

## Journey on Behalf of Reproductive Health and Family Planning in Developing Nations Includes Unusual Stops

AFTER SPENDING A NUMBER OF YEARS working in business, **TARANEH R. SALKE** changed course. “I decided to follow my heart,” she says. That path led her to the UCLA School of Public Health, where she completed her M.P.H. this year.

Taraneh has long been interested in social issues, having first become involved as a teen working for Greenpeace. She became passionate about reproductive health and family planning in developing countries through her studies and activities related to the environment. “I learned about the effects of overpopulation and how low fertility could improve people’s lives, particularly women in developing countries,” she says. “I strongly believe that access to reproductive health and family planning services is a fundamental public health right, is the main factor in decreasing maternal mortality and morbidity and improving child survival, and is the prerequisite for social and economic development in developing countries. Women in these countries face many obstacles and need assistance, and I hope that I can be a small part of providing that.”

Through studies of a wide variety of populations in several countries, Taraneh has gained firsthand knowledge of the issues that concern her – and has gone to great lengths in the process. As a UCLA undergraduate in the summer of 2000, she spent two months in Iran conducting field research on the health practices of, and available services for, a semi-nomadic Kurdish community in the mountains of Kurdistan. She was permitted to set up her own tent and live as a member of the community, walking to the stream for water and fighting the elements – including extreme heat and dust, a sandstorm, and encounters with wolves.

While a student at the UCLA School of Public Health she received funding from the Bixby Program in Population & Reproductive Health for overseas trips to Afghanistan and Iran. In Afghanistan, Taraneh conducted an assessment of reproductive health programs, making recommendations to Afghan non-governmental organizations and establishing links between the school and these organizations. In Iran, she attended and presented at a first-of-its-kind National Seminar on Abortion. Taraneh, who grew up in Iran, spent the summer of 2002 working at the Family Planning Association in Iran, an affiliate of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. There, she developed proposals for health intervention programs for submission to international funding agencies, and worked on evaluating reproductive health programs for the Afghan refugees in Iran.

Last year she spent six weeks living with local families in a blue-collar section of Cairo. Taraneh visited Egypt’s Family Planning Association and women’s clinics, interviewing staff and health workers, and contacted a number of non-governmental organizations active in reproductive health projects to learn about their activities and programs. She also attended an intensive Arabic language program at a school run by religious Muslims.

She believes her diverse experiences will contribute greatly to her ability to be an effective public health professional. “I have gotten an in-depth look at other ways of life and thought processes,” says Taraneh, who, since graduating in December, has been working as a consultant to the Bixby program and International Medical Corp. “One thing I learned was that not everything we in the Western world consider health problems are considered problems by other populations, and vice versa.”

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