In Kabul, Afghanistan, the youngster with deep-brown eyes and a ready smile wanted to learn as much as she could. The future, though, brought difficult lessons, especially when the Taliban arrived in her neighborhood. But Marwa Hasanzoi found a way to keep learning. Today, she is among a distinguished—and diverse—community of international Fulbright Scholars studying at Pitt. And that’s good for the whole world.

As a child, even before her first day of school, Marwa Hasanzoi was whip-smart and spirited, an Afghan girl who lived in a closely knit, middle-class family in Kabul. Education was prized by her mother, Urza, a Supreme Court judge, and her father, Shahwali, a government official, and both parents stressed the importance of education to their five children.

But at age 6, Marwa’s education was disrupted—along with the family’s way of life—when the Taliban overran Kabul during a civil war that devastated the city. Thousands were killed. Schools were closed to girls because of the Taliban, and Urza Hasanzoi wasn’t allowed to work. Desperate, her family fled to Pakistan as refugees, leaving behind all their possessions. From second to seventh grade, the young Hasanzoi attended a makeshift school offering only rudimentary reading and writing lessons. But her curiosity and aspiration pushed her to self-study. She excelled at mathematics and became interested in its practical applications, such as engineering.

**Bright Passage**

Written by Cristina Rouvalis
Photography by Harry Giglio
he family returned home in 2001, when the Taliban were pushed out of Kabul, but the temporary peace soon deteriorated into suicide bombings and bloodshed. Amid the chaos, Hasanzoi, by then a teenager, dug into her studies and continued to excel. In 2007, she landed a coveted engineering spot at Kabul University, where a professor told her her engineering was no place for a woman, and where math and science courses appeared to be the realm of men’s study. But Hasanzoi was stubborn—and driven to succeed. No one was going to tell her she couldn’t do something.

Not only did she excel at this so-called man’s career, she distinguished herself even more after graduation by winning a Fulbright Scholarship to study civil and environmental engineering at Pitt.

But even the Fulbright process proved harrowing, with Kabul’s ongoing strife. The day Hasanzoi was scheduled to interview for her student visa in June 2013, a bomb went off at the Kabul Airport, postponing the interview. Days later, during a Fulbright orientation, an explosion detonated in front of the Afghan Supreme Court, where her mother works. Seventeen people died in the bombing; but, because she had left her office minutes earlier, her mother was spared.

The dread of impending disaster haunted Hasanzoi every day. “When we are buying groceries, we think, ‘What if a bomb goes off?’” she says. “Even walking down the street, you worry there might be a suicide bomber.”

Today, the 25-year-old pursues her future in a setting far more conducive to potent learning, as part of an international community of Fulbright Scholars studying at Pitt. The education and skills that she and other Fulbrighters acquire here will be used to benefit their own countries when they return to those nations after one or two years. Though they represent a range of nationalities and fields, these far-flung students share a bond.

“It is like having a common passport,” says Alberta Shragia, vice provost for graduate studies at Pitt. “They have been through a competition and are thought to be among the most promising in their country and field of study. They are intellectually interesting and adventurous. It gives them an immediate connection.”

The Fulbright scholarship program was born from the ashes of WWII, when Senator William J. Fulbright sponsored a U.S. Congressional bill to use funds from the sale of war-surplus property for “the promotion of international good will through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture, and science.” The bill became law in 1946; since then, more than 325,000 Fulbrighters from 155 countries have participated in the scholarship program at universities worldwide. About 8,000 grants are awarded annually. Many of these scholars have gone on to distinguished careers: 53 Fulbright Scholars have won a Nobel Prize, 80 have won a Pulitzer Prize, 29 have received a MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellowship, and many others have become heads of state or government.

Shragia, a Fulbright recipient herself who conducted her dissertation research in Milan, is a distinguished scholar in European Union studies and was the inaugural holder of Pitt’s Norden Berg University Chair before accepting her role as vice provost. One of her priorities has been to gather and connect the international community of Fulbright Scholars both at Pitt and in Pittsburgh at large, including current visiting scholars and alumni of the program.

After all, once a Fulbrighter, always a Fulbrighter. During the fall semester, Shragia hosted a reception of these scholars inside the elegant cloister of the Frick Fine Arts Building, and Marwa Hasanzoi was among the sociable crowd.

“Fulbright is the symbol of our commitment to international students,” says Shragia. Just as the scholarship immerses international recipients in U.S. culture, she explains, it also exposes Pitt students and Pittsburghers to people from different cultures in a way that goes beyond the headlines. “Obviously we have Fulbrighters coming from developing countries with strife,” she says. “When you meet someone who is a Fulbrighter from Afghanistan, it’s 99 percent likely that they are breaking stereotypes about Afghans.”

Hasanzoi engages with many Pittsburghers who have never before met someone from Afghanistan. “Some people have misconceptions about my country,” she says. “They don’t believe that a girl like me got an engineering
He told the committee that Mexico needed an electronic medical records system like the one in the United States to effectively monitor and combat diseases. The committee agreed, and in August 2010, Pineda arrived at Pitt to develop a computer program in which emergency room nurses enter patients’ influenza symptoms and other information to aid in early detection. Here, he soaked up computer knowledge from some of the best. “Pittsburgh is at the forefront of electronic record keeping in the world,” he says.

degree in Afghanistan and got a scholarship here.” Then with characteristic humor, she adds, “Some of them think we live in tents and travel on camels.”

But Hashanzoi quickly shatters any preconceived notions, not only with her perceptive intelligence and career in engineering but also with her warm personality and ready smile. She has befriended other international Fulbrighters, including her roommate Mirrah Almirah from Indonesia and others from Brazil and Paraguay. She also visits her sister, Fathat, 27, who works at the Afghan Embassy in Washington, D.C.

This spring, she earned a Pitt graduate degree in civil and environmental engineering, and soon she’ll return to Kabul. “We don’t have an extensive and developed transportation system,” she says of her homeland. “We lack building design and construction standards and regulations. As a civil engineer, I want to play a role toward rebuilding my society.”

Even now, she worries about the safety of the rest of her family in Afghanistan. When a recent Skype call home was interrupted by a blast, her mother had her wait online while she checked the TV news. A bomb had detonated a few blocks away. With heart-stopping scares like that, it can sometimes be difficult for Hashanzoi to concentrate on her studies. But she perseveres, eager to use her engineering skills to rebuild a country ravaged by war and to become a professor so she can share her knowledge.

While some of her Afghan friends have emigrated to the United States to live a more peaceful existence, Hashanzoi has never been one to take the easy path. “I feel like I am not supposed to live only for myself,” she says. “I have to live for others. I love my people. They deserve a good life.”

In 2008, Arturo Lopez Pineda, a computer science professor in Morelia, Mexico, applied to the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program. Though he didn’t know it yet, his timing couldn’t have been better. He had the tools to fix an emerging problem.

In April 2009, as the Fulbright selection committee sifted through applicants, an influenza scare gripped his country. Schools and offices closed, journalists gave
daily bulletins about the death toll, and pan-
icked shoppers cleared the pharmacy shelves, buy-
ing not just cough syrup and surgical masks
but anything they could grab. The country was
so paralyzed that Pineda could not even go to
his interview with the Fulbright committee in
Mexico City.

When the panic subsided in June, after the
feared pandemic never materialized, Pineda
finally traveled to the capital, where he made a
slam-dunk case for going abroad to study bio-
medical informatics. “How can we not afford to
have an information system to track diseases
like influenza in Mexico?” he asked.

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an electronic medical records system like the
one in the United States to effectively monitor
and combat diseases. The committee agreed,
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dge, something of the best. “Pittsburgh is at
the forefront of electronic record keeping in
the world,” he says.

He selected a university in the northern
United States so he could experience a real
winter. Pittsburgh did not disappoint, allowing
him to touch his first snowflakes and ski the
slopes at Seven Springs. And for this dino-
saur buff, Pittsburgh—with the world’s largest
Jurassic collection at the Carnegie Museum of
Natural History—was an ideal destination for
viewing prehistoric bones.

After completing the work of his Fulbright
project in July 2013, the 30-year-old researcher
stayed at Pitt to get a PhD degree. Now, he
is part of a team analyzing cancer data sets
from all over the country through the Cancer
Genome Atlas, administered by the National
Cancer Institute. The vast data set shows the
geneic mutations that cause various types of
cancer. Pineda, along with other researchers,
is analyzing lung and breast cancer data to
identify molecular biomarkers that can be used
to recommend personalized treatment to indi-
vidual patients. “I am working with this group
on the mining of large data sets,” he says.

Pineda’s natural inquisitiveness was nur-
tured by a family in Morelia who stressed
education. His father, Serafin, is a retired
mechanical engineer who worked for a state-
owned electrical utility company. His mother,
Puri, is a homemaker who holds a degree in
philosophy. “My parents never told me I had
to get a PhD, but they said, ‘You have to get an
undergraduate degree. From there, you can do
what you want to do’.”

Pineda surpassed their expectations and
now aims to use his advanced computer savvy
to help reduce disease-related suffering in
Mexico. When he returns in a few years, he
intends to set up an electronic tracking system
to monitor the spread of infectious diseases like
influenza. He also hopes to use his comput-
 ing skills to help combat tropical diseases that
spread quickly in Mexico, amid poverty and
poor sanitary conditions. “With an advanced
information system, we will have added tools
to fight back,” he says.

Consider the odds: A Colombian
musician-scholar gets married,
wins a prestigious Fulbright,
and departs from his new wife in
Medellín to pursue his studies
at Pitt. After a year of pining and
daily Skype calls, she wins a Ful-
bright, too. She applies to schools
in and around Pittsburgh and, to her delight
and utter amazement, is accepted at Pitt.

Juan Velasquez Ospreña and Catalina Pine-
da Molina couldn’t have asked for a bet-
er reunion. Most evenings, the couple, who
married in 2013, study side by side at their
Shadyside apartment, pursuing their research
passions.

“It is amazing,” Pineda Molina says. “We
are in the same city and the same university,
and we are both studying what we wanted on
a Fulbright.” The two are also pursuing cer-
tificates in Pitt’s Center for Latin American
Studies.

Their academic interests couldn’t be more
different. He’s a professional violinist studying
musicoology, while she’s a biomedical engineer
developing new devices for patients. The cou-
ple, who met 10 years ago in their hometown
just outside Medellín, Colombia, root each
other on.

The double Fulbright winners also strive to
despise myths about Medellín, a city best known
in America for drug lords and street violence.
Many people mistakenly believe the famous “City of Eternal Spring” has
bounced back from its crisis in the 1980s and 1990s to
become a major industrial and cultural center.
The husband-and-wife Fulbright winners help
promote the new image. As Velasquez Ospreña
puts it, “I try to show them another side of
Colombia, the musical history of my country.”

Back home, Velasquez Ospreña had two
jobs—professional violinist for the EAFIT
Symphony Orchestra and professor of musi-
cology at EAFIT University. Musicoology, the
scholarly study of music, is a relatively new field
in Colombia, and Velasquez Ospreña plans to
advance its study by writing about Colombian
composers and their music, as well as archiving
the music.

For the 34-year-old musician, the joy of
playing the violin and studying the history
behind the notes complements one another. “To
me, music is more than just a beautiful sound,”
he says. “It is about the people who created and
played and listened to the music.”

After winning a grant for cultural research
in Colombia, he published a book about the
music of his country titled Los Ecos de la Villa: La
Música en los Periódicos y Revistas de Medellín
(1886-1990), or The Echoes of the Village: The
Music of Periodicals and Journals of Medellín.

His current research shines a spotlight
on historical composers like Gonzalo Vidal,
Adolfo Mejía, Luis A. Calvo, and Daniel Sala-
zar, as well as recent ones such as Blas Emilio
Anchorena, Jesús Pimón, and Víctor Agudelo.
He also studies the intoxicating Colombian
rhythms like pasillo, joropo, and curruca. Last
summer, he cataloged the archive of Florencio
Asenjo, the late Argentine composer and math
professor at Pitt. For Velasquez Ospreña, music
connects people of all languages: “It is about
humanity.”

Pineda Molina, 30, is also striving to help
humanity but from a more scientific angle. The
engineer does research to create new devices
to treat disabling conditions such as osteo-
arthritis, diabetes, and loss of tissue due to
trauma. She wants to advance biotechnological
research in Colombia, where the field is still in
its infancy.

Even if their arrivals at Pitt were not
perfectly coordinated, Velasquez Ospreña
and Pineda Molina will finish their high-powered
studies at the same time in three years. “We are both
committed to spreading what we learn to other
people in Colombia,” Pineda Molina says.
Consider the odds:
A Colombian musician-scholar gets married, wins a prestigious Fulbright, and departs from his new wife in Medellin to pursue his studies at Pitt. After a year of pining and daily Skype calls, she wins a Fulbright, too. She applies to schools in and around Pittsburgh and, to her delight and utter amazement, is accepted at Pitt.