A Passion for Persian Culture: Gifts Support Iranian Studies

BY MEREDITH KUNZ

Bita Daryabari is passionate about Persian culture. Her goal is to share this enthusiasm with the Stanford community—and, by extension, with all Americans. “I want to expose Americans to the poetry and arts of Iran, to educate the American public about what Iran is all about—its literature and history,” she explains.

This effort is especially important in light of current events. “Given the high level of political tension between the two countries today and the critical need to avoid violent conflict, I thought this was a great time to foster more understanding about the other side of Iran,” says Daryabari.

The Bay Area philanthropist has now provided a generous $5 million in gifts to further the study of Persian language and literature at Stanford. When combined with matching funds from the Hewlett Foundation, Daryabari’s support adds up to a total of $6.5 million in endowment, lending significant momentum to the university’s Iranian Studies Program.

Daryabari’s first commitment to the program, made in 2007, set up an endowment to fund courses, lectures, and conferences on Persian art and literature. She also created the Bita Prize for Literature, an annual award given to recognize an Iranian artist or writer who has achieved excellence in his or her field. Iranian novelist Goli Taraghi and poet Simin Behbahani have both been honored. This gift also funds a visiting professorship, enabling renowned artists, writers, and scholars from Iran to teach at Stanford.

Last fall, she expanded her investment in the program by endowing the Bita Daryabari Professorship in Persian Studies, to be held by a teacher and scholar with expertise in Persian language and literature.

“There has been a gaping lacuna in Iranian studies, and adding a versatile younger scholar will help us in terms of creating a new program and attracting more undergraduate and graduate students,” says Abbas Milani, the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford. Daryabari’s gift will also fund a second visiting lectureship, he adds, vital for bringing fresh Iran scholarship to campus.

The School of Humanities and Sciences established the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Program in Iranian Studies in 2006 with endowed support from university trustee Hamid Moghadam, MBA ’80, and his wife, Christina, ’78.

Daryabari’s family roots are steeped in Persian language and literature. A relative authored the first Farsi dictionary 80 years ago. And her great-grandfather, who served in Iran’s congress, wrote some of the country’s first laws “in his hand, adding poetry and literature to them,” she explains.

In addition to her interest in Persian culture, Daryabari feels particularly strongly about supporting modern Iranian women’s role in the arts. “There are many educated Iranian women who sacrifice their lives to have a role, to speak. I’d like to expose more of them to an American audience,” she says.

As the Benefactor goes to press, Milani is planning a June event bringing together visiting lecturer Taraghi with Iranian writer Shahmush Parsipur and artist and filmmaker Shirin Neshat to discuss Neshat’s new feature film based on Parsipur’s book, Women Without Men, a collection of short stories. “We will have three of Iran’s top women artists of this generation here—a unique occasion,” says Milani. “The fact that we have the funds to do this is the direct result of Bita’s generosity.”

Bita Daryabari has set up an endowment at Stanford to further the study of Persian language and literature. She has also established her own foundation, Unique Zan, focusing on women’s education in the Middle East.

PHOTO: Courtesy of Bita Daryabari