

University to aid Afghan women, challenges others to join effort

by Kristen Rasmussen
The Providence Journal

About 1,650 letters left the Roger Williams University mailroom on Friday as part of the school's recent announcement that it is challenging all institutions of higher learning nationwide to follow its lead and offer academic scholarships to Afghan women.

The letters are addressed to the editors of the country's major newspapers. This week, a similar letter will be electronically sent to officials at the nation's 4,500 colleges and universities. The messages are co-signed by university President Roy J. Nirschel and his wife, Paula.

"Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island, is pleased to be the first university in the country to offer a full scholarship-tuition, room and board to an Afghan woman," the letter states.

"In this small way, we can make a difference. And by this act we challenge all of American higher education-proportionate to a college's or university's size and endowment-to do likewise and invest in rebuilding Afghanistan as a model society in the twenty-first century."

The establishment of the scholarship is the brainchild of Paula Nirschel, a personal friend of Providence, R.I., resident and Afghan expatriate Fatima

Gailani. The two women became friends in November, when Gailani's story gained national attention, Paula Nirschel said.

Her interaction with Gailani - who said she plans to return home to help restore peace and women's equality to Afghanistan - led Nirschel to the conclusion that longstanding societies can only be built or improved by providing educational opportunities for their citizens.

"In this small way, we can make a difference....we challenge all of American higher education...to do likewise and invest in rebuilding Afghanistan as a model society in the twenty-first century."

Challenging other academic institutions to offer these educational opportunities augments what Roger Williams can and will do to help, Paula and Roy Nirschel said.

"Even educating a few Afghan women and giving them their wings and sending them back to help their country would be wonderful," Paula Nirschel said.

"Even if only 10 percent of universities participated, that would still be 500 Afghan women or men attending college," her husband added.

The scholarship will be awarded based on the recommendation of Gailani, Paula Nirschel said. The scholarships are worth about \$125,000 over four years and will be awarded to women

who plan to return to their home country, she said.

The scholarship will be awarded to one student each year, paving the way for the presence of four Afghan women on campus at a time, Roy Nirschel said. No end has been set for the program, he said.

The first scholarship will be awarded to a student enrolling in the fall, his wife said.

But young Afghan women will not be the only ones to benefit from the scholarship program, those involved said.

"It will be a reciprocal benefit to have women from Afghanistan educate us," said Rebecca Leuchak, assistant professor of art and architectural history at Roger Williams.

"This is a growing opportunity for our community, as well as for the women coming over."

And establishing relationships in the country helps further catapult the university onto the global stage - one of the school's main aims, Roy Nirschel said.

"We want to become an increasingly global university," he said. "We are very proud of being in Bristol and proud of being in Rhode Island, but we are also part of a bigger, broader society."

But to Gailani - who said she deeply loves her homeland despite its horrid treatment of women in the past - the most important beneficiaries are the most obvious ones: the Afghan women who will receive a higher education and the citizens whom they return to help.

Table tennis? In Texas, school ventures into sport

by Paul Bourgeois
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Table tennis may be the second most popular sport in the world, but let's face facts: We're not IN the world. We're in Texas, and in Texas, football rules - real football, not soccer.

But Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth has bravely taken the lead and is the first university in North Texas to field (or to "table") a varsity table-tennis squad.

Coach Christian Lillieroos said he knows that he's in an uphill battle. Not as a coach. That's easy. The battle is to sell table tennis as a real sport that people might want to see and support, he said.

"People don't realize," he said, "that table tennis might be the most physically demanding sport there is."

Wesleyan is in the Texas Division of the National Collegiate Table Tennis Association. The other teams in the division include the University of Texas at Austin, Rice University in Houston, Baylor University in Waco, the University of Houston and Houston Community College.

Texas Wesleyan President Harold Jeffcoat said table tennis is a good fit for the university.

"It seemed like a good opportunity for Texas Wesleyan to do something different, to get our name out there in a different way. It's not expensive, and it's something we could do well in a very short time," he said.

Table tennis is part of a new approach to sports at Wesleyan, which pulled itself from National Collegiate Athletic Association Division II competition in the summer.

Now, the university prefers more sports and more participants but for less money. This year, Jeffcoat cut all athletic scholarships and the school dropped to Division III because the university was facing financial problems. Several coaches and students on athletic scholarships moved to other colleges and universities.

The table-tennis program is expected to cost only about \$40,000 and is open to almost everyone.

Wesleyan's first season doesn't start until mid-January, but already the three-member varsity is paddling the competition. It won a gold medal last month at a tournament in Baltimore.

Lillieroos coached the U.S. National team in 1997-98 and is well known in world table-tennis circles. It was expected that Lillieroos would attract top players, but Jeffcoat said he is surprised at the caliber of the players who have signed on.

The players include: Jasna Reed, Olympic medalist in 1988, three-time Olympian and two-time European champion who competed for the USA in the 2000 Sydney Olympics; Rasvan Cretu, a five-time Romanian national champion who played for the United States in the 1997 Birmingham World Championships; and Idan Levi, an Israeli junior national team member. Six other players are on the junior varsity.

Compared with the National Collegiate Athletic Association, National Collegiate Table Tennis Association rules are loose. Team membership is open to any school employee or student - full time, part time, exchange, undergrad or graduate.

And Jeffcoat said that could be another plus. With an emphasis on building Wesleyan's graduate and international programs, he said it can't hurt to have a competitive sport with a large international following that any student can play. In the National Collegiate Table Tennis Association, the play is co-ed.

Jeffcoat said sports play an important part in student life and in helping spread knowledge and interest in Wesleyan.

The university needs to spread some basic knowledge of table tennis, Lillieroos said.

But first, it needs to shake any notion that table tennis and Ping Pong are the same thing. Table tennis players bristle at the idea that the two are alike.

The rules are different. The table tennis ball is two millimeters larger. Games are played to 11. The paddles are also different and are capable of slamming the ball at 100 mph with spins clocked at 9,000 rpm.

But the biggest difference is with the athletes, Lillieroos said.

He said comparing Ping Pong to table tennis is like comparing softball to baseball.

"Table tennis is the second-largest sport in terms of participation in the world. It's second only to soccer," he said.

"It also is very physical. In table-tennis developed countries like Sweden, China, Germany, Korea, France and Croatia, table-tennis athletes on average are the most physically fit among all sports," Lillieroos said.

meridian
on college avenue



Formerly Gateway Center
Apartments

646 E. College Ave.
State College, PA

(814) 231-9000 or
(800) 392-0444

www.meridianoncollegeavenue.com

As Our Valued Resident, You'll Enjoy...

*All Utilities Included Except Phone *Friendly Staff

*Spacious Apartments With Numerous Closets

*Fantastic Conveniences...Parking, Laundry, MAC, Study, Lounge and Fitness Center All On Site, In One Great Location!

Now Leasing For Fall 2002... Call or Stop In Soon!!!