

# 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, to 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.

## Do you have a person in mind for the City of Lafayette to honor as 2015 Citizen of the Year?

Criteria are as follows:

- Must NOT be a current elected or paid member of any city council, school board or commission;
- Must be a current Lafayette resident;
- Must be someone who has given of their time, money or energy to help make Lafayette a healthy community, where people will want to live, work and shop;
- Must be someone who models excellence in everything they do;
- Must be someone who brings this community together and/or makes us proud to be a member of the community.

A celebration dinner will be held on **Friday, March 27** at the Lafayette Park Hotel & Spa to honor the winner! The deadline for submitting nominations is **Friday, Feb. 13**.

The 2015 Lafayette Citizen of the Year Award is co-sponsored by the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce and Lamorinda Weekly.

Please send your nomination to Lafayette Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson

Email: jay@lafayettechamber.org

Mail: Lafayette Chamber of Commerce  
Attn: Lafayette Citizen of Year nomination  
100 Lafayette Circle #103  
Lafayette, CA 94549

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From my family to yours...I want to personally congratulate the Campolindo Varsity football team on a fantastic year and winning the State Championship game. You've made Moraga proud. Congratulations to each and every one of you!!



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*Reliez Valley*  
**3234 Del Mar Drive, Lafayette**

This wonderful updated ranch home is located on a great corner lot in a fantastic Reliez Valley area. This home enjoys a great flow with 3BD/2BA, 1687+/- sq. ft. and a remodeled kitchen. The flat backyard has ample play area space and is ideal for the garden lover.  
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*Reliez Valley*  
**3258 Surmont Drive, Lafayette**

The sweeping views from this home are captivating! This 3,750+/- sq. ft., 3BD/3BA home is located on a .81+/- acre lot with 180° views from the Benicia Bridge to Mt. Diablo and beyond. Completing this home is a large master suite, a bonus/game room and an expansive deck for entertaining.  
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