The sound of a bomb detonating breaks the stillness of Kandahar’s morning hours. To Sarah Chayes ’84, in her office in the small building that is home to the soap and body-oil cooperative she has founded, the blast sounds like heavy boxes cascading onto an upstairs floor. Like everyone in the southern Afghan city, Chayes is accustomed to the sound of gunfire or the dull throb that accompanies suicide and roadside bombs, but this time the shock wave that usually rattles windows is missing. “That means that the explosion must have been quite far away,” she says. But its impact becomes clear moments later when ambulances, taxis, and private cars rush through the streets carrying the injured to hospitals. The scenario is not unusual, Chayes says. “The thing is, you live with it and it starts to feel normal.”

It’s been six years since Chayes, a courageous and energetic Cambridge native, first came to Kandahar as a reporter. As a National Public Radio “smoke jumper”—a foreign correspondent dispatched to crises—she had left her Paris base numerous times to report on the conflicts in the Balkans and in Algeria during the 1990s. But Afghanistan kindled a deep fascination in her. Rather than staying in hotels with other international journalists, she moved in with a Kandahar family, learned Pashto, and formed close friendships with the locals, including President Hamid Karzai’s family. But she was increasingly frustrated by the fact that she wasn’t contributing to how the conflict turned out. “As a journalist I was only there, holding my microphone in people’s faces, but I wasn’t part of the story.”

She also felt a growing disillusionment with Western culture and its current emphasis on dividing the world into two opposing blocs: the West versus Islam. “I don’t believe in the clash of civilizations,” she says. “I believe that most human beings share some basic aspirations and basic values.” The extent to which different people have achieved their aspirations depends on what has befallen them over time, and not on some irrevocable cultural difference, she adds. So when President Karzai’s uncle asked her, in early 2002, to stay in Kandahar to help get the country back on its feet, she didn’t think twice. “That was the opportunity I had been waiting for,” she remembers. “I could talk to people on both sides of this alleged divide and help them hear each other.”

Chayes first served as field director for the nongovernmental organization Afghans for Civil Society (www.afghansforcivilsociety.org), which has helped rebuild a village destroyed during the war, launched successful income-generation projects for Kandahar women, and conducted various socioeconomic studies. But in 2004, she chose to move into the economic sector because it seemed critical to the country’s rehabilitation. The following spring she opened Arghand (www.arghand.org),
which manufactures natural skin-care products from the abundant fruits and nuts of the orchards of southern Afghanistan and exports them to the United States and Canada. To date, the cooperative supplies more than a dozen stores; others are waiting in line.

Arghand, which is Persian for “triumphant” or “conquering,” tackles one of Afghanistan’s most dangerous problems: its dependence on the opium poppy. The country is the world’s leading supplier of opiates and its drug trade is booming. “That criminalizes politics and puts Afghanistan’s people at the mercy of armed gangs,” Chayes says. Growing the drought-resistant, high-value poppy plant is often the only choice for poor farmers in the south who have no other access to credit in a region where water is scarce and expensive and the value of licit produce fluctuates dramatically.

In this dire situation, Arghand is a glimmer of hope. The cooperative buys roses and produce such as pomegranates, almonds, and apricots directly from farmers at prices that compete with opium. Arghand also provides employment opportunities. Currently the cooperative consists of eight women and four men from different walks of life and varying educational backgrounds, including the former bodyguard of an assassinated Kabul police chief and several women who are single parents or have disabled husbands.

Life is harsh. Chayes, who lives in the same building that houses her cooperative, keeps a Kalashnikov AK-47 rifle in her room and Arghand’s male employees take turns spending the night in the building as a security measure. Chayes no longer drives unaccompanied to the U.S. military base from which she ships Arghand’s products. “The base is half an hour away,” she explains, “so if I have a flat tire, that becomes a life-threatening experience, because I’m immobilized and could become a target of opportunity.” She plans to stay in Afghanistan at least until Arghand is able to operate without her: perhaps in three to five more years. But the region has become increasingly volatile and violence has surged, leading her to wonder how much longer she can safely do her job. “The situation around us is quite grim,” she allows. “Kandahar and the Afghan south really feel like they are falling apart.” Just before she left for a two-month fundraising tour in August, three Afghans with known connections to “internationals” or the government were killed and their bodies were hung at three-day intervals in the village of one of Arghand’s members: “part of a massive intimidation campaign run by the Taliban,” she says. She is exploring ways to direct the cooperative remotely from her home in Paris more of the time. “That’s not just because of my own safety,” she notes, “but because my mere presence in Kandahar makes life much more dangerous for my cooperative members.”

Still, Arghand offers a source of encouragement for Chayes and others. “There is...
always something positive to fall back on,” she says. “Even if what’s happening at Arghand is small, it’s a positive development.”

The work is challenging. “What makes a really great Bordeaux is a mixture of different varieties of grapes in different proportions,” she explains. “It’s the same with soap.” She and her team experiment constantly with different seed oils to develop new formulas. Chayes even got in touch with the curators of a perfume museum in Grasse, the center of the French perfume industry, for expert advice.

The cooperative has enjoyed continuous growth and success since its inception. Last year, it was among 12 finalists in the BBC’s World Challenge, a global competition that seeks out projects and businesses that not only make a profit, but also give back to their communities.

But Chayes’s work reaches far beyond Arghand. Because she has relationships with Afghan leaders as well as with international officials and organizations, she is in a unique place to foster communication between them. “Since I started working in Afghanistan, I have encountered problems that I never would have seen as a reporter,” she says. “I am immersed in this incredible microcosm through which I can examine and analyze the policy context, and because I have access to people in decision-making positions, I can then take this analysis to them.”

Access to electricity, for example, is frequently a concern. Power lines that run through battle zones are frequently damaged and need constant repair. But when power didn’t return for several days in the winter of 2006, Chayes started to inquire. “I talked to the local electricity lineman and I learned that the Taliban were demanding money to fix the lines. In other words, they were holding electricity hostage.” She spoke to the political adviser to the NATO troop commander, who hadn’t known about the electricity problem. Subsequently, NATO troops launched a military operation to clear the Taliban out of an area they had controlled, thus securing the power lines.
in the region. “If I hadn’t come up against this problem myself,” she adds, “I never would have found out about it.”

Although Chayes no longer works as a radio reporter, she hasn’t abandoned journalism entirely. Her first book, The Punishment of Virtue (2006), chronicles her experiences in Afghanistan and explores Near Eastern history, the subject she studied as an undergraduate and during two years in a doctoral program at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. In the process of writing the book, she found herself revisiting her Harvard professors, including Gurney professor of history Roy Motta-hedeh, whose “moral and material support was precious.”

“I am glad these different threads of my life knitted themselves together, she says. “Interestingly, what I studied at Harvard has become the absolute foundation of what I have done with my life.” (A self-described “Harvard baby,” she is the daughter of the late Frankfurter professor of law, Abram Chayes ’43, LL.B. ’49, a pioneer of international law, and Antonia Handler Chayes ’50, a legal scholar, mediator, and former federal administrator who is now a visiting professor of international politics and law at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.)

She sees herself as a bridge between Islamic culture and the United States. “I discovered in the process of doing Arghand that the beneficiaries of our actions are just as numerous in the U.S. as they are in Afghanistan,” she says. Building relationships with retailers and other audiences, such as those she meets during fundraising tours throughout the United States and Canada, improves the reputation of Afghanistan in America and vice versa.

Arghand offers Americans a way to get involved and a way to help, she says. “I hope that this will influence the direction that our societies are going to take: whether we are going to live in a bipolar world consisting of two irrevocably hostile civilizations, or whether we are going to live in a world made up of interconnected civilizations that are different but not mutually exclusive. I think that is one of the biggest issues that our generation is confronted with in this century.” That’s a lofty goal, she acknowledges. “I know that whatever I have to offer is a drop in the bucket,” she says. “But I may as well put my drop in a crucial place. And Kan-dahar is such a place.”

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Eye on Harvard

Eye on Harvard is an Internet talk show “for and about Harvard people” that appears on InTimeTV.com. The subject matter is broad — topics so far have ranged from stem cells and evolutionary biology to adventure travel and North Korean politics. But the aim is specific: “bring together like-minded individuals who share a background, certain interests, and a history,” says Chicago-based host Ogan Gurel ’86. “It’s not just another TV show. It really represents a confluence of important social and technological trends.”

A medical doctor, Gurel also hosts Insights in Medicine, another InTimeTV show that targets physicians. On the Web, he says, “You have to build shows around specific niches, rather than for mass appeal.” Eye on Harvard’s guests have included Gurel’s classmate, Paul Kent ’86, assistant professor of pediatric hematology/oncology at Rush University Medical Center, who discussed the politics and ethics of research on stem cells and cord blood; evolutionary biologist Neil Shubin, Ph.D. ’87, now at the University of Chicago; and Nancy Collins, M.B.A. ’99, CEO of Global Adrenalin Inc., who talked about her transition from investment banking to travel entrepreneurship.

The show’s audience has grown steadily, from a few hundred to a few thousand viewers during the last several months. If the increasing popularity of Internet TV is any indication, the trend will continue. “Graduating from Harvard,” Gurel explains, “you always want to do the next best thing, and really make a mark.”

Comings and Goings

University clubs offer a variety of social and intellectual events, including Harvard-affiliated speakers (please see the partial list below). For further information, contact the club directly, call the Harvard Alumni Association at 617-495-3070, or visit www.haa.harvard.edu.
