

ALUMNI NOTES

Summer 2008



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PHOTO BY CARA PHILLIPS

"We established some friendships that I know will be lifelong. There was just an instant bonding. I felt there was a common heritage. Their humor, warmth, sincerity — it was all very familiar to me."

HALLEH HAKIMIAN (CAS'97), WHOSE COMPANY IS HELPING AFGHAN RUG MAKERS REVIVE THEIR TRADITIONS

MAGIC CARPET RIDE

ON A U.S. TRADE MISSION TO AFGHANISTAN, HALLEH HAKIMIAN FINDS SIGNS OF HOPE

PHOTO BY BEHROOZ HAKIMIAN



Halleh Hakimian (CAS'97) with a young street vendor in Kabul.

AS A YOUNG Iranian-American Jewish woman with a beautiful smile and an open, engaging manner, Halleh Hakimian (CAS'97) is not the first person you'd expect to find in a flak jacket and an armored Jeep rumbling over the pockmarked roads of Afghanistan.

And yet when work presented an opportunity to travel to the country last summer as part of a U.S. trade mission, she didn't hesitate. She knows it surprises people when she says it was probably the most pleasurable travel experience she's ever had.

Hakimian helps run Hadji Jalili Revivals LLC (HJR), which produces handmade, high-quality reproductions of antique and historically significant Persian rugs. The company, based in New Jersey, is owned by her father, Behrooz Hakimian, and his business partner, Kambiz Jalili, both Iranian-born and both from families where rug-making is part of the genetic legacy. Jalili, in fact, is

the great-grandson of the legendary Hadji Jalili, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made what are today's sought-after antique rugs.

HJR's acclaim brought an invitation from the U.S. Department of Commerce to attend the First Afghanistan International Carpet Fair last August in Kabul, an event intended to build relationships between Afghan weavers and American wholesalers. Afghanistan's hand-woven rugs are a source of national pride; the recovery of the carpet-making industry is one key to the country's economic resurgence.

The trip fostered relationships with manufacturers that are already yielding fruit, Hakimian says. "And we established some friendships that I know will be lifelong."

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Because the Hakimians speak Farsi (a close cousin to Dari, a common Afghan tongue) and could blend in a bit, they felt comfortable leaving their hotel, unlike other U.S. delegates. Hakimian paints a vivid picture of Kabul, where devastation and tentative signs of rebirth intermingle. There were the kids who gather on Chicken Street, the city's main tourist shopping area, to hawk water and magazines. There were the roads with bombed-out houses, where "you can see that this country has been ravaged by war — they didn't even get a chance to catch their breath before they got pummeled again," she says. Since there was no vegetation, everything was covered with a fine layer of khaki colored dust. Every now and then, a sprig of color would come into view, in an area where houses were being rebuilt and life was resuming. There were the moments of quiet hospitality, as when Hakimian realized that their Afghan driver on the way back to the airport was the only person in the vehicle not wearing the requisite flak jacket, saying only "there weren't enough."

And then there was the night a group of new friends took her and her father to dinner. "We drive up, and it's like in Manhattan, when you go to a club and from the outside it looks really unwelcoming. There's a bouncer, a guy with a rifle — they said he was a former mujahideen." Inside, she found a hip oasis, complete with trees and grass, lanterns on the tables, and clubby music. Not to mention a chic European menu. "I had fusilli with gorgonzola sauce, in Kabul," she remembers. "It was surreal."

She describes a country beset by trauma, full of complexity, living with as much hope as possible. "What I saw were people wanting to move forward, wanting to live in peace alongside the rest of the world," she says. "People seem ready for something new." **BARI WALSH**

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