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## Lamorinda Realtor's Long Journey Home

By Nick Marnell



Shiva Jafarzadeh in her Lafayette office  
Photo A. Scheck

Real estate agent Shiva Jafarzadeh will sell you a home, but she wants nothing to do with anything that reminds her of back home.

"I was a rebel," said the Iranian-born Bay Sotheby's International Realty agent, expelled from middle school because she questioned the religious teachings of Islam. Why did the prophet have 40 wives? It didn't make sense to her. School officials had no answers.

She kept it up in high school, questioning why girls should cover up, or not wear makeup. The school thought she was mentally ill, and sent her to therapists and religious leaders. "There is nothing wrong with me!" she insisted.

At the University of Tehran in the mid-1990s she continued to flout authority, publishing flyers about Islam and how it promotes the abuse of women, taking away their rights. Again, expelled.

"Where you are going, is very dangerous," her

father warned.

That scared Jafarzadeh. "I was afraid that if I got into too deep of trouble, I would be sent to prison. And the tortures..." So she acceded. She agreed on an arranged marriage - to her cousin.

"It's not like you can walk down the street in Iran and ask a guy to have coffee with you."

The pairing was doomed from the outset. She worked as a travel host for an agency, and her fiancé hated it. He hated that she laughed with other men. He hated that she had an interest in art, and painting, and she told him she was damned well going to work. "You don't talk to your future husband like that," he said. He hated it enough that he hit her.

Jafarzadeh was suffocating, like breathing in a steam bath. She had to leave - the war, the oppression, him.

She and her boss at the travel agency concocted an escape plan. He assigned Jafarzadeh to lead a pilgrimage into Syria. But, in order to leave the country, she needed permission from her fiancé, or her father, any male authority figure. The boss called her dad, and after much weeping and gnashing of teeth, he agreed to sign her travel document. She had pleaded that she needed the money.

Off to Damascus. "All of those women... they all wanted to set me up with their sons."

She left the hotel in Syria and rushed to the U.S. Embassy, seeking a temporary student visa. Other applicants chided her. "You only have \$500? No English? You're wasting your time." An official stormed into the lobby. Let her alone! She grabbed Jafarzadeh, dragged her into her office. They held hands and cried as Jafarzadeh told her story. Maybe I can find a sponsor for you, the official said. Can you stay here two months?

It was a miserable two months, sneaking from hotel to hotel. But the official found a sponsor. A church in Oklahoma agreed to sponsor Jafarzadeh as an international student. She would do volunteer work for the church in return.

"Oh, boy. Now I'll have to commit to some other religion. But, if that's what it takes..."

She was broke. She had nobody. She knew no English. "But at least I'm not married."

The church fed her and provided a place to sleep, yet she despised it. She resented having to do what the church expected. But she avoided expulsion; she crawled out the window of her dorm and escaped.

An Afghan man gave her a job mopping the floor at a Walgreens and he let her sleep on a mattress in the back room of the store. She met a guy and dated him for six months, until she found out he was married, with kids. His wife warned Jafarzadeh: He'll do the same thing to you.

"So this is what they mean by a free country?"

The guy stalked her. The church turned her in. Immigration was after her. She fled to California, where there were more Iranians. Jafarzadeh arrived in Walnut Creek in 1999, got a job at a cafe in Oakland, saved her money.

And she applied for asylum. A volunteer immigration translator helped her at the court. You need to tell me your story, he said. "No, I only have to tell my lawyer. Not you."

The volunteer was her future husband.

At her hearing the San Francisco judge told Jafarzadeh to raise her head. "I want you to be proud of yourself. Be proud that you reached this level. You are serving this country and we need people like you. I am going to grant this," he said.

She enrolled at DVC, worked finance jobs, married the translator. More courts. Prove to me that this marriage is legitimate, said the judge, wary of a fraudulent reach for citizenship.

"What evidence do you need? Pictures? Movies?" Defiance with a smile.

Jafarzadeh lives in Moraga with her husband and 7-year old son, and has poured her passion and drive into a 13-year real estate career, at Lafayette Sotheby's since April 2015. "I love to find people a home where they can feel safe, loved, free...and enjoy a community that will respect them," she said. Sometimes she has trouble identifying with those who complain about things like the area traffic, or the property taxes. "I can't share that with them. They have no idea..."

She still has flashbacks, as on one of her first dates in San Francisco. Her fiancé promised a surprise, which as a rule she dislikes. Into the city they drove, she heard the roar, she saw the planes approach, lower...closer. "No! Not here too!" She fainted. But they were not bombing her grade school in Iran. They were the Blue Angels.

Jafarzadeh believes in a strong community, and especially in education. She believes that the best investment people can make is in their own children.

"If as parents we try to raise independent critical thinkers by supporting their questions and refer them to books and research, and respect their choices even if they are different than ours, maybe the next generation will not experience the chaos and war that is going on around the world now," she said.

The chaos and war of which she has many memories that she tries hard to forget.

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