

New London

For Afghan, a pilgrimage Student journeys to America to help his homeland

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Iraj Khaliqi will celebrate Thanksgiving with turkey, pie and lots of appreciation. Just as many of us will.

For Khaliqi, though, the holiday spirit never leaves. Not when he has a host family like Dr. Chet Reynolds and his wife, Candi. Not when he has his own bedroom and his own bathroom and notebook paper, too.

And certainly not when his homeland, Afghanistan, continues to search for an identity, one that includes law and stability and peace.

When will the killing stop, Khaliqi wonders. When will the latest war end? When will schools and small businesses thrive? When will reason and compromise replace greed and corruption?

The questions remain, at least for now, so Khaliqi takes nothing for granted. That's why he thanked about 15 people, most retirees with big hearts, last week at Colby-Sawyer College in New London. He thanked them for adding \$16,000 to the \$25,000 scholarship he received for his freshman year.

Khaliqi hugged them and shook their hands, people he had never even met. But he knew why they were there.

"These people who have paid for my education have made this moment for me," Khaliqi said last week. "They are the ones who are the cause for this moment for me to be a thanksgiving moment, and I'm really thankful for that."

Joe Kun was there. He left Hungary in 1957, after the Soviet Union had crushed an uprising aimed at Josef Stalin's iron grip.

"I came here to go to school, just like (Khaliqi)," said Kun, sipping coffee. "I came as a refugee,



KEN WILLIAMS / Monitor staff
Iraj Khaliqi (left) welcomes Jack Harrod, who arrived in Afghan clothing, to Colby-Sawyer College in New London yesterday.

and I immigrated, and I had my home here."

When asked to describe his homeland at the time he left, Kun smiled and said, "Miserable."

Khaliqi's story is a little different. He plans on going back home to Kabul after school. He'll return to his parents and his three sisters and his wife, whom he married last summer.

He'll try to make a difference in a country that's been at war since the day he was born, 20 years ago.

"Everyone is caught up with war, and we're not getting anywhere with the current government," Khaliqi said. "It's even worse than it used to be in 2002."

Khaliqi and his family have lived in Iran and Pakistan in search of the educational system missing in Kabul. Khaliqi's father made fur coats, as his father and grandfather had done. He sold them to the Russians. He worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week. Business was slow during the summer.

They lived in Pakistan for seven years, shoehorning themselves for six months into a three-bedroom apartment with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and lots of kids.

Money remained tight after the Khaliqis finally got their own place. Flower bags, sewn together by Khaliqi's mother, were used for notebooks. Ice from the nearby bazaar, costing less than 1 cent and used to combat 100-plus-degree days, often wasn't affordable.

But Khaliqi thrived in school, learning English, Urdu and several other languages.

Then came Sept. 11, 2001.

"I was in sixth grade," Khaliqi said. "I was taking a final exam that day. I got home early. My mom was watching it on TV, CNN. I didn't know who Osama was. I didn't make the connection."

The U.S.-led invasion quickly ousted the Taliban, opening the door for the Khaliqis to return to a country they thought was shifting toward human rights and peace.

They took a bus to Kabul, driving three nights over potholes that put the ones here to shame.

"People were almost accepted that they were going to be dead. It's the last trip," Khaliqi said. "Some buses had already fallen down the cliff."

In 2005, Khaliqi passed a series of exams and earned a visa to come here, one of 40 handed out among nearly 3,000 applicants.

Emily Jones, a librarian in New London, hosted Khaliqi for his senior year at Kearsarge Regional High School.

"It was wonderful," Jones said. "I had to make a big meal for him at night."

Khaliqi spoke at Rotary clubs. He relayed stories about his home. He graduated with honors.

He then worked in Kabul for three years, at a micro-financing company and a nonprofit group dedicated to the improvement of the country's education, agriculture and health programs.

He's back, a freshman at Colby-Sawyer College with a five-year visa.

He worries about his family members, who live near the site of several recent suicide bombings.

But he wants an education before going home. His current hosts, Chet and Candi, showed up to hear Khaliqi express thanks last week.

"Very charming," Chet said. "Not a politician, but a political scientist. He has the ability to feel the pulse of a country."

He's felt the pulse of Afghanistan and its dangerous past. He's felt the war with the Soviet Union, and the civil war between factions of the mujahedeen, and the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaida, and, most recently, the rise of a corrupt government.

"What's important to us is we want to treat everyone equally," Khaliqi said. "Treat every ethnic group the same so we don't have any social inequality in the country."

He's gotten a taste of that here, and he's enjoying the ride.

"Every day is a holiday," Khaliqi said. "Every day is Thanksgiving. I feel that way."

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