

## HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Genna Stead Wangsness (Shiraz/Tehran, 1965-71)

### Ten Years of Excellence in Education

Alam High School, an elite co-ed school affiliated with Mashhad University, opened in 1969 as one of three university-affiliated co-ed Iranian high schools. While the other two—Pahlavi University High School in Shiraz (1968) and Melli University High School in Tehran (1974)—



were named for their affiliated colleges, Alam received its name from Asadollah Alam (1919-1978), who held positions such as Prime Minister, Chancellor of Pahlavi University, and Governor of Sistan-Baluchestan province during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. At Alam, Iranians taught subjects such as math, physics, chemistry, biology, and geography, while English language classes—as well as a few other subjects—were taught by Peace Corps volunteers or volunteers hired based on their prior Peace Corps experience.

Iran Peace Corps Volunteer **Bernadette (Bunny) Marriott** (Mashhad, 1970-72) taught biology and chemistry at Alam. She and her husband **Robert Marriott** came to Iran with one of the first groups to be trained totally in-country. Prior to their acceptance, discussions were handled by phone between them and Peace Corps Washington. No personal interviews were conducted, but an FBI background check was done. Informed of a public works program in Iran, they expressed their desire to be placed where both could have meaningful jobs—Bob had an education in building science and architecture and Bunny had degrees in biology and chemistry. When they arrived in country, Bob had been assigned as a designer in public works, but Bunny was placed in the new and dreaded “non-matrix spouse” category, meaning her service was secondary to his. Responsible for locating her own work, she found a job splitting her time at Mashhad University hospital working with home care nurses dispensing government-provided birth control pills and assisting a university professor in setting up a new immunology library. Three months in, the professor heard that Alam needed a teacher for her field of expertise, biology and chemistry. Bunny taught at Alam for what remained of their two years in Mashhad.

**Matt Beha** (Quchan 1969-70), an English teacher, quit Peace Corps to teach at Alam. During the first school year, without explanation, Matt was told to move from his house and find other accommodations. Frustrated, he went to Mashhad during Now Ruz, where he talked with the head of the Iran-America Society, **Carter Bryant** (Torbat-e Jam, 1966-69), who told him about teaching positions available at the newly founded Alam School. Offered a position, he returned to Quchan to finish out the semester, discovering he had been evicted by SAVAK, not because of anything he had done, but because SAVAK didn’t think it looked good for an American to be living next door to their office, which abutted Matt’s house! Although the eviction was overturned, he decided to honor his contract with Alam to teach during the upcoming school year, thus ending his Peace Corps service.

**Mary and Jim King** (Bam, 1968-70) committed to a year at Alam and Mashhad University. While Mary was at Alam teaching English—she had taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade English in two schools in Bam—Jim taught scientific English to science majors at Mashhad University “... going into agronomy, veterinary science, pre-med, biology. So there was lots of technical jargon, or a more

elevated use and level of English, [with] a lot of focus on reading, as the texts for most core courses were in British or U.S. English.”

Following their service, **Norman and Sonna Loewenthal** (Birjand, 1968-70) joined Alam, Sonna teaching English and Norm history. Following Sonna’s retirement as a municipal administrator, she earned a master’s degree in teaching English as a Second Language and for a number of years taught ESL in Durham, NC, public schools, where many of her students were from immigrant families. Norm writes that “Now, through Church World Service, we both volunteer in teaching ESL to adult refugees who come to Durham from many places in the world and, consciously or not, I am sure that we draw on our experiences in Iran in doing so. Since some of the refugees are Dari-speaking people from Afghanistan or Pakistan, we even occasionally draw on our very rusty Farsi.”

**Jim Goode** (Tuyserkan, 1968-71) taught for two years following his three years of Peace Corps service. “I enjoyed my two years at Alam. It was quite a change coming from Tuyserkan, where I would be happy if a student could carry on a very basic conversation after two years of English. At Alam many students seemed to be fluent in English, and some of them had no accent whatsoever! ...I taught world history my first year. With their prodigious abilities to memorize, student essays were like reading from a book. Not a whole lot of critical thinking, I’m afraid. Many of our students went on to bigger and better things, becoming doctors, engineers, businessmen, professors.”

**David Munro** (Libya, 1968-69; Iran 1969-72) transferred to Iran from Libya following the 1969 Libyan coup and taught English in Fariman, followed by a year at Alam and at Mashhad University during the 1971-72 academic year. While he was able to get one of his best students from Fariman into Alam, he admits his motivation to remain in Iran to teach was “determined at least in part by a desire to stay out of the Vietnam War, still raging at that time.”

**David McBride** (Iran, 1967-69) taught English at Iranzamin International School in Tehran, the American School of Isfahan, and then Alam following his Peace Corps service.

**Jim and Pamela McCloud** (Shushtar, 1968-70), following two years teaching at middle school in Shushtar, taught for one year at Alam. Jim taught English while Pamela taught world history at Alam and English at Mashhad University. Jim remembers the students as smart, serious, and well-behaved. Pamela writes, “All went well in history class until I addressed the 5<sup>th</sup> century Persian Wars. My Iranian students had a different view of history when it came to the victor. That, and using the generally accepted Shatt al Arab River vs. the Persian Arvand Rud, created some of the more animated classroom moments.” Wonderful friendships with teachers who were fellow Peace Corps volunteers are also remembered.

Alam students were unlike those often encountered in public schools. **Bernadette Marriott** remembers her students as attentive, bright, and a pleasure to teach. “One really exciting aspect of the Alam School was that one quarter of the students were girls!” Enthusiastic, well-disciplined, and respectful, the students were eager to learn, “some of the brightest and best of Iran’s future” according to a documentary produced about the elite Iranian school. Everything changed following the 1979 Revolution: Alam was closed in 1980 and the building transformed into a prison for political dissidents in 1981. “It soon held captive some of the very same students who, months or years earlier, were being groomed to be the best Iran had to offer.” (See documentary, 2017, by Yaghmai-Aledavoud.)

**Dr. Saied Saiedi**, a civil engineer and educator who attended Alam, has edited *Alam High School* (2018, 512 pages), a retrospective of memories of Alam by graduates and teachers that includes 20 interviews with former Iranian and American teachers. The bilingual (Persian and English) book contains an extensive introduction to the school's history, preliminary list of students (900), and hundreds of historical pictures of the students and recent reunions in Iran and abroad. In order to include the memories of Peace Corps volunteers in the next edition of the book, Dr. Saiedi would like to hear from volunteers who taught at Alam, plus he has copies of the current book available for \$45 pp. His contact information is: Saied Saiedi, [saied.for.alam.book@gmail.com](mailto:saied.for.alam.book@gmail.com).



Dr. Saied Saidi