A homeland revisited
Endeavor helps connect Iran’s past with its present

BY Brynn Nandel
Republican-American

The stereotypes about her homeland disturbed Cima Sedigh. The Sacred Heart University education professor would query students about what they knew about Iran. Lobbied back at the Bethlehem woman were words like terrorism, extremism and violence.

"It’s nuclear proliferation, and it’s terrorism and you don’t think of anything outside of that," said Sedigh, adding the erroneous picture that frequently features women sheathed in black.

Changing that limited perception took Sedigh on an eight-year journey of exploration and self-revelation chronicled partly on film. Sedigh followed the seasonal migration of a nomadic tribe, the Bakhtiari, in the mountains of Southwestern Iran.

The educational documentary that resulted, "Bakhtiari Alphabet," will be shown Sunday as part of the Kent Film Festival (see If You Go, far left). Screened at various universities and slated for the Boston International Film Festival, Sedigh hopes the film finds its way to the United Nations, to raise awareness among policy makers of the ways in which indigenous, nomadic people connect the past and present.

The deceptively simple Bakhtiari lifestyle hearkens back to ancient Persian traditions, said Sedigh, something that resonated deeply with her.

For Sedigh, painting a broader picture of her homeland began by re-learning it herself. She left Shiraz at 18 to attend college in California, and did not return for 17 years. By the time of her next visit, another 17 years had elapsed.

"That piece of truth and reality that I want to bring my students? I had to research it myself," Sedigh said last week on a porch overlooking her fruit tree-dappled property.

The Bakhtiari's was not an easy path to follow. Sedigh initially encountered resistance as an American trying to gain access to a library to research the tribe.

Then, she had to find her subjects. She recruited the help of her sister, a dentist in Shiraz, who had a patient whose friend was a settled Bakhtiari. After a car ride to a remote area of Iran, they met another Bakhtiari whose uncle was among the tribal members who migrated according to the seasons, in pursuit of an eternal spring.

Next came logistical issues. The Bakhtiari traverse rugged terrain — clips in the film show brightly clad tribal members walking steep and

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Traditional outfits that Cima Sedigh of Bethlehem brought back from Iran. Her documentary, "Bakhtiar Alphabet," focuses on a nomadic Iranian tribe.

SEDIGH: Film follows Iranian tribe's trek

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rocky ranges, hopscotching from boulder to boulder across rivers. Mothers and babies and men and herds of dozens of sheep make this journey, with horses and donkeys frequently in tow. They hike the range on a three-to-five week migration along what Sedigh calls a path of eternal return, between summer and winter grounds.

Traveling to meet tribe members during one winter break, Sedigh reconvened driving a treacherous stretch of road in a unreliable vehicle.

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"It is severe winter," she said, displaying a photograph in which a blanket of white fog and clouds mingled with mountain snowcaps. "We are driving on the peaks." Two additional challenges? Her footage was stolen, twice. Sedigh said that on the first filming trip in 2001 she partnered with a British filmmaker who absconded with footage they obtained. "I had to start all over," she said. She partnered with Iranian filmmaker Reza Ghadryan — a collaboration Sedigh described as fortuitous since he immediately shared her passion. But another setback came when Ghadryan's "Tehran Studio was broken into in 2005. Again, they lost footage and time. Sedigh took seven trips, including a six-month sabbatical, to make the film, receiving two small grants and chipping in herself. Sedigh wants her chronicle to contribute to the preservation of this ancient way of life.

"The history and the lifestyle goes back to Biblical times," she said, explaining that highlighting tribal education illuminated how it perpetuated the community's culture. For example, on the Bakhtiar's carry a lantern, even in daylight, in a nod to a pre-Islamic respect for the God of Light. "They have safeguarded Persian history, so if we want to keep our history, we need to keep them." Beyond learning about the Bakhtiar, Sedigh said making the film transformative. Living among people in tents who pack all they own on the backs of donkeys prompted her to recalculate her values. "Their life is about unity, purity, love and care," said Sedigh, gazing at a nearby pond and, beyond, the rolling Bakhtiar hills that look like a puzzle to gleam under the sun. "How often do I get to express my love for trees, for skies, for neighbors?"

Meanwhile, Sedigh caught the filmmaking bug. A hobbyist painter, she said, "It was the immediacy that translating her research into a visual form afforded." Inspired by the Bakhtiar, Sedigh crafts, she has already begun a follow-up film on tribal crafts. "It's the sense of being on display on the bodies of the nomads trekking from one seasonal ground to the next. On mountain passes and in everyday life, the women wear sequined skirts and hand-beaded hats in ensembles accented by hand-sewn scarves with glinting gold decorations. The clothes, said Sedigh, reflect the beauty of the Bakhtiar see around them in nature. And the reaction from students to whom she has shown the film? "They say, 'Oh, wow, we never pictured Iran to be so beautiful,"' said Sedigh. "That is why I wanted my work to be in a form of art. It is a beauty that brings people together."