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Speech at the Seeds of Peace Annual Gala with the former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright*Parnian Nazary**May 16, 2012*

It is a pleasure to be here, among all of you.

Growing up as a girl in Afghanistan was not easy. I was ten when the Taliban came to power and denied me access to education for five years. After the fall of the Taliban regime, I returned to my school and found it to be a shadow of its former self – damaged and destroyed.

But we, the students, were excited to be back in school even though we had to sit on the bare floor and write on a broken blackboard. Taliban had lived in my school and had burned the furniture and books. We had no library, labs, and many classrooms missed doors and windows. Unfortunately, even today, education suffers in Afghanistan. This year alone, over 500 schools were closed in insurgency affected areas.

In 2004, I was selected to attend Seeds of Peace camp. There I experienced living in peace for the first time. Even getting a good night of sleep was a luxury I did not have back home. There, for the first time I understood the importance of leadership and dialogue. For the first time I lived in an environment without strict gender roles. Without violence. Without conflict. It changed my life. I became determined that I wanted to work towards bringing peace and stability to my country, Afghanistan.

From this experience came the opportunity to study at Phillips Exeter Academy. I wanted to attend the top high school in the United States, but I did not know that my top high school in Kabul was very different from the top high school in the United States.

I went to Wellesley, a college dedicated to educate female leaders and thinkers. It produces future global leaders. Our guest of honor, Dr. Madeleine Albright is a great example of that.

After graduation I began to work at the Center on International Cooperation, where we address some of the pressing issues facing Afghanistan and the region today. I find our work and approach incredibly important particularly at a time that Afghanistan is at a crucial juncture with the ongoing transition and the gradual withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

One of those key pressing issues is the rocky reconciliation process with the Taliban.

Given my life experiences under the Taliban rule, I would naturally oppose to reconciliation with the Taliban.

However, the experiences of Seeds of Peace have shown me the importance of dialogue, the ability to sit across from the "other," the "enemy." Talk to them. Listen to them. And strive to reach a mutual understanding. I saw that happening at the Camp, among the people from regions of conflict, who had been taught to hate each other –Israelis and Palestinian, and Afghans, Pakistanis and Indians. If we could have that kind of dialogue at camp, why can't we have it with the Taliban?

However, let's make sure the conversation does not take place behind closed doors. Let's see a transparent and inclusive dialogue, which places the rights of women and all human's rights including safe access to education at its center. A dialogue that ignores this, cannot, and will not bring peace to Afghanistan.

I am fortunate to have had the opportunity at the Center on International Cooperation to develop a project on education to secure funding, access, and physical safety for both students and educators in Afghanistan beyond transition. I am going to Afghanistan in a few weeks to work on the education project and research for protection of women's rights. In other formal, informal, and volunteer positions I work for this one cause – bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, and for the Afghan people, particularly the women and children, to live a life of safety and freedom. I do not want for them not to have access to education, like me.

I had the honor of talking to Dr. Madeleine Albright in Washington DC through the Wellesley in Washington Program. I had the opportunity to meet her several times while working with the establishment of the Madeliene Korbelt Albright Fellowship for Global Affairs at Wellesley College. She has been always an inspiration and a role model for me. She has provided me with the kind of advice that I have taken to heart – her stories of struggles as a young female leader several decades ago in the United States resembles my struggles as a young Afghan woman today - working on political and peace-building issues.

I would like to invite Dr. Albright to stage and present her with the John Wallach Peacemaker Award, named after the founder of Seeds of Peace, for her dedication to serve the cause of peace as a national and international leader.