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Shadows of Kabul: Qiam Amiry now ponders Afghanistan's troubles from afar

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Qiam Amiry now ponders Afghanistan's troubles from afar

Sitting cross-legged on his bed like a rail-thin Buddha, Qiamuddin Amiry '09 searches the air above his head for the words to explain his life before Colby. He is used to searching. Just four years ago, he spent his nights wearing a bulletproof vest, patrolling the streets of Kabul.

As a translator for British special forces, Amiry spent his nights with soldiers who maintained security on the war-torn streets of his home city. He worked the night shift with the military so he could attend classes during the day and teach English in the late afternoon. "At the time, I never thought what I was doing was unusual for a sixteen-year-old kid," Amiry said.

In fact, what he is doing now—attending Colby, studying philosophy and government—is very unusual for a kid from the streets of Kabul, especially for one with Amiry's background.

His family is from the Hazara ethnic group, which is at the bottom of the Afghan social class strata, he explained. For centuries the Hazara were viewed as servants for more privileged ethnic groups: Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, he said. As a result, the Hazara lag behind the other groups in education and literacy.

As a boy Amiry worked 14 hours a day making carpets. "I was a really good worker," he said, "I used to work very hard. I would only sleep two hours a night." He added, "Now I am a lazy ass; I sleep for about nine hours."

Amiry wasn't the only one sleepless in Kabul. While the Taliban resurgence of the past year or two had not yet begun when he left there, militias loyal to the Taliban were intent on creating chaos by looting and killing civilians, he said. His nighttime work with the British soldiers was tense, often marked by tragedy: a sick old man who died before Amiry's eyes as a security-force ambulance rushed to the hospital; a child accidentally shot by another child. Amiry searched for the words to describe life in Afghanistan. "There was a sense of fear late at night," he said softly.

He was working as an interpreter, attending classes, and teaching when he heard that a non-governmental organization was distributing applications for scholarships to the United World College (UWC), a worldwide system of postsecondary schools with which Colby has a relationship. Amiry decided to apply.

From an applicant pool of 400, five students were chosen. Amiry was one of them, selected to attend Li Po Chun UWC, in Hong Kong, where he took courses toward his International Baccalaureate degree. "My old school [in Hong Kong] was so small. We were like a family," Amiry said, taking off his blue Maine sweatshirt to reveal a red T-shirt from his high school. "Those were the two happiest years of my life."

At Colby, Amiry is far from the din and danger of his former world. He is now able to concentrate on his studies in philosophy and government. The former child laborer now has a work-study job behind the main desk at the Olin Science Library.

However, as Amiry settled into life at Colby, he remained aware of the world beyond Mayflower Hill. Flanked by charcoal sketches he drew of Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Abraham Lincoln (later replaced by his drawings of Mohammed Ali and a Hazara girl), Amiry said he hopes his education at Colby will enable him to attend graduate school and ultimately to work for the betterment of his country.

It's a formidable goal.

When the Taliban regime ruled Afghanistan, "there was no hope." The fall of the Taliban in Kabul in 2001 caused an outpouring of emotion, he said. People played music; they shouted in joy; men, women, and children took to the streets in celebration. That day, he said, there was hope in Kabul.

This fall Afghanistan was once again in the throes of civil unrest, as resurging Taliban forces battled government and NATO troops. While he still retains a flicker of hope, it is "a hope that has turned to a nightmare now and is dying inside me," Amiry wrote in an e-mail in September. "Afghanistan has had its bloodiest days for the past few months. It is turning into another Iraq. ... If one has nightmares during the day about his family there is hardly any hope."

But Amiry, who has endured more hardship in his 20 years than many people do in a lifetime, lives by this flicker of hope and plans to return home one day. When he does, he hopes he will no longer be protected by a bulletproof vest but empowered by his education.

By John Campbell '09
Photo by Fred Field