

Published January 14th, 2015

Business Person of the Year - Leila Douglah

By Cathy Tyson



Leila Douglah in her Douglah Designs showroom in Lafayette. Photo Cathy Tyson

After arriving from overseas fresh out of college with \$500 in her pocket, successful business owner Leila Douglah is now living the American dream. It's no wonder she was recently voted the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce Marquis Business Person of the Year. She'll be honored on Jan. 30 at a special dinner at the Lafayette Park Hotel.

Although she was born in Minnesota, Douglah moved to Baghdad with her family when she was just 8 years old and stayed there for the next 16 years - through high school and college at the University of Technology in Baghdad. Her mother worked at the United Nations and her father was a professor at the university. After attending international school the first year of her stay, her parents decided that she and her two siblings should attend a regular local school to learn about the culture and master Arabic. She describes the first few years there as very challenging: "sink or swim."

Knowing there were virtually no opportunities for women in Baghdad due to political and economic constraints, this eager and studious young woman, upon receiving her degree in architecture, was hungry to get back to the States.

Armed with her degree, and a can-do attitude, she relocated at age 24 to Lafayette and quickly landed a job as an assistant kitchen designer at a large home improvement store. From there, she started her own interior designer business, working out of her condominium. Then in 1997 she opened a full service interior design and build business in the Clocktower building. Unfortunately she lost her lease when a new building management team took over, which in hindsight ultimately was a blessing as she moved directly across the street to a space with much more visibility on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. In 2014, she opened a second location at La Fiesta Square that serves as a retail showroom featuring plumbing fixtures, tile and lighting.

As locations expanded, so did the business's repertoire. Just a couple of years ago, Douglah obtained her contractor's license, so now the business offers clients luxury design-build remodeling, complete with an in-house construction staff. "Everyone is cross-trained," said Douglah, so the person who installs tile can also install cabinetry and countertops and more; most importantly, "we can control the quality." All of her two dozen employees enjoy medical, dental and vision benefits and paid holidays along with a consistent work schedule.

Douglah credits her upbringing for valuable lessons on learning to adapt, to look at the big picture and to not sweat the small stuff. After 24 years in the business, she knows there are constantly what she calls "little surprises" with any remodeling project.

Her philosophy is obviously working, as the business continues to blossom. "She's always looking for ways to improve," says office manager Diane Smith, adding every client is different, but the staff takes ownership and is accountable, and everyone works well together. "Leila knows that happy employees help grow your business," said assistant Nancy Glieden, explaining that's the key to any successful business. "She takes great care of us."

Grateful for life's opportunities, Douglah also has generously supported a number of organizations including Habitat for Humanity, Lafayette Partners in Education, Shelter Inc. and the Lindsay Wildlife Museum. She's a fantastic example of doing well by doing good.

The Marquis Business Person of the Year annual dinner is scheduled to start at 6 p.m. Friday, Jan. 30 at the Lafayette Park Hotel. The Chamber of Commerce sponsored event also features the introduction of the 2015 board of directors, incoming President Debbie Cooper from Mechanics Bank and the "State of the City" address by Mayor Brandt Andersson. Reservations can be made online or by calling the Chamber at (925) 284-7404.

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