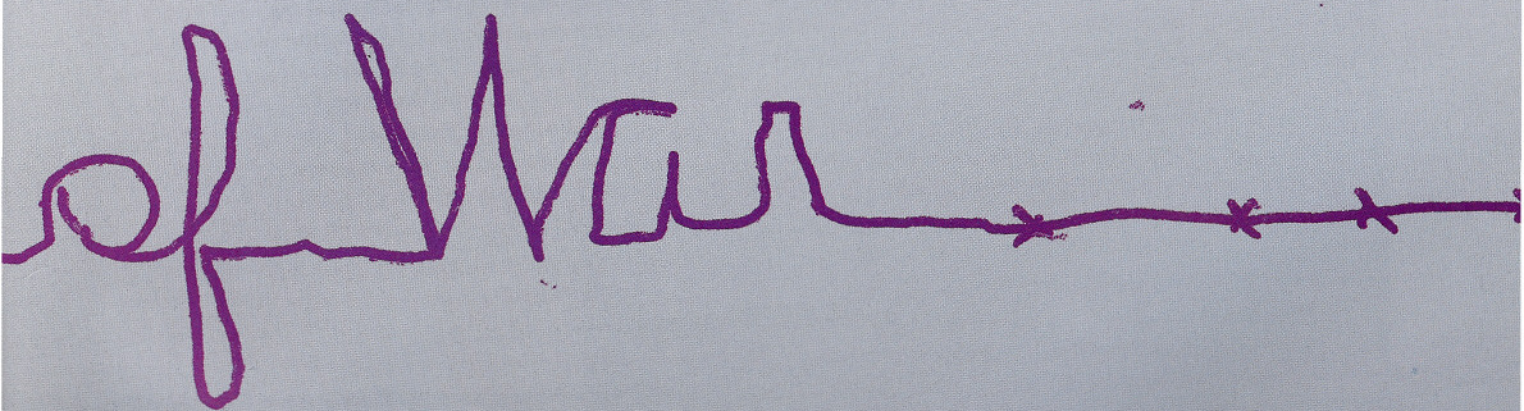


Children

BUCKNELL STUDENTS WHO
HAVE LIVED THROUGH THE
WORST ARE DETERMINED TO
CHANGE THEIR COUNTRIES
FOR THE BETTER.

BY THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF '85, P'13



When elephants fight,
it is the grass that suffers.

– Proverb of Kenya's Kikuyu Tribe



Simin Wahdat '11 still has nightmares two or three times a week. She relives the bombings and hears the cries of the wounded whom no one can help — like Wahdat and her family were, they are huddled in their Kabul basements trying to save their own lives. Wahdat's tears flow steadily as she describes her childhood in Afghanistan and later Pakistan, where her family went to escape the civil war that convulsed their home country. Today, she still remembers clearly the gnawing hunger and the desperate need for security as she mourns the loss of her childhood and innocence.

"Everyone was just waiting for death. I was just a child, yet I was always thinking, 'I am the next to die,'" says Wahdat. "I remember as a seven-year-old asking my mother, 'Does it hurt to die?' She had no answer for me."

As tragic as her story is, Wahdat is not alone at Bucknell, as she learned last spring when she was asked to participate in a panel discussion on Women of War. Co-panelist **Zumra Balihodzic '09** was living in Sarajevo when Bosnia erupted in battle in the early 1990s. Though she, her mother, and her brother eventually escaped to Germany, her father was captured and imprisoned in a concentration camp.


Fellow panelist **Sowande Parkinson '11** grew up in Sierra Leone, a country engulfed in civil war for nearly half of his 22 years. The main government opposition during the war came from the Revolutionary United Front, but there also were coups and attempted coups by members of the army. Parkinson suffered less than many of his countrymen

the day the war landed on his doorstep. The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, a splinter group of Sierra Leonean soldiers, attacked the main prison in the city and freed prisoners affiliated with their rebel group.

"They came in with the objective of burning the city to the ground," Parkinson recalls. "As they came through the city, they were killing people, torching houses, amputating people's limbs — whatever you can think of." Parkinson most of all feared losing his mother, who was then and remains today the center of his world and the source of his strength.

One rainy night in late March, these three students came together in Vaughan Lit.'s Trout Auditorium to tell their fellow students about the painful experiences they usually keep buried deep inside. They were brought together by Balihodzic and **Rudo Mawema '09**, as part of their work for Bucknell's Women's Resource Center. "I think people relate better to stories when they can put a face on the situation," says Mawema, who has previously spoken about the deteriorating situation in her native Zimbabwe.

"We met several times over several months preparing for the panel discussion," Mawema says. "It was a kind of therapy for the speakers. They supported each other, and together they built up the confidence to actually speak in public. It makes a difference when people at Bucknell know about and take an interest in our lives, when we know that they care."



because he lived in a section of the capital city of Freetown that was spared much of the violence. The war severely restricted his movement, however, and it was not until the fighting ended in 2002 that he saw the villages and rural countryside of his own country.

Like many who lived in Freetown, Parkinson vividly recalls Jan. 6, 1999,

Audience members asked questions and voiced their support. Their expressions showed mixtures of compassion, horror and disbelief. Many cried silently when they heard about their fellow students' heartbreaking stories, like the day Balihodzic's best friend died in her arms. They were 11 years old at the time. Though it was dangerous to venture outside, people tried to go on with their lives, and children continued to attend school. One day, Balihodzic and her friend were running from one

school building to another, ducking behind trash cans for cover from the ever-present snipers, when Balihodzic's friend was hit. "He died while I was holding him. I was found lying there crying in the middle of the street with him in my lap," she says. "I live with this every day. I see it, I relive it, I dream about it. I live my life now for the two of us."

Before being asked to speak on the panel, Parkinson had spoken about his life in Sierra Leone to very few students at Bucknell. He confided in his friend **Muyambi Muyambi '11**, who grew up in Uganda, where the government continues a battle against guerillas from the Lord's Resistance Army that began in 1987 and is now one of Africa's longest-running conflicts. The guerilla group has been accused of murder, mutilation, the sexual enslavement of women and children and forcing children to become soldiers.

"It's difficult reliving all those memories, very painful," says Parkinson. "Muyambi and I have been able to talk about it a little, mostly in jokes. The only way to let it out is little by little." After his experience on the panel, Parkinson says he is willing to talk again about what war has done to his country and its people. "It's something I owe to the world. They need to know how people suffer, how these situations turn people into animals."

Parkinson and Muyambi met in Norway, where both were attending a Davis United World College preparatory school. Bucknell is one in a consortium of colleges and universities that accept and financially contribute to the support of Davis Scholars, who are drawn from countries throughout the world, not just those in political turmoil. In the 2008-09 school year, three students came to Bucknell through the Davis program. Last year, an additional nine matriculated. The current first-year class includes five Davis scholars. All are funded through scholarships and grants from Bucknell and the Davis program.

Wahdat came to Bucknell through the efforts of volunteer business people involved with the nonprofit group Bpeace, which helps women in Afghanistan and Rwanda start and grow

in business management and minoring in Arabic, her seventh language. Palwasha receives financial aid through a diversity scholarship founded a decade ago by trustee **Dave Ekedahl '56** and his wife, **Patty P'79**. This fall a third Bpeace student, Rwandan **Malyse Uwase '13**, joined the first-year class.

Balihodzic came to Bucknell as a Jack Cooke Kent Scholar from Garrett Community College in western Maryland. She landed there, thanks to the friendship and support of a member of the Maryland National Guard for whom she worked as a translator when she returned to Sarajevo in 1998, after hostilities had abated. While the international community has shifted focus, the situation in Bosnia remains precarious and getting worse, Balihodzic says. She would like to return home, but her mother has told her it is not advisable.

Mawema will not be returning to her home in Zimbabwe anytime soon either. She left for Bucknell before the worst of the suffering began, and conditions there have since become untenable. The government of Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's president since 1980, has been blamed for hyperinflation, chronic shortages of food and fuel, health epidemics, human rights abuses and election tampering. In 2002 the government seized farms from whites and redistributed them, leading to the further collapse of an agricultural system that once earned Zimbabwe the reputation as the breadbasket of Africa. Daily life continues to deteriorate. "There was no petrol, no food. People would spend all night waiting in line to get bread," Mawema says of her teenage years. "It got really bad two years ago. Supermarket shelves were empty, and my mother would drive four to five hours to Mozambique to shop for groceries."

Mawema says she and her family are luckier than most Zimbabweans. Her family has been able to avoid being endangered by the country's cholera epidemic, for example, because they are now drawing their drinking water from their pool instead of the public water system. But she wonders what will happen when that water runs out.

The family of **Jacquelin Kataneksza '09**, Mawema's former teammate on Bucknell's field hockey team, is experiencing these and other distressing ramifications of Mugabe's failed rule. Kataneksza's mother is a black South African, and her father is a white Polish immigrant. "It became a race thing in Zimbabwe when white families were told to leave their land,"

small businesses in order to support their families and contribute to peace and prosperity in their communities. Wahdat was working as a translator for Bpeace in Afghanistan when she was befriended by an American woman who helped her get to the U.S. and, subsequently, Bucknell.

Palwasha Siddiqi '10 also came to Bucknell through Bpeace. Born in Afghanistan, she was raised primarily in Pakistan before her family eventually returned to Kabul. She is majoring

she says. In 2003, when Kataneksza was 15, her family was displaced from their home near the tourist area of Kariba, where her parents made a living fishing in Lake Kariba. They were relocated to the capital city of Harare. To support themselves, they live in Mozambique for months at a time so they can fish there.

About 18 months ago, ethnic violence forced Kataneksza's father to flee to Mozambique. Now that the political unrest has calmed a bit, he is back in Zimbabwe, but daily life continues to be difficult. "Like most everyone else in Zimbabwe, they have

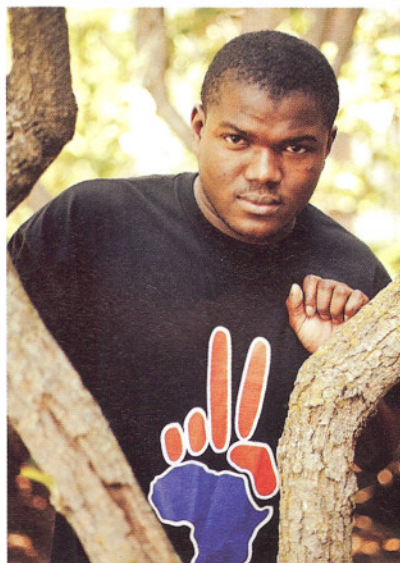
trouble finding potable water and getting enough food to eat," Jacquelin says. "I wake up every day and feel guilty because I'm here in the U.S. where there's so much excess and so much ignorance about social issues that matter on a much bigger scale."

Some of the students can remember a time before war and destruction, when life was happy and their land still beautiful. They aspire to return someday to help the countries and people they love. Both Parkinson and Muyambi are studying civil engineering so that they can help to rebuild their countries' infrastructure.

Others are studying political science, international relations or economics with a goal of working in the government or in humanitarian organizations. Years before coming to Bucknell, Balihodzic had worked as a translator for the U.S. Embassy and for U.S. peacekeepers in Bosnia. Wahdat has worked as a translator for nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan. She also has worked in refugee camps in Pakistan as a project officer, educating women about the parliamentary process and women's rights. Mawema has completed an internship at the World Affairs Council.

Muyambi has been active over the past few years with several initiatives related to Uganda. The summer before matriculating, he visited a refugee camp in the Gulu area in northern Uganda and interviewed people who had been affected by the civil war. That fall he organized a "Gulu Walk" at Bucknell to raise money and awareness about child soldiers. Last fall he organized a second walk and brought former Liberian child rights advocate Kimmie Weeks to speak on campus about child soldiers. He began a project called Bicycles Against Poverty, a microfinance project that provides bicycles to Ugandans so they can start their own businesses.

Once she has recovered from surgery on her knee, Kataneksza hopes to do development fieldwork with a nongovernmental organization before beginning graduate school. Wahdat, Balihodzic and Mawema plan to pursue graduate studies as well. After that, Wahdat would like to return to Afghanistan "to do something to help women. There is a lot to do," she says. Mawema hopes to work in international diplomacy. Balihodzic aspires to become prime minister of Bosnia. "As a little child I always said 'I am going to be the first female president of Bosnia,'" she says, "but I learned through my classes at Bucknell



Top to bottom: Simin Wahdat '11, Sowande Parkinson '11 and Zumra Balihodzic '09.



that a prime minister has more power in the Bosnian political system, and now my goal is to be the first female prime minister and help my country achieve its potential."

Despite their own past trauma and the continuing conflict and uncertain futures of their countries, these students and recent alumni remain determined to use their Bucknell education to improve life in their homelands for generations to come.

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