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This is where Alterman learned some tough lessons about Afghanistan that the U.S. military would come to know all too well after 9/11. "Traveling in Afghanistan is extremely difficult," she said. "There are very few roads, no railroad, and the country is made up of high mountains and deep valleys." But she discovered a population that was rich and wise, fiercely proud, and very respectful. "The Afghan people were wonderful," Alterman said. "But the women I saw in the villages over there couldn't vote, own land, have a bank account; they were having a baby every year, and their life was backbreaking." What Alterman quickly realized was how good she had it. "I had no idea," she said. "I literally was one of the top one percent of the planet because of the opportunities and freedom and power to control my own life."

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BURGER COLUMN: Once upon a time in Afghanistan

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Jennet Robinson Alterman knew as a young girl growing up in Charleston she wanted to see the world. When she was 24, she got a real good look at it.

That's when she joined the Peace Corps after college and spent two years in Afghanistan creating health education material for women who couldn't read or write.

"I thought I was going to go to Fiji," said Alterman, who now directs the Center for Women in Charleston. "Instead, I got Afghanistan, which was the ultimate life-altering experience.

"I spent two years in a culture that was 180 degrees away from Charleston. And this was the best of times, before the Russians invaded and before the Taliban existed.

"But it was a culture where half the population was virtually powerless, because the medieval attitudes towards women were in full force."

Tough terrain

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50th anniversary

After Afghanistan, Alterman spent a three-year stint managing Peace Corps volunteers in Southern Africa, then five years in Washington, D.C.

Now that the Peace Corps is celebrating its 50th anniversary, she is proud of her service and still wants to help.

To that end, the Center for Women is hosting the screening of the documentary film "Once In Afghanistan," the story of how a small group of women in the Peace Corps traveled the country, went house to house, vaccinated people against smallpox in 1969, and virtually eliminated the disease.

Six of those women will be present Thursday at 6 p.m. when the film will be shown at the Terrace Theatre on James Island. Tickets are \$10 (763-7333 or www.c4women.org).

"What we want to show is that the Afghan people aren't the Taliban," Alterman said. "They're just like you and me. They just want to be able to have a peaceful existence, food to eat, and a roof over their head."

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