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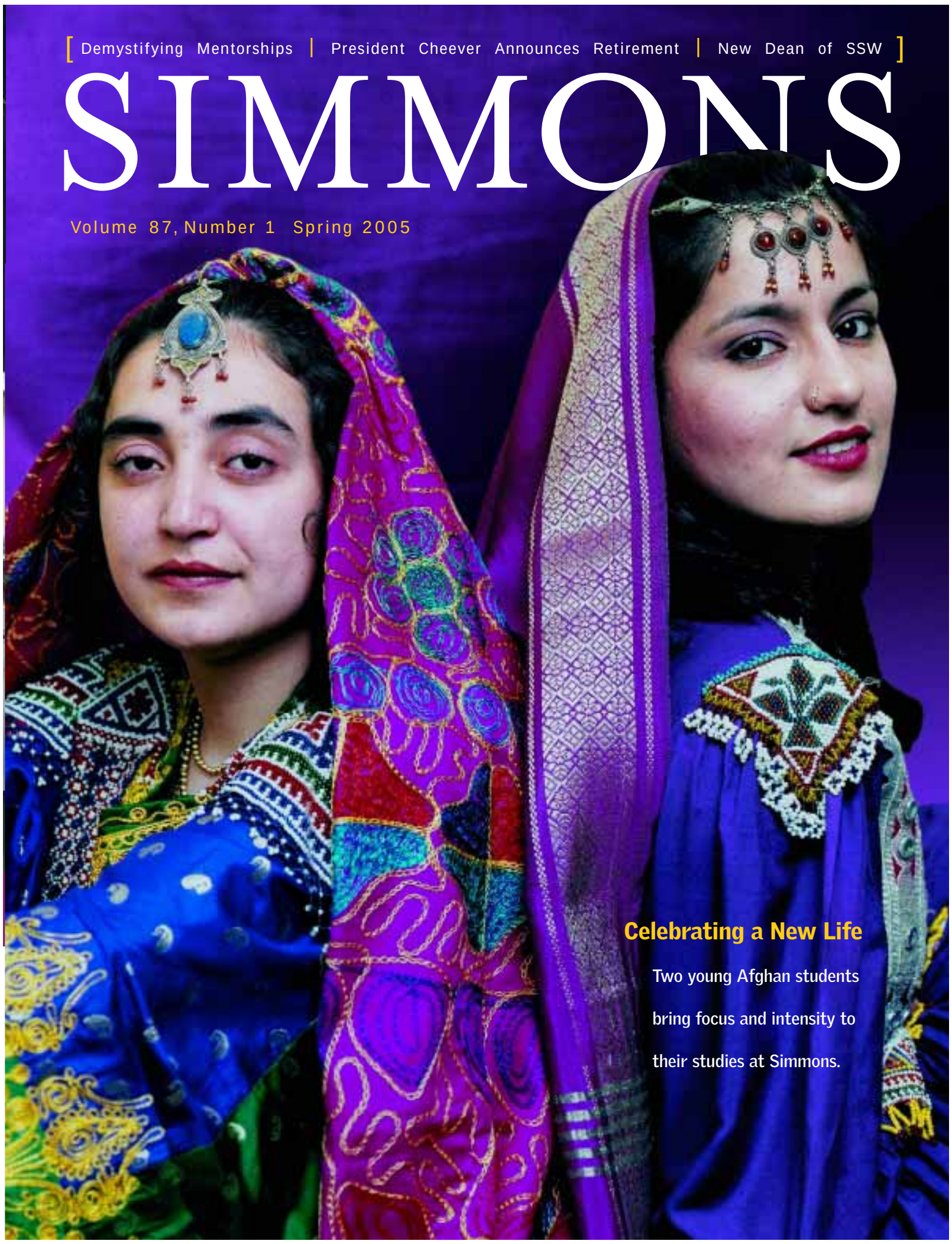

Celebrating a New Life

Two young Afghan students bring focus and intensity to their studies at Simmons.

From Kabul to Boston

Defying Tradition to Rebuild a Nation

BY C. KALIMAH REDD KNIGHT

Adela Raz '08 enters the MCB for her morning classes.

LIKE MOST COLLEGE FRESHMEN, Palwasha Mirbacha '08 and Adela Raz '08 want nothing more than to prove their mettle, living on their own for the first time, far away from home. But their goals carry a bit more weight than most new students: they aim to prove to themselves, their families, and to other Afghans back home that women can defy tradition by traveling overseas for an education and then return to help rebuild a war-torn nation.

"That's a big responsibility," said Mirbacha, a 22-year-old international relations major, in her dorm room one snowy day this winter. She described her intense drive to someday become an ambassador for Afghanistan. "That's what motivates me here — to learn all of the knowledge available, so that I can go back and share it with the people who did not have the opportunity to come here."

She and Raz enrolled at Simmons in the fall after receiving full, four-year scholarships from the College as part of a national program to help educate Afghan women.

Since their arrival, the Simmons community has enjoyed Mirbacha's and Raz's open, friendly personalities — and witnessed their voracious study habits. Neither attends parties nor dates, in accordance with their Islamic tradition; instead, they spend Friday nights at the library.

Many at the College also have become acquainted with their intriguing, and sometimes perilous, pasts. Raz operated a secret home school when the Taliban regime prohibited girls and women from being educated, and Mirbacha fled the country with her family to live in Pakistan, where she could continue her education without persecution.

The two young women describe attending Simmons as an extraordinary opportunity to receive a first-rate education at a time when their country needs them most.

"I believe that education can change a society," said Raz, a political science major who upon graduation hopes to improve the country's crumbled judicial system by working as a human rights officer or a judge in the Afghanistan Supreme Court. "That is why we are here."

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Paula Nirshel founded the Rhode Island-based Initiative to Educate Afghan Women (IEAW) nearly three years ago with exactly this goal in mind. Nirshel, a former social worker and wife of Roger Williams University President Roy J. Nirshel, was compelled by the haunting images of Afghan women, covered from head to toe in burqas, in news coverage following the September 11th attacks.

The Taliban's enforcement of strict fundamentalist Islamic law led to public stoning for adulterers, hand amputations for robbers, and public beatings for women whose burqas did not fully cover their bodies. The extremist group was particularly discriminatory against females, banning them from driving, working (with the exception of physicians), and attending school.

With a small group of young women now studying in colleges across the United States (Simmons being the first in Massachusetts and the first women's college), IEAW is just beginning to build the resources that Nirshel hopes will help address Afghanistan's deepest needs.

Indeed, after more than 25 years of war, Afghanistan ranks among the poorest countries in the world. Violent conflicts have virtually decimated the formal education system. Of those who attend school at all, most make do in home schools. Five years ago, the literacy rate of residents aged 15 and older was just 36 percent, according to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

But getting Afghan education on par with Western nations any time soon is nearly impossible, given the country's outdated resources. After decades of witnessing violence, girls are held back more often than boys because many Afghans fear

PHOTOS © LISA KESSLER

of attending a university some day. Meanwhile, a brutal war between U.S.-backed Afghan fighters and Russian invaders bloodied their national soil. That stain grew with the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s.

With the Taliban edict that girls could no longer be educated, Mirbacha's parents left their jobs and lives in 1994, and relocated to neighboring Pakistan. "My family always wanted us to receive the highest education possible," she said of her five sisters and brothers.

In Kabul, Raz resorted to covert measures to continue her education. She attended English and computer classes at a secret home school, one of

Raz took on the dangerous duty of running her own secret home school in her family's living room. She told her students to **hide their books under their burqas.**

sending their sisters and daughters abroad alone to study. Many also fear that the freedoms of Western culture may encourage females to abandon their traditional roles in favor of an autonomous lifestyle.

"To come overseas for a woman to study is pretty much, well, an atomic bomb," Mirbacha said.

Even some of the families participating in IEAW are subjected to criticism from their communities. Raz's extended family was shocked by her mother's decision to allow her to come to the United States. "[Now] I must give honor to my family," she said. "I have to work so hard for them. I have to prove that [my mother] did a good job."

For these young women, the journey to Simmons began years ago in Afghanistan, a country slightly smaller than the state of Texas. Growing up and attending school as young girls during the 1980s, Mirbacha and Raz dreamt

Palwasha Mirbacha '08 and Raz spend Friday nights and weekends in the library.

many created during the Taliban's rule. But her classes came to an end after her father, a government employee who opposed the Taliban's denial of education for women, became ill suddenly and could no longer support his family. Determined to contribute to her family's finances as well as to the education of young girls in her community, Raz took on the dangerous duty of running her own secret home school in her family's living room.

Each day, 45 students in small groups shuttled in and out of her apartment. She told them to hide their books under their burqas, and to say that they were going to study the Koran, if they were stopped by anyone on the street. For more than a year, Raz lived under the threat that harm would come to her family if the home school was discovered. "I felt responsible; I had to teach them," she explained. One year later, her father died.

After the Taliban's removal from power in 2002, and the establishment of an interim government, life in Kabul began to stabilize. That same year, Mirbacha's family returned to Afghanistan, and the two young women immediately sought work within influential government agencies. Mirbacha went to work for the U.N. Office for Drugs and Crime, and then for the Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan. Raz aided the U.N. Assistance Mission for Afghanistan and supported the efforts of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in addressing gender issues.

In addition to the tremendous obstacles both young women have surmounted — and the courage of their actions — moving more than 7,200 miles from home has been a painful challenge. Before the fall semester, Raz had never

Raz stays after her class to speak with Professor Christina Brinkley.

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— Palwasha Mirbacha '08

spent a night separated from her family. Nevertheless, she and Mirbacha combat homesickness by e-mailing their relatives and talking on the phone to them every weekend.

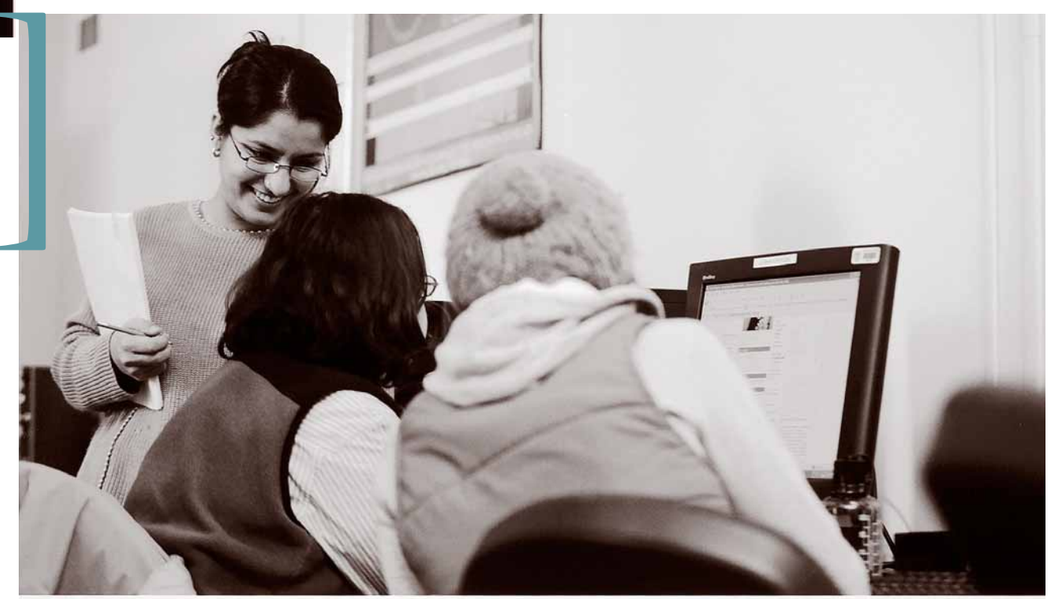
Both young women speak with gratitude for how welcoming and warm the entire Simmons community has been to them. Their religion also has been a great source of strength. As devout Muslims, they pray five times a day, in accordance with Islamic tradition, and study the Koran. When the stress of school and being away from home mounts, Mirbacha said she turns inward, reciting a religious prayer about Allah's enduring support: *He is most powerful. He knows all the secrets. He knows all the knowledge. He's the pain reliever. He's the one who gets us through all of the difficulties.* "That's my religious cure," she said.

The ache of being so far away from home is subdued during the weekdays, as both young women focus on their class work. International Relations Assistant Professor Anna Ohanyan said the two students excel in her class, despite gaps in their history education. Each week, they visit the professor's office to catch up on missing information. "They absorb every single thing that comes out of my mouth; every single piece of information, they just grab it," she said. "They are relishing in [this country's] freedom of speech, this freedom of information."

Simmons President Dan Cheever said American students at Simmons also are benefitting from their interactions with the Afghan students. Mirbacha and Raz provide the community with rare insights on the impact of war and how American policies are perceived in a developing country. He said the two young women recently described their optimism about Afghanistan's democratic presidential election, especially because of the high turnout and the inclusion of a female candidate.

Every bit of news about Afghanistan is, for Mirbacha and Raz, personal as well as political. The summer break will bring a joyful reunion with their extended families, as well as new plans to help other young Afghan women.

"I'm very happy — the tears are making their way down my eyes — that I am actually able to represent my country here, and that I am going to be somebody who can lead a nation that needs help," Mirbacha said. "That is so important for me, and for my nation, especially the women who have been suffering."

Fueled additionally by personal loss, Raz added, "When my father died, I wanted to become a woman who works for her country. This wish only comes true when I am educated. I want to complete my education and study hard for our poor Afghan women who really, really need help."

For more information on supporting students from Afghanistan through scholarships, see page 23.