

The Child of Immigrant Parents

By Kayvon Jabbari

I admire my father's courage in leaving everything he knew in Iran to provide a better life for his family. At the age of 19 he charted a new life in the hope of achieving the "American Dream," leaving behind his family and Muslim culture. My father tells me stories about his first years spent missing one life while building an entirely new one. In his fifth year, my father earned an engineering degree and later an MBA. After launching a career working for high-tech companies, he eventually returned to his beloved homeland, married my mother, brought her to America, and bought the modest little house in Santa Rosa, CA that we still call home today. I am the second of three children and their only son.

As a child, I watched my friends play in soccer leagues while my family and I drove past the fields. Every Saturday morning for 12 years, my family took this 70-mile trip to the Islamic Cultural Center of Northern California, where my dad and mom served respectively as the principal and 1st grade teacher at the Farsi school. I learned about my Persian culture and Islamic ethics while joining interfaith discussions and doing service work with partner churches and synagogues. I saw my service at soup kitchens and homeless shelters bring joy to the eyes of those less fortunate. Cultural teachings of compassion, and people so wonderfully modeling these qualities all around me, have set the foundation upon which I stand today, one devoted to honoring those of different races, cultures, religions, sexual identities.

Unfortunately, I was not met by this same inclusiveness in my home city of Santa Rosa. I grew up in a school district that lacked cultural and ethnic diversity. My Muslim classmates and I often faced racial and cultural prejudices throughout elementary, middle, and high school. It was not uncommon to watch other adults question my parents' political views about extremist Muslim terrorists in the Middle East. I suspect, a question that stemmed from fear and a deep misunderstanding of Islam.

Growing up with Iranian immigrant parents, among other first-generation families, and being involved in the Persian community have given me unique insight into the culture and fears of the immigrant population. I have grown attuned to the vulnerability of these communities. As an Upward Bound Advisor at UC Davis, I was exposed to the prevalence of social and cultural forces that burden other immigrant populations like my own. My heart is touched deeply by the irony that steps people take to make their lives better can leave them so open to more hardship. In a way, my desire to pursue a medical profession is a function of my understanding of this vulnerability and of my growing sense of how best to fight it.

As a supporter of the Interfaith Council of Sonoma County, I embrace inclusiveness and equity within our community. I believe prejudices can be eliminated through shared dialogue, especially under the current administration. Through the broader lens of humanitarianism, we can better understand and celebrate our differences in race, culture, religion, sexual identity, and gender identity. I challenge you to take one step closer to this goal. The next time you see a friend, neighbor, or stranger—simply smile...and maybe you will open a familiar window into the life of someone you once thought to be different.

One Love.

-Kayvon Jabbari