

# Beheading dragons works for some, but not for others

**T**raffic vibrated the Highway 101 bridge overhead as Nancy Wang eyed in palpable disbelief the likenesses of two sinewy, tail-to-tail dragons that adorn the Prince Memorial Greenway walking/cycling path.

"I really can't understand it," said Wang, long a leader of the Redwood Empire Chinese Association. "It's such a disgrace."

This was the Santa Rosan's first viewing of the 700-foot tile mural, paid for by the city and created by students and instructors in the acclaimed Artstart program, since a major modification eliminated the dragons' heads.

Vandals had repeatedly gouged the eyes and smashed the tiles on the heads. The city's Art in Public Places Committee took up a psychologist's suggestion to remove the attraction for vandals by removing the heads.

The reworking makes it appear that one dragon's head is dipped below the sidewalk and the second around the corner of the mural's western edge.

Wang finds it insensitive to the Asian culture to portray a dragon, a mythical creature imbued by many with great power over water and weather, without its head. The dragons created by the Artstart apprentices and staffers are beautiful, she said, and their placement alongside Santa Rosa Creek ideal.

But now, she said, they chose decapitation as the solution to vandalism.

"I'd prefer that they took the whole thing out rather than cut the heads out."

**GRATEFUL AFGHAN:** Sonoma County has almost adopted Zabitullah Aimal, a remarkable young man who risked his life serving U.S. soldiers in his native Afghanistan and who seems perfectly suited to the role he seeks in the world.

Aimal, a former combat interpreter who days ago had Rotary Club members in and around Santa Rosa laughing and cheering and clutching their hearts, aspires to be a peacemaker.

"The Afghan people are so tired of the fighting," the animated, sparkling, 26-year-old Muslim told Rotarians at the Flamingo Hotel.

Though bombings and other violence continues to wrack his homeland, he said, the American people should feel

good about the changes and the degree of security that this country has brought to Afghanistan.

Thanks to intervention and investment by the U.S., Aimal said, millions of Afghans now enjoy access to education, health care, the right to vote and many new roads and bridges, and there are signs the culture is moving from tribalism to democracy.

"We do have issues. I'm not going to sugarcoat everything," he said. But since

the United States first challenged the Taliban, he said, life in Afghanistan is certainly better, safer.

In his talks to Rotary clubs, Aimal reviews major events of his extraordinary life: Six months old when he lost his father to Afghanistan's war with the Soviet Union, he grew up desperately poor. But he was a good student, and at age 17 the English he'd learned on TV prompted a U.S. Army officer to hire him as an interpreter and cultural advisor.

In that role, Aimal witnessed how a Nevada National Guard unit greatly reduced attacks and combat casualties by meeting with tribal leaders and winning their support through dialogue and incentives such as jobs in school, bridge and other development projects.

A Guard officer from Nevada, also a Rotarian, was so impressed with Aimal he offered to help him come to America and to sponsor his college education. Today the Afghan has earned a degree in political science at the University of Nevada at Reno and he's about to travel to England as a Rotary Peace Fellow and study conflict resolution at the University of Bradford.

This summer he's spent time with local Rotary members, who made clear that they hope he and his wife, Asma Halim, will come back often.

One reason Aimal savors the chance to speak to Americans is to demonstrate that Muslims can have a sense of humor. He shared that when he was working as a teenaged interpreter and confided to his quite conservative mother that he worried about having to fast during Ramadan, she advised him, "Be a Baptist for a month."



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