets turned to bedlam, she traded her jeans for a floor-length dress from her wardrobe (anything shorter might now get her killed) and did something she'd never been inclined to do before, something prohibited under Taliban rule.

"I started singing," she says. "Singing while crying."

With the words of Afghan songwriter Dawood Sarkhosh in her head—*My land, so tired of persecution; My land, anonymous and silenced; My land, suffering without a cure*—Ahmed planned her escape. Coordinating with University officials, she and AUW peers around the capital chartered seven city busses and, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, made their way to the Kabul Airport.

"My mother pushed me and encouraged me, and even my brother believed I should take this chance," she says. "They told me: 'Even if you don't make it, God forbid, at least you will have tried.'"

Ahmed and the others spent four days circling the airport grounds, navigating through a stampeding crowd 10,000 strong. At one point, bullets pierced one of the busses and, when a suicide bomb killed 170 civilians, some passengers witnessed the flames. The students slept—and prayed—in shifts.

Sensing their window of opportunity would soon close, Ahmed and her classmates decided to fling themselves from the proverbial mountain, risking everything to approach a Taliban-controlled gate and plead their case. Unmoved, a guard fired his gun into the air as warning. All seven buses turned around at midnight, and the women returned home.

"I told myself: 'You are stupid to have faith in this situation,'" Ahmed said.

But the following morning, the women steeled themselves for another attempt. This time, just before dawn, U.S. soldiers escorted the students onto a Spartan military transport. Only then did relief untangle the fear and anger knotting inside Ahmed. She called her brother, who had not been eating or sleeping in her absence, to let him know she had survived—her big, frightening dreams still intact.

Now, as she adjusts to life at UD, Ahmed worries daily about the safety of her community, especially fearful that her sisters and other girls, as young as 15, will be forced into marriage. But she did not escape that reality to lose herself in grief.

When she's not working toward a degree in physical therapy, Ahmed spends her free time finding threads of cultural connection. Now in Newark, she and three of her fellow evacuees experiment with what they call AA, or



YOU ARE NOT
MEANT TO
STAY WITH
YOUR PARENTS
FOR 15 OR 20
YEARS, MOVE
INTO YOUR
HUSBAND'S
HOUSE, GIVE
BIRTH AND
DIE WITHOUT
DOING
ANYTHING FOR
YOURSELF



I AM
GOING
TO FIND
MYSELF
HERE.

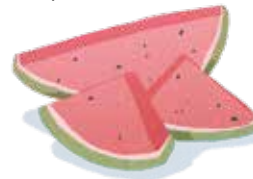
Afghan-American cooking. To a soundtrack of Justin Bieber, a sensation even in the Middle East, they infuse English-muffin pizzas with Afghan spices or bake a type of flatbread known as bolani. The dough Ahmed still makes by hand, but it's not quite the same as the clay-oven version she learned from her mother as a girl.

Nothing, she realizes, will ever be the same.

Despite this heartbreak, Ahemd has hope—hope that the Taliban might self-destruct under the weight of its own evil, and that she might someday see her family again. In the meantime, she'll continue video chatting with her parents and siblings every few weeks, sharing with them odd perceptions people in this strange new land hold about her home: "They ask if we have shopping malls and even doorbells in Afghanistan," she says. "Of course we do. My country developed rapidly, and I believe this would have continued... if only we'd been allowed peace."

Last spring, Ahmed once again observed another Afghan new year. This time, she could not climb the mountains of her beloved Kabul, and she could not celebrate with family. But she has not given up on making wishes for her future.

"I believe no one is created without a purpose," she says. "I still have faith I can accomplish something positive with my life. And I still have faith in humanity."



LONGING FOR PEACE

Ferwadin Serat can still taste the fresh watermelon she shared with her sister on a bank of the Kokcha River. She can still picture the snapping fish that chased them out of the water. And she can still hear their laughter, rising above the rapids.

It is one of many fond memories Serat carries from her days growing up in this river valley, surrounded by fields of saffron, fruit trees and roaming livestock on her family's land, roughly the size of the UD campus. The recollections bring a sense of inner peace, which, coincidentally, is

said to be a side effect of lapis lazuli, the precious, celestial-blue stones mined from this fertile earth for thousands of years.

But not even magical stones can ward off evil.

For the 20 years that the U.S. occupied Afghanistan, Serat's northern province withstood violent attacks from the Taliban. The evenings brought a cacophony of mortar shelling that drowned the sounds of the river. In the mornings, Serat braced for the insurgents who regularly climbed onto the roof of her school building to protest the rights of girls receiving an education. Due to overcrowding, she endured these disturbances from inside an adjacent tent that served as a makeshift classroom, often hiding under a table with fellow pupils or abandoning written examinations to flee to safety when the shouting turned menacing.

The war took a toll on Serat's family. A relative had been forced to marry a Taliban soldier at the age of 17. Then there was the beloved 22-year-old cousin killed by a bomb at his Afghan university in 2016. She learned about his death while watching news broadcasts, a cherished ritual that provided a conduit to the world outside her mountain-ringed province. In her grief, Serat feared a similar fate, but she clung to hope.

"I still had belief in my future," she says. "I still dreamed of what my life could be."

Serat persisted with her lessons in the tent, getting soaked during the rainy season and nearly passing out in the summer heat, her requisite burqa making the latter especially difficult to endure. Upon graduation, she became the only one of her peers to enter a university, studying in a less remote part of the same province. But when she returned years later, a college graduate with a degree in literature, the realities of her conservative region set in. As a woman, her work options were severely restricted.

Fortunately, Serat's parents were relatively progressive. Her mother had also managed to obtain a university degree, and she served as a teacher while secretly dreaming of life as a performer. Around the house and garden, she sang the lyrics of Farhad Darya, a formerly exiled music composer and peace activist considered the Elvis of Afghanistan. Serat's father, meanwhile, worked

for the government's agricultural sector, teaching members of the community how to tend their land. He enjoyed his career but, when he saw his daughter consumed by sadness over her limited post-college prospects, he decided to move all five of his children, aged 14 to 24, to the more contemporary capital city of Kabul.

Even 12 hours removed from their province, the family could not escape war. Sporadic bombings executed by Taliban insurgents prevented Serat from ever fully exhaling. A music fan like her mother, she considered taking advantage of a nearby guitar class but worried that such a gathering would attract militants looking to make an example of progressive young women who dared sing in public. "Always, there was fear in my heart," she says.

Even so, Serat relished other aspects of her new life, like trading in her burqa for jeans and a smaller head scarf. She also found a rewarding job within the government's energy sector and, for one year, she basked in the feeling of a long-but-fulfilling day at work. The aromatic rice in her family's kabli pulao dish tasted somehow better knowing that her income had helped purchase the ingredients.

This brush with empowerment left Serat wanting more. Following the lead of an older sister, she and another sibling applied for scholarships to Bangladesh's Asian University for Women (AUW). With the COVID-19 pandemic raging, all three women were admitted, and they waited patiently for a return to normalcy so they could seize this ticket out of Afghanistan.

Their departure came sooner than expected.

When the Taliban wrested control of Kabul in August 2021, Serat watched from a window in her family's ninth-story apartment as her street descended into chaos. Neighbors ran from the encroaching insurgents, and two people just behind her building were killed. From her television set, a BBC news anchor narrated the unfolding nightmare, and she learned that her president had fled the country. Deep within the Arg, Kabul's presidential palace, men with automatic weapons slung over their arms snapped iPhone photos of one another sitting behind the former leader's ornate wooden desk.

"It was like being in hell," she says. "I thought: 'This is it. Everything is finished.'"



I STILL
HAD
BELIEF
IN MY
FUTURE.
I STILL
DREAMED
OF WHAT
MY LIFE
COULD BE





I WANT TO
CHANGE
MINDS.
MOST OF US
ARE JUST
LIKE YOU.
WE WANT
A LIFE
WITHOUT
RISK.
WE WANT
FREEDOM.
MOST OF
ALL, WE
WANT
PEACE.

Serat held her breath as, one by one, her mother and siblings returned from their respective jobs, having survived the pandemonium. She watched her 14-year-old sister run home from school in tears, knowing she might never set foot in another classroom. Her father paced the room, voicing the worry that regularly kept him awake at night: “What will I do if the Taliban forces one of my daughters into marriage?”

After one hour, the street turned eerily quiet. Serat’s home had lost power and water, outages that would last weeks. The female siblings spent the following days sleeping and crying, losing track of the hours as they retreated from the world.

“I felt sick,” Serat says. “Every thought, every word, every social media post—it was all about the Taliban. I called my boss and told him I was coming back to work, but he said, ‘Do you want to die? Women can no longer enter, and men with guns are standing outside the door.’”

Her parents tried to console her—“We’ve lived this life before; we can do it again”—but, for Serat, there could be no going back to a time when laughing in the street might result in death. Instead, she and her two college-bound siblings decided to risk the escape plan conceived by AUW peers, with help from school officials who’d been coordinating with U.S. military on the ground.

After an emotional goodbye to their family, the sisters boarded one of seven chartered busses to the airport. As they circled the grounds for four days, desperate strangers approached their vehicle, hoping for their own shot at a flight out, but the driver turned them away. In the middle of the night, when Serat’s mother texted for updates, she had to cut off contact—she could not risk light from her cell phone illuminating her face and drawing the attention of passing militants.

Eventually, the students made it to an airport checkpoint, where a member of the Taliban asked a designated leader to hand over a list of passengers. But, with shaking hands, this woman failed to produce the information quickly enough. The man commanded the students to get lost—they had wasted his time. For a moment, Serat saw her future crumble before her eyes. But neither she nor any of the other women moved; they had not come

this far to turn around. After a pleading intervention from the leader of another bus, the exasperated Taliban finally waved the students through.

“You cannot imagine what it is like to be face to face with one of them until it happens to you,” Serat says. “It’s indescribable.”

After a flight to Saudi Arabia, then Spain and finally Wisconsin’s Fort McCoy, a U.S. Army installation where the women spent four uncertain months, Serat is now at UD, working toward a degree in international relations. She dreams of becoming a U.N. ambassador with power to advocate for her country.

“I want to change minds,” she says. “When people ask me where I am from and I answer Afghanistan, I can read the words behind their eyes. They think maybe we are all terrorists, or that we come from a no-good place. But most of us are just like you. We want a life without risk. We want freedom. Most of all, we want peace.”

While one of Serat’s sisters is studying at New York’s Cornell University, the other has become a fellow Blue Hen. Together, the women explore UD’s campus, where they are continually taken aback by the almost pathological optimism of the student body. It’s a mentality that has rubbed off on Serat, whose water bottle bears a “Life is good” sticker.

“Sometimes, I feel like I’m 80 years old because of everything I’ve experienced,” she says. “With friends at home, we would talk only about our problems. But here, I see the students discussing their futures and their hopes. I realize that I can be happy.”

Since arriving, the women have also taken part in the activity Serat never felt safe committing to in Kabul: guitar club. On certain weekday afternoons, if you happen to stroll the halls of the University’s English Language Institute, you might just hear the gentle refrain of Farhad Darya, the same lyrics Serat’s mother once sang amidst the lush foliage of their family’s home by the water: *I am in a timely journey of wandering... far away from the skirt of Kabul River... weary hearts’ pilgrimage is calling me.*

Serat doesn’t yet know whether she’ll ever see this home by the water again, but, when she closes her eyes, she can still taste the fresh watermelon grown on her family’s land. For now, at least, this is enough.



ASSERTING HER POWER

One mild evening in the gritty Pakistan neighborhood where she grew up, 16-year-old Tamanna Salehi did something vulgar and unthinkable for a young woman: She rode a bicycle.

This was not her first offense. Salehi often paid her little brother 20 rupees, the equivalent of 26 cents, to borrow his red set of wheels. On those occasions, she made sure not to violate cultural norms too egregiously, staying on her street and never losing sight of the modest home where she shared one bedroom with her parents and three siblings.

But this day was different.

As Salehi pedaled, a neighborhood woman scolded her for careening down this path of certain moral decay and social ignominy. And she instructed the teenager to go back inside and put on a longer head scarf, one that would drape past her knees in a show of modesty and submission to Allah.

“So I rode even farther,” says Salehi, now 21, giggling as she recalls disappearing onto a neighboring street. “I wanted to prove to this woman that I can do this—I *am* doing this—and nothing bad is going to happen.”

Resistance, you could say, is built into her DNA.

In 1998, Salehi’s parents escaped the terror of the extremist Taliban movement by fleeing their native Afghanistan. They resettled in a southwestern area of Pakistan populated by fellow displaced Hazaras, members of a Persian-speaking minority community ruthlessly targeted by the militant group. Although they never studied beyond fifth grade themselves, the couple valued education—even for young girls who were routinely denied access. After starting a family, Salehi’s father committed to saving for his children’s school tuition but, since he could not work in the country without citizenship, he regularly traveled more than 2,000 miles to Kuwait, where he cooked in a restaurant for two-year stretches.

Despite this relatively progressive mission, more conservative values manifested in Salehi’s childhood home. Unlike her younger brother, she was prohibited from speaking with peers of the opposite sex, from seeing friends outside of school, even from playing outside. Her father controlled all the money in the house, often meeting requests for everyday items by dramatically shouting his thoughts on proper spending “just to show his power.” Meanwhile, her mother was not permitted to work outside the home, and “she felt dissatisfied with her life, which was so sad for me,” says Salehi, vowing, “I will not become that.”

When she began asking at the age of nine to take classes in wushu, a type of martial arts, her parents said no. Their eldest daughter jumping and kicking in front of a male instructor registered as inconceivable. But after seven years and much pleading, they finally acquiesced. Members of the community were less understanding. One woman insisted the activity is not meant for “girls with no muscles and no power.” But Salehi wore black bruises on her knees with pride.

Following high school, she dreamed of something even more shocking: higher education. To achieve her goal, her refugee status left her with no choice but to resettle in Afghanistan. Neighbors once again whispered about the dangerous independence of this young girl and the inevitable promiscuity and corruption that would befall her, should she leave her family.

“Do not think about those people,” Salehi urged her worried mother. “Think about how bright my future will be: I won’t have to be a servant for a man; I can earn for myself. Think about that moment.” Her mother would take in those words and reluctantly reply: “You are right.”

In Afghanistan’s capital, Salehi faced myriad hardships, including hostel life with sporadic water and 10 girls to a single room. Yet she felt invigorated by the vibrancy of her Kabul University campus, by her computer science courses and by a city that, unlike her own sleepy town, came to life daily at 5:30 a.m. Mostly, she felt intoxicated with freedom.

“In Pakistan, I was thinking that Afghanistan is all about war,” she says. “But then I saw the beauty



FROM A
VERY YOUNG
AGE, I HAD
THIS IDEA OF
DREAMING
BIG. I WAS
NOT AFRAID.



of Kabul. I saw how hard people work, and how the girls seek education. Even though it is also an Islamic country, it was less strict—we wore jeans and smaller head scarves. Girls and boys worked together, and young people were empowering themselves and creating chances for others to do the same. I thought it was beautiful.”

As part of her own mission toward empowerment, Salehi pursued hobbies, like skateboarding and dancing to hip hop. And, with her hijab haphazardly tucked beneath a metallic blue helmet, she took her favorite, formerly taboo pastime to a new level: She joined a club for young people interested in learning bicycle tricks. In one photo she saves on her phone, she wears a plaid shirt and jeans while standing atop a red bike. One sneaker is perched on the handlebars, the other is planted just in front of the saddle, and her arms are outstretched.

“When I’m riding, I feel free,” she says. “I feel like myself.”

In November of 2020, an act of terrorism sent shockwaves through this blissful reality. The Taliban blasted the gate of Kabul University with an explosive, allowing three gunmen to kill 32 people and wound 50 more.

The institution closed its doors for one week and, when classes resumed, undeterred scholars eagerly filed onto the geranium and cherry blossom-lined paths of campus—Salehi included. For a time, attending classes felt “a little scary,” she admits, noting that protocol for handling a future attack became part of her regular curriculum. But the experience made Salehi feel something else, too: powerful. The Taliban, she believes, fear educated women: “I told myself: I am so lucky that I am able to come to this classroom.”

The fortunate feeling was short-lived. Last August, insurgents once again entered the capital. Only this time, they took control of the city, a reality Salehi never imagined possible.

“I woke up that day and went shopping,” she says. “I even went to a restaurant with a friend. Later, everyone started saying the Taliban were all around Kabul, and on social media you saw people closing their shops. This wasn’t making any sense. A country that developed over 20 years—a country that was working—a bunch of crazy people can just come and take it? It all happened so quickly.”

Unable to return to her hostel for fear of an attack, Salehi stayed with an uncle. From the window of his home, she processed a jarring scene: disheveled, gun-wielding members of the Taliban driving in confiscated police cars, the vehicles “that were supposed to protect us, that were supposed to protect our freedom.”

She had one glimmer of hope.

Looking for ways to make her education more affordable, Salehi had applied for a scholarship to the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh. At the time of the attack, she was mere weeks away from a transfer. This new academic institution, she knew, was working on a plan to get their incoming Afghan students safely out of the country. But while her peers had their passports ready to go, Salehi’s was still being processed.

After much back-and-forth, representatives from AUW ultimately decided there was nothing they could do. The risk of trying to get through a Taliban checkpoint without proper forms was too great; they would have to leave Salehi behind. For three days, as her classmates circled Kabul Airport on chartered buses, praying for a path through chaos on the ground, she sat at home, pleading her case to AUW: “Oh, God. I can’t stay here. This is my only hope.”

Then came an answer to prayer.

Representatives from the school relented, alerting Salehi she could take the risk after all. It was 4:30 p.m., and one of the buses would pick her up in 30 minutes for yet another attempt at escape. She packed only her phone, important travel documents and, because she was on her period at the time, menstrual pads. Her hijab, she made sure, covered everything but her eyes.

Salehi and the others spent the night on their respective buses, parked outside of an airport gate. At first, the sound of nearby gunfire led to screaming from the women, but eventually the noise simply “became normal,” she says. Just before dawn, the Taliban finally let the women through, but they scolded them as they passed: *Good Muslim girls would never abandon their country. You don’t need independence; you need a man.*

Leveraging one final indignity, the guards forced Salehi to leave her menstrual pads behind. Considering everything she’d abandoned for this chance at a future, this final humiliation felt trivial. But it was also symbolic: men who feared and detested her womanhood weaponizing a symbol of this womanhood in the most empowered yet vulnerable hour of her life. They would not break her spirit.

“I welcome hardships in my life,” she says. “I like taking risks, and I like danger, because I know how strong I will be in the face of obstacles.”

Since arriving at UD, Salehi has taken part in a self-defense class put on by the University Police Department, affording an opportunity to reflect on how far she’s come since her days in Pakistan, when her passion for fighting felt illicit. Neighbors from her hometown who once lamented her independence also marvel at her unlikely journey.

“They are happy I’m here,” she says. “People who called me a bad person are now saying how lucky I am, and how wonderful it is that I’m in a position to maybe help my family.”

Salehi hopes to prove them right by working diligently at UD, potentially in a public health program. To arrive at her classes, naturally, she will ride a bicycle.

While she respects those in her cohort who feel differently, she has decided to shed her hijab, believing the head scarf not to be a legitimate requirement of Islam, but a misguided directive imposed by those who’ve misinterpreted the faith. As she rides to campus, pulling a trick or two along the way, Salehi will feel the wind in her hair—and the endless possibilities at her fingertips.

“I am going to find myself here,” she says, a hint of a smile beginning to play across her face. “I am going to improve what is already inside of me.” 🐦



To help support these women, visit udel.edu/afghansupport