

Mongolian Heights

Luce Scholar goes the distance to close technology's gap

Mongolia may not be every recent graduate's first choice for a post-Carolina excursion, but for **Alex Mehfar '01**, it's the perfect place to help bridge the digital divide. Fewer people are connected to the Web in the entire country than on Carolina's South Campus – something Mehfar's trip will go a long way toward changing.

Mehfar is locating to Mongolia as a Luce Scholar. The scholarship, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation of New York, allows students to live in Asia for 10 months, where it matches the interests of recipients with those of Asian companies. Mehfar will be working with DataCom, an Internet service provider in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar, creating e-commerce opportunities and expanding Internet services to rural areas of the country.

Mehfar, a member of the Order of the Golden Fleece who graduated Phi Beta Kappa, is one of only 18 Luce Scholars nationwide and the 22nd UNC student to win the award since the program began in 1974. UNC is second only to Harvard in Luce Scholarships, for which students can apply up to age 29. "The staff at the Luce Foundation told me the award is aimed at well-rounded students," says Mehfar, "and they like students coming out of UNC – they said UNC students make good diplomats."

Although Mehfar never had the opportunity to study abroad as a Carolina student, he did have an abbreviated experience in his parents' native country of Iran last year. A native of England, he is now an American citizen, but he can be drafted into military service in Iran if he stays more than three months. So Mehfar spent the summer

working on a photojournalism project through his Morehead Scholarship. (To view the project, go to www.ils.unc.edu/~mehfa/iran.html.)

"I returned to Iran for the first time since I was 5 years old," he says. "My parents had fled the country then, because of a bloody revolution and an even bloodier war that followed. ... I journeyed back to study the legacy of a revolution whose beginning signaled a new beginning for me as well. For me, this trip tied personal history with a country's history in order to understand what had caused my parents to leave everything behind for a chance at the unknown."

A willingness to tackle the unknown runs in the family. Mehfar had to learn the Mongolian language from scratch this summer in an intense study in Bloomington, Ind. And he hasn't been shy about diving in and starting new things in the past, either. As a student, he and several friends co-founded Students Engaged in Technology for the Future, a group designed to bridge the digital gap among middle school students in the Chapel Hill area. He also co-founded SOCKHELP, an online program that identifies business opportunities for sock manufacturers.

Mehfar credits his relationships with key professors for his interest in using business tools in service to the commu-

nity and his success in winning the Luce Scholarship. An economics and political science double-major, he said he was inspired by Professor Joel Schwartz in a class on race, poverty and politics and by Professor Rachael Willis in a class on

race, gender, and economics. But he also impressed the teachers. "I can't tell you how many times I've gotten a call from them or other professors about a research opportunity, a job or a grant," he says. "Kids I met from other schools during the Luce interview process were amazed at the relationships I've been able to build at UNC."

If he chooses, Mehfar will have a job waiting for him when he returns from

Mongolia with a management consulting firm in San Francisco, where he hopes to work with nonprofits. And he eventually might like to get a graduate degree, perhaps an MBA/JD or a master's in public policy.

He knows his 10 months in Mongolia will be a life-changing experience. And while the future for Mehfar might look like a field of infinite possibilities, what he is certain of is his determination to serve. "Perhaps, for me, it is a function of being from an immigrant family. My father came to this country with \$300 in his pocket, and so many people helped us," he says. "I feel a need to give back – to my family and to others." ■

—Miriam Sauls '73



Mehfar will shoulder responsibilities for bringing the Internet to rural Mongolia.

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