

ALUMNA EARNs DEGREE IN WAR-TORN BEIRUT

By DAVID C. HENLEY
FOR THE REGISTER

BEIRUT, LEBANON • It's difficult to comprehend the hazards and dangers that Chapman University alumna Jeannie D'Agostino has encountered here the past two years while pursuing a graduate degree at American University of Beirut.

Beirut is fraught with insecurity and peril from the escalating civil war spilling over into Lebanon from neighboring Syria, according to D'Agostino, who this summer was awarded a master's degree from the school.

The Syrian conflict, which has brought bloody warfare between supporters and enemies of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad throughout Lebanon, has forced this nation's capital city "almost to its knees," says D'Agostino, 25.

Along with internal violence perpetrated by the Lebanon-based Hezbollah terrorist organization, Beirut faces chaos from city-wide battles between Sunni and Shiite Muslim religious sects, the nation's political instability and a devastating economic crisis created by a decrease in foreign investments and a total lack of tourists.

Although the university campus is a "comparatively safe haven," it is "always on edge ... an explosion can take place anywhere and any time," adds D'Agostino.

Stephen Dockery, her American friend, neighbor and reporter for English-language Beirut newspaper Daily Star, agrees. He said all those studying and working at the university "always have on their mind" the on-campus assassinations of a university president, two deans, 20 students and staff members, the kidnappings of another president and 30 faculty (eventually freed) and the bombing and destruction of the university's administration building during the nation's 1975-90 civil war.

Today, residents of Beirut once again are seeing havoc and bloody strife arrive virtually on their doorsteps, says D'Agostino, who lives in a seaside apartment near the university.

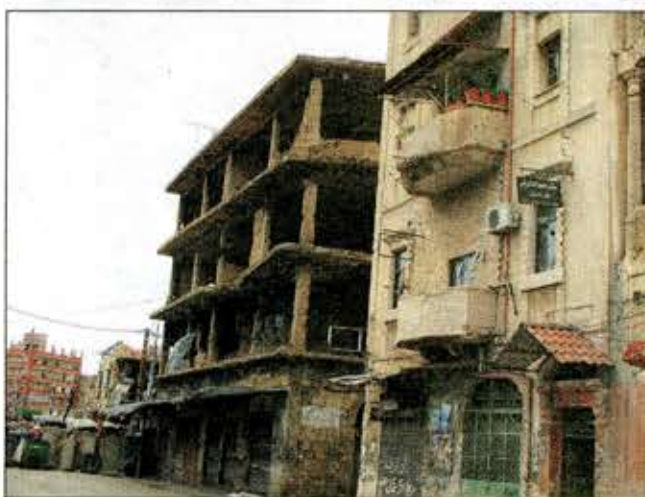
"I'm awakened nearly every night by gunfire and the roar and sirens of tanks, armored cars and ambulances racing to scenes of violence in my neighborhood," she said. "There is a frequent presence in the streets below my apartment of heavily armed civilian gangs."

"Beirut also is plagued with constant power failures, and with flashlight in hand I often must climb five flights of stairs to reach my room because the elevator and lights aren't working,"



PHOTOS: DAVID C. HENLEY, FOR THE REGISTER

Jeannie D'Agostino, who received an M.A. at the American University of Beirut, stands in front of AUB's College Hall, leveled by a bomb during the Lebanese civil war.



Shaken by bombs, buildings such as this one are found throughout Beirut in the midst of war.



Lebanese army tanks, armored cars and troops are stationed in D'Agostino's neighborhood.

she said.

Despite these challenges, D'Agostino said, "I must admit I like living in the fast lane. What an exciting time I've been having in Beirut!"

She and her two sisters are the daughters of career Army officers who served together at nearly a dozen posts overseas and in the states.

Her mother and father, retired lieutenant colonels, had several assignments in Europe, including at NATO headquarters in Belgium. The sisters attended public schools in Belgium, learning French and traveling throughout eastern and western Europe.

After high school, D'Agostino enrolled as an

undeclared major at Chapman University "because of its national reputation as a quality, small liberal arts school."

D'Agostino then double-majored in peace studies and French with a minor in political science.

She spent the summer before her senior year studying Arabic and Middle Eastern and North African history and cultures at the Chapman-affiliated Center for Cross Cultural Learning in Rabat and traveled extensively in North and sub-Saharan Africa.

By the time D'Agostino graduated from Chapman in 2010, she had won several honors such as the Delp Award in Peace Studies and

a \$26,000 scholarship from Rotary Foundation.

Despite U.S. warnings that Americans "should avoid all travel to Lebanon," D'Agostino's parents and grandmother were here in mid-June when she received her master's degree. Her thesis was titled "Opening a Dialogue about Lebanon's Missing and Disappeared: Victims' Voices in a Postwar Civilian Society."

In the days surrounding her commencement ceremony, a half-dozen Shiite men were killed in Beirut street fighting, five people were injured when rockets were fired into the city's suburbs, religious protesters set up roadblocks throughout the city, and the Lebanese military erected razor-wire fences and metal barricades around intersections, government buildings and military posts to guard against the mobs objecting to the cancellation of scheduled summer elections.

D'Agostino's immediate plans include travel to Jordan and Africa, followed by a long stay in Brussels, Belgium, where her parents live and her father is employed by NATO in a civilian administrative post.

She then will return to the U.S. and seek a position at an international "think tank" or nongovernmental organization that specializes in peace and conflict issues.

"I certainly will visit Chapman when I return to the United States. I have wonderful memories of Chapman University ... it is where my interest in Middle Eastern studies began and were nurtured," she said.

David Henley, a Newport Beach resident, is a foreign correspondent and a member of Chapman University's board of trustees.