



Celebrating 50 years of NU Trailblazers!

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Tehran to Vermont: Sussan (Shahin) Coley '83



In 1979, Sussan (Shahin) Coley embarked on a transformative journey from Tehran, Iran, to Norwich University. Hailing from a group of 27 female Imperial Navy recruits whose tuition was paid-in-full by the Shah of Iran, Sussan was pursuing an engineering major while actively participating in the Norwich Corps of Cadets. The progressive Shah, recognizing the need for increased female representation in the Iranian armed forces, sent women like Sussan to American universities as part of a broader initiative. Sussan recalled, "The plan was to acclimate us, go through the process, complete our study, go back home, serve in the Navy and repeat the experience with more women."

However, the political landscape shifted dramatically with the onset of the Islamic Revolution in October 1979.

The U.S. embassy in Tehran witnessed the seizure of 66 Americans as hostages, prompting the Shah of Iran to flee the country. Despite attempts by the United States, led by President Jimmy Carter, to negotiate the hostages' release, the newly established Ayatollah Khomeini regime refused. In response, in April 1980 President Carter implemented sanctions, including a ban on Iranian oil, and severed diplomatic ties with Iran. Within 48 hours, all Iranian diplomats and students were ordered to leave the U.S.



Sussan found herself forced to return to Iran, only to realize that living under the oppressive Khomeini regime was unsustainable. The consequences of being blacklisted and having her passport confiscated due to her association with the prior government were compounded by the loss of women's rights. Despite the challenges, Sussan was determined to leave her homeland, forging connections with passport office employees and befriending an Armenian woman at the Austrian Embassy.

After months of uncertainty, a brief lifting of the passport ban provided Sussan with a narrow window to escape to Vienna. Pretending to be the embassy employee's maid, she navigated through the complexities of displacement in Austria, where she faced language barriers, financial struggles, and periods of homelessness.

Colonel Anne Turner, VSM, director of the NU library, and her husband, George, who had assumed the role of Sussan's "American parents," along with Norwich University's President Loring Hart, rallied support to petition Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy for Sussan's return to Vermont. Following a difficult 11-month ordeal, she finally returned to Norwich to complete her Bachelor of Science degrees in electrical engineering and mathematics as a proud member of the Class of 1983.



In photos above, Sussan Coley says goodbye to Norwich faculty members, and waves goodbye, as Iranian Imperial Navy students board the deportation buses.

Sussan's journey didn't end at Norwich; she went on to forge a successful consulting career and positions with Fortune 500 companies like Polaroid, IBM and Microsoft. In 1995, she earned her MBA from Boston University and garnered certifications from Harvard University, all while working full-time. Her contributions extended to the field of medical imaging, where she holds two patents for her work on a digital mammography platform.

Today, Sussan resides on an island in Maine, embracing a philanthropic role by supporting nonprofits for marginalized women and students, and rescuing abused animals. Despite facing PTSD-inducing challenges, she leverages her life experiences to give back to future generations, exemplified by her two terms of service on Norwich's Board of Fellows.

hand you were dealt and how you played it. I've lost a lot. I have been fired. I have been dumped. But I think I have had a great life... awesome, so hard and so good."

Reflecting on her remarkable journey, Sussan emphasizes, "The riches of a person are based on the experiences they accumulate... It's what

Sussan Coley's narrative stands as a testament to resilience, determination, and the transformative power of education and opportunity.

To read a transcript of Sussan's interview for the Sullivan Museum's Oral History project, see: [Oral History Transcripts - Norwich University Archives & Special Collections.](#)

Records documenting women's history and experience at Norwich are available through the University Archives. <https://archives.norwich.edu/>

In 1972, Vermont College merged with Norwich University. 2024 marks the **50th anniversary** of the first women to live on the Northfield campus and the first to join the NU Corps of Cadets—two years prior to the US Service Academies!

Join the celebration!

Tell your story. Nominate NU trailblazers.

Contribute to the Women Kicking Glass Scholarship. [Learn more here...](#)