Hurricane Nadia

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From the day she arrived at Furman in September 2002, Nadezhda Dimitrova Savova of Sofia, Bulgaria, cut a swath through the campus that few before her have matched.

A talented artist and writer, fluent in four languages, she made waves immediately as an on-line journalist for the Admissions Office, where she shared her energy and high-octane personality in long, lyrical postings about the joys of college, from classes to residence hall life to parties (oh, how she loves to dance) and everything in between. She embellished her entries with an equally extensive bank of photographs — almost all of them featuring her, mugging exuberantly for the camera.

Here was someone who was having the time of her life — and didn't mind letting the world know it.

"I was so fascinated by everything," she says today in her husky, richly accented voice. "I was soaking in everything and more, and I just wanted to talk about all of it — the food, the flowers, the birds flying by."

After that first year, it was time to explore the world outside the Furman bubble. She spent the next three years (summers included) doing just that — in Washington, D.C., Spain, Cuba, Peru, Mexico, South Korea, Chile, and points between and beyond. "She probably set a record for participating in the most study away programs," says Benny Walker, vice president for enrollment.

When the end came on June 3, 2006, she walked away with her mega-watt smile still in place and her Bachelor of Arts degree in political science and Spanish, Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude. Oh, and the Donaldson-Watkins Medal for General Excellence, awarded annually to the outstanding woman graduate.

More than one person has called her a force of nature, given her zest for life and determination to wring every possibility out of her undergraduate experience. Others coined an even more descriptive phrase for her: Hurricane Nadia.

Her impact on those she met, on campus and off, is not likely to be lost any time soon.

"She is one of my favorite students in my 35 years at Furman," says Walker.

"One of the most memorable students during my 23-year career at Furman," is the way political science professor Cleve Fraser describes her.

So how was Furman fortunate enough to embrace — and be embraced by — Nadia Savova?

Step back a few years to a time when Nadia, hoping to study in America, was ramping up her college search. While taking the
BY JIM STEWART

**BRACE YOURSELF, WORLD. HERE COMES NADIA SAVOVA.**

SAT, she asked a young man sitting nearby where he was sending his scores. His reply: “Furman.”

Her response: “What’s a Furman?”

Turns out that her friend knew another Bulgarian student who had attended Furman. So Nadia, who was already thinking liberal arts, decided to give this place called Furman a shot. After investigating further and liking what she saw, she submitted her application.

Her college choice came down to Furman and Bates, a leading liberal arts school in Lewiston, Maine. “Furman was a little bigger, and it was in the South, where I knew people were friendly,” she says. “I was also thinking of majoring in art, and Furman’s art building and department were impressive.”

The biggest influence on her decision, she says, was the persistence of William Lavery, professor of history and director of international education, and admissions director Woody O’Cain. Their openness and honesty — and the offer of a full-tuition Goodwill Scholarship — helped seal the deal.

Once she arrived, she found that her interests and intellect meshed with Furman’s emphasis on engaged learning and on providing nontraditional avenues through which students can pursue their educations. And she thrived in the liberal arts environment.

“You have so much open space for development, so much freedom and so many opportunities to explore new things,” she says. “I needed that.

“In Europe, you tend to be limited to one field and the educational process is more restrictive. Here, I could find myself.”

Certainly, people had no trouble finding her. She quickly became a leader in FUISA, Furman’s association of international students, and in the Model United Nations program. She worked with the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership. She held three teaching assistantships. She

A child shows off an icon she painted under Nadia Savova’s direction; at graduation, Nadia and her mother, Darina (far right), share a hug with Bill Howes ’59, former chair of the Furman board, and his wife, Mary, who provided support for Nadia’s education through Furman’s Partners Scholarship Program. Nadia says, “They’ve been a family for me here.”
When studying and traveling abroad, Nadia Savova always sought to make personal connections with the local citizenry. In Chile, she joyously joined a demonstration in support of Michelle Bachelet, who was elected the country’s first woman president in January.

worked several on-campus jobs, from food services to the language resource center, and sent money home to her family.

She also taught art classes in Furman’s Learning in Retirement program. Trained in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of icon painting, a strictly regimented style that she has practiced since the sixth grade, she shared her talents not just with the FULIR students, but with her peers and teachers — and with the people of Chiapas, Mexico.

As a recipient of a Witness for Peace Delegation Scholarship, she traveled to Chiapas in the summer of 2005 to study the effect of neo-liberal policies on indigenous people and small farmers. While there, she offered workshops in icon painting and doll making for women and children who could then sell their art to alleviate their poverty.

Sofia Kearns, associate professor of Spanish, says, “What made Nadia different and special was her desire to explore beyond the boundaries of Western culture and to immerse herself in other cultures” — and to connect with the people she met along the way.

Especially, it seems, with children. In Peru, for example, Nadia interned with Amnesty International and helped develop public health programs for children in the slums of Lima. On a trip to Chile, she volunteered at an orphanage for abused girls — and joined with other Furman students to start a non-profit organization to provide ongoing aid to the children. (See accompanying story).

Now that she’s come to Furman and seen the world, or at least a lot of it, she’s continuing to prepare for a career that will combine her interests in human rights, cultural policy and education. She enrolls at Princeton University this fall to pursue a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology.

The plan, she says, is “to complete two years of coursework, then do field research in Africa — I haven’t been there yet — and write my dissertation. In five years, I’ll be Dr. Savova.”

After that? Benny Walker says, “Because she is so multi-talented, she will have many opportunities. I’m not sure where she will end up, but I have no doubt about the ultimate outcome or the impact she will have on the people around her.”

And as Cleve Fraser says, “Her curiosity is boundless, her desire to make new friends is genuine, and her spirit is unquenchable and almost uncontainable.”

Combine that with her thirst for knowledge and desire to help others, and what do you have? Says Fraser, “I have every expectation that Nadia will be the first female president of Bulgaria.”

Stay tuned for future chapters in the Chronicles of Nadia.