By Aleta Mayne

Speaking on her cell phone in Boston’s Logan International Airport, Susan Retik Ger ’90 is about to board a plane to Pittsburgh. There, she will attend a public screening of Beyond Belief, the documentary about how she has reached out to help widows in Afghanistan after losing her own husband in the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Rewind to September 11, 2001. Susan’s husband, David Retik ’90, was in the same airport, on his cell phone, saying goodbye to Susan before boarding American Airlines Flight 11. After hanging up, David boarded the plane and took his seat in the first row of first class. As the 33-year-old prepared for his business meeting in Los Angeles, another 33-year-old, with much different intentions, was seated across the aisle. Mohamed Atta, the Egyptian-born terrorist who would become known as the ringleader of the World Trade Center attacks, was getting ready to hijack the Boeing 767 and fly it into the North Tower.

As the subsequent events affected people the world over, Susan’s life was turned upside down and set on a new course.

Susan Zalesne and David Retik had met as Colgate first-years at a party in their dorm, Andrews Hall. “I thought David was adorable the minute I met him,” she recalled. “I remember thinking, if I made a checklist of everything I wanted in a person, he had it all.” She even called her mom and told her, “I think I met the man I want to marry.” But, both were seeing other people at the time. It wasn’t until the end of their sophomore year that Susan started thinking of furthering their friendship. Knowing they were both going abroad the following year, she decided that as soon as they came back to campus, she was going to ask him out. That very first week of their senior year, Susan bumped into David at the annual town-gown barbecue on the Village Green. When he said he was going to the library, she asked for a ride.

“Mind you, I had no reason to go to the library — I had no book, no pencil, nothing,” she said, laughing. “Over the course of that half-mile ride, I managed to stutter out, ‘Do you want to go out with me sometime?’” He said yes, and as soon as they got to the library, Susan ran to the pay phones to call her mom with the news. David called her soon afterward to ask her to dinner and a movie, and they were a couple from then on.

Following graduation, Susan and David moved separately to New York, where she got a job at Scholastic in educational publishing and he went to work for Ernst & Young in a program that enabled him to simultaneously earn his master’s at New York University. In 1993, David was offered a job with the venture capital firm Burr, Egan, Deleage & Co. in Boston. He asked Susan to move with him, so they relocated to Brookline, Mass. Two years later, they got married, and their son, Benjamin, was born in 1997. After moving to Needham, Mass., and the birth of their daughter Molly in 1999, Susan quit her job at Houghton Mifflin to be a stay-at-home mom. David had become a founding partner at Alta Communications, a successor firm to his previous company.

Having built their dream life together, the Retiks were expecting their third child when David boarded Flight 11 for that business trip. At 8:46 a.m., their lives would forever change. Seven months pregnant, Susan was in her car running errands when she turned off the children’s music and heard the NPR reports. “As I was driving, it just became more clear that there was a possibility this was Dave’s plane,” she remembered. Susan returned home to look at David’s itinerary, and knew in that moment when she confirmed his flight number.

“I remember thinking, I can’t wait until my mom gets here,” Susan recalled in the beginning of Beyond Belief. “I just felt then it would all be
The events of September 11, 2001, took Susan Retik Ger ’90 from Needham, Mass., to Kabul, Afghanistan, to the U.S. White House. This is the story of how she has turned a tragedy in her life into an opportunity to improve the lives of others.

OK. And I remember, she came and I got up to give her a hug, and I realized, it’s not OK, she can’t make it better.” Susan’s family and David’s parents came to help with the children so that she could have time to grieve. Numerous friends, neighbors, and total strangers from around the world showed their support — her mailbox overflowed with cards and letters, and quilts and toys for her children were left on her doorstep.

“Life was such a haze back then,” she said. Typical of her type-A personality, Susan kept busy, partly as a means of coping. Baby Dina (named after David) was born on November 19. As if a newborn didn’t present enough challenges, in January, Susan got the family a puppy. “I never stopped,” she admitted.

In the ensuing months, as the United States prepared to invade Afghanistan in retaliation for the World Trade Center attacks, the news became inundated with stories about the Afghan people. Watching the coverage, as a recent widow herself, Susan was overcome by the hardships that Afghan women face.

“I just could not imagine living in Afghanistan and having the same thing happen to me — losing my husband and not being able to support my children, not knowing where the next meal was going to come from,” she said. “Even though losing David was so devastating, from what I was reading and seeing on TV, I realized I was still one of the lucky ones. You look at those women begging on the streets, covered in burqas, not allowed to go to school, not allowed to work, and I just realized, we are so lucky to be born in the United States with all these freedoms.”

That comparison of her life to the lives of widows in Afghanistan inspired her to create Beyond the 11th, a nonprofit organization with a twofold mission: to fundraise for partner nongovernmental organizations that give Afghan women the opportunity to learn a trade and become self-sufficient, and to raise awareness for the plight of those women.

Today, there are approximately two million Afghan widows, who are “stripped of whatever resources and respect they had when they were married,” according to Beyondthe11th.org. Approximately 94 percent are illiterate; their average income is $16 per month, versus $46 for male-headed households in the country. According to a 2006 UNIFEM survey, 65 percent of the 50,000 widows in Kabul “see suicide as the only option to get rid of their miseries and desolation.”

Beyond the 11th started with a friendship. In February, Susan met another woman widowed on 9/11, Patti Quigley, who lived in nearby Wellesley. Mutual acquaintances had suggested that Susan and Patti get together because they were both pregnant when their husbands were murdered. In addition to their shared experience, their personalities clicked, and they became instant friends. “Susan has this energy that, as soon as you meet her, you know exactly where she stands, and I love that,” Patti said in Beyond Belief.

Not long after their friendship began, Susan approached Patti with an idea: to reach out to Afghan widows. At first, she wanted to help just one or two women. “It was never my intention to start a nonprofit,” she explained. “My whole idea was to help one family the way so many people have helped me … to make one woman’s life easier so she doesn’t have to worry about feeding her kids and providing shelter and clothing, so that she can focus on raising her kids and grieving.” Susan also wanted to make a connection. “I wanted to reach out and say, ‘This is who I am — who are you? Let’s learn about each other.’ Because I didn’t hate them, and I didn’t think they hated me.” The pair quickly realized that the amount of money they each contributed would help many more than just one or two Afghan women.

They threw themselves into researching Afghanistan and learning how to establish a nonprofit. It was a welcome distraction for both. “My motto is, the busier you are, the less you have to think,” Susan said, adding, “which has served me really well in certain ways, and not as well in others — because eventually you have to take the time to think about everything that’s going on.”

While developing Beyond the 11th, Susan also dedicated her time as a board member of the Retik Mello Foundation, which was established in memory of David and his colleague Christopher Mello, who also was on Flight 11. In June of 2002, she organized the David Retik Fathers’ Day Fun Run and Walk to raise money for the foundation, which funds nonprofit programs in education and athletics. The event, which that year attracted 1,000 people and raised $45,000, was something Susan continued for five years.

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Afghan widows wait in line to receive rations of basic necessities such as cooking oil, flour, beans, and salt.

In the fall of 2003, Beyond the 11th became official. Shortly afterward, Susan faced one of those times when she was forced to think about what she'd been avoiding: David’s remains had been found, and although the family had a memorial service after 9/11, they could now hold his funeral, in Wayland, Mass. “It was horrible,” was all she would say in a recent interview. Afterward, Susan and her family traveled to Colgate, where a new gateway to Van Doren Field was being dedicated in honor of David and two other soccer alumni who perished in the attacks, Todd Pelino ’89 and Scott Coleman ’94.

For the next year, Susan and Patti focused on refining the mission of their organization and fundraising. “We realized we didn’t want to recreate the wheel, there are some fabulous NGOs that do great work in Afghanistan, so we had to learn about them,” Susan explained. They decided to partner with CARE International, a humanitarian organization that works to fight global poverty, and Women for Women International, which assists female survivors of war. Both organizations were already providing aid in Afghanistan, so beyond the 11th worked with them to create programs tailored to the needs of widows.

Susan and Patti also devoted their time to the second aspect of their mission: educating the American public about the plight of Afghan widows through various media outlets and speaking engagements. In one scene in Beyond Belief, they’re shown at the Lowell (Mass.) Police Academy.

“I have tried to turn this into something other than hatred,” Patti told the cadets. Susan added, “Not only would we like to help these widows with their basic necessities, we hope to undo, if even a small bit, of the hatred that has been learned both in Afghanistan and here in the United States. If these widows have the opportunity to learn about us and we about them, we can begin to learn the truth about one another. We feel if we can teach love and kindness as opposed to teaching hatred, that is the way terrorism will end.”

Susan and Patti also started training for their largest fundraiser yet: a three-day, 275-mile bike ride from Ground Zero to the Massachusetts 9/11 Memorial in Boston Public Garden. They set out September 9, 2004, and raised $140,000. The bike ride, which Susan has continued over the years in different iterations, highlights another striking comparison: “Here, I can say, I’m going to ride a bike from New York to Boston — and I didn’t even own a bike,” Susan said. “In Afghanistan, boys and men ride bikes, but women aren’t allowed to.”

Just a few weeks before the 2004 bike ride, a documentary named Beth Murphy heard about it. As chair of the board of the International Institute of Boston, a group that helps immigrants and refugees, Murphy was beckoned by the women’s story. “Not only did I think it was a story that needed to be told, but I also wanted to be the one to tell it,” she said. Initially, Susan hesitated to participate because she didn’t think anyone would be interested. But, as Murphy said, “It was very clear to me from the outset what the film would be: that we would have an appreciation for what had happened to them, share the kinship they were feeling with Afghan widows, and ultimately travel with them to Afghanistan as they meet the women they were helping.” Although a trip to Afghanistan was not yet planned, “they had always expressed to me not just a desire to go, but also feeling a real need to go there,” Murphy explained.

Filming began on what would become the award-winning Principle Pictures film Beyond Belief. The emotional and, at times, chilling documentary follows Susan and Patti from their 2004 departure from Ground Zero on their bikes, to the planning of their Afghanistan trip, to their 2006 journey across the globe to meet the women they were helping. About a year and a half into filming, the project almost took a different direction when there was a question about whether or not the trip would happen. Their main point of contact in Afghanistan, CARE employee Clementina Cantoni, was kidnapped at gunpoint and held hostage by a gang in Kabul. “As soon as I heard this, my initial reaction was, I’m not going, forget it, this is crazy — they’re targeting aid workers,” Susan said.

“My first thought was, I was nervous because of the kids, and my second thought was, we don’t need any more losses,” echoed David’s mother, Lynn. Protesting Cantoni’s capture, Afghan widows filled the streets of Kabul. For women who generally don’t have a voice and rarely even defend themselves, their signs and shouts of protest on behalf of Cantoni spoke volumes. After a month, Cantoni was freed.

Eight months later, Susan and Patti realized they both still wanted to go. Plans for the trip resumed. Arriving in Kabul on May 10, 2006, they were aghast by what they saw. Despite their research and their preparation for the trip — like shopping for culturally appropriate clothing — the reality of Afghanistan troubled them. “We had seen so many images on TV of women in burqas and begging on the street, so you think you’re prepared for it, but when you looked around and everywhere there seemed to be someone in need,” Susan said.

Traveling through the infrastructure of their partner NGOs, the women met the widows they were helping and got a glimpse of their daily lives. A particularly unsettling scene shows a sea of blue burqas as approximately 500 widows stand in the hot sun waiting in line for their rations. They also visited the widows’ one-room houses, which had no furniture, no running water, and no electricity. “This is poverty with a capital P,” Susan said.

Gathering in a small room packed with widows all sitting on the floor, they listened to them tell of their tribulations. “I want to thank my sisters for helping us so much,” one woman told them. “I’ve had a terrible life. A lot of my children have died from starvation. I wish you could have come earlier so my children wouldn’t have died. They went in the ground hungry.”

Another widow told them how an American bomb killed her husband and fractured her daughter’s skull and blinded her.

“Before we met you, we wanted to help you — now that we’ve met you, we really want to help you,” Susan told the group. “We will tell your stories when we go home, and we will continue to help support you.”

One of their income-generating initiatives is a poultry-rearing program in which they provide widows with chickens and feed to enable them to sell...
the eggs and have some for their families. While in Afghanistan, Susan and Patti assessed the program. “We learned what worked and what didn’t and what we could do to change it,” Susan said. “Originally, the women got fifteen chickens, but they needed more in case some got sick or didn’t produce as many eggs. With our next round of grants, we were able to change it to fifty.”

Before departing for Afghanistan, Susan had said she believed their trip would be successful if she could find a true connection with at least one woman. She did form a bond — with a woman named Sahera, who voiced her story in Beyond Belief. Sahera explained that her in-laws forced her to wear a burqa in public, even though she couldn’t see out of it and it made her dizzy.

On a return trip to Afghanistan in 2009, Murphy tracked down Sahera to deliver a video message from Susan. When Murphy found her, she was “so excited” to see that Sahera was not wearing a burqa. Sahera’s life had changed, and so had Susan’s. She had found love again. When Susan returned from Afghanistan, the man she had been dating, Donald Ger, proposed. The couple was married seven months later and welcomed baby Rebecca into their family in 2008. Via video, Susan shared her good news with Sahera. In return, Sahera recorded a video message for Murphy to take back to Susan. Sahera told her that because of the poultry program, she was able to sell the chickens to buy fabric and support her family by sewing for women in her village. “The bond that we have is not typical,” Sahera told her. “We are not just two people who have met. We are like sisters. I hope that we will meet again.”

“It’s really difficult to stay in touch,” Susan explained recently. “But I know she’ll be a part of my life in some way for many years to come, regardless of how often we actually communicate.”

Today, Susan continues her full-time job as a mom and running Beyond the 11th on her own. Patti stepped down in 2005, but she still devotes time to causes benefiting Afghanistan and the two are still close friends.

Over the years, Susan has significantly expanded Beyond the 11th, which now has given out more than $600,000 in grants. The organization currently partners with four NGOs that empower Afghan women and has begun sponsoring a microfinance program.

As part of her goal to educate people about the cause, she does speaking engagements (she recently spoke at a mosque for the first time and raised $11,000 there) and travels to some of the public screenings of Beyond Belief (one will be at the Hamilton Theater this February). “The core message I hope people walk away with is, we are all one,” Susan said. “It doesn’t matter what religion you are, or what country you’re born in. Pain is pain, no matter if your husband is killed here in the United States, or in Afghanistan.”

The differences in cultures do, at times, present challenges for Susan’s work with Beyond the 11th, because she must operate within the confines of the limitations placed on Afghan women. “It’s difficult because there are so many fabulous business ideas out there, so many wonderful things that they could do to earn money, but there are constraints,” she said, noting, for example, that women mostly have to work from home.

It’s also frustrating for Susan to know that Afghan women can’t enjoy many of the personal freedoms she has. For example, while Susan is happily remarried and has added to her family, if Afghan widows remarry, they must leave their children behind with their first husband’s family. Many choose poverty so their children can stay with them.

And while Susan is grateful for her Colgate degree, educational opportunities for Afghan women are scarce. “Women aren’t even supposed to go to a male doctor, but there are so few women doctors in Afghanistan because under the Taliban, educated people fled for fear of being persecuted,” Susan said. “Their choices are so difficult.”

With an appreciable gumption, Susan has made the most of the freedom with which she has been blessed. Her work has attracted the attention of Oprah Winfrey, has been written about in numerous publications including the New York Times and Boston Globe, and last August was recognized by President Barack Obama. She was awarded the 2010 Presidential Citizens Medal, the nation’s second-highest civilian honor.

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“No one would have blamed Susan if she turned inward with grief or anger, but that’s not who she is,” Obama told the crowd at the ceremony for the 13 award winners.

“To think that the president of the United States knows my name and my work, it was unbelievable,” Susan gushed.

True to her character, she made sure to shift the focus back to the women she’s helping. In a White House interview after receiving the award, she said, “It’s an incredible honor, but I hope that some of the light shed on Beyond the 11th’s work will transfer over to the women in Afghanistan. They’re really the ones who need all of the attention right now. We can’t leave them behind; we need to remember that we need to work really hard for them.”