

A Labor of Love

“Whatever you do in life, you must always have passion.”

—Filmmaker Jahangir Golestan-Parast

by Ryan Gorman

It's a mild February evening in Southern California, and in the heart of the pleasant UC Irvine campus, a couple hundred people have gathered inside the Crystal Cove Auditorium. They're ready to spend the next hour witnessing what has taken three years of one man's blood, sweat, and tears to complete. The man of the hour is Iranian-born filmmaker Jahangir Golestan-Parast, a 55-year-old insurance salesman in Laguna Hills during the workday, but also an artist who mortgaged his house in order to help finance *Bam 6.6*, a bracing documentary about the devastating earthquake that struck his native Iran in December 2003.

Insisting that following one's dreams is the key to a life of health and fulfillment, Jahangir says, "It was a story I just had to tell." In his own words, his vision was to make "the first film I can think of that focuses on the positive aspects of Iranian culture from an American point of view." He expressly states that his intentions were not political; rather, the film focuses mainly on the story of an American couple—Tobb Dell'Oro and Adele Freedman—trapped in the historic city of Bam, Iran, when the earthquake hit and the selfless efforts of native Iranians to rescue them. He hopes

that this story will speak to a larger truth. "Everywhere you look, there are good people," he says. "You just have to open your eyes to them."

A Long Journey

As the old adage goes, it's the journey, not the destination. For Jahangir, however, his move from Esfahan, Iran, to Irvine, California, is the story of both a journey and a destination. "If you've been to Esfahan, you've seen half the world," he gushes. His only wish is that more people could come to know and appreciate the wonders of his homeland. "I was raised in such a loving, affectionate family," he says. He adds that he is "eternally grateful" for the compassion he learned from his mother, father, and seven siblings—as well as for the rich culture he was steeped in.

Of course, if you talk to Jahangir for any extended period of time, another passion of his will inevitably enter the fray. "When I was growing up in Esfahan," he remembers, "we used to skip class to go to the movies. Burt Lancaster. John Wayne. Steve McQueen." Jahangir recalls his brothers and sisters being swept away by these mythical personalities from another world. "One of the first films I can remember is *In*

Cold Blood. I saw that film when I was 15 years old. Ever since then I've wanted to be a moviemaker." Jahangir was always taking pictures, always sharing his passion for the films of the West. "My family always encouraged me to follow my dreams," he says graciously. But where his dreams would lead him, Jahangir didn't know.

"I left Iran when I was 16. I had a brother out in England already—Mohammed. He lived in London. I went out there to stay with him; I wanted to go to film school." Previously, Iran was the only place Jahangir had ever known. His hometown of Esfahan and the hotel and restaurant his family owned were his entire world. "London was something new and massive to me," he remembers. Initially, the opportunities seemed endless, but Jahangir experienced a surge of disappointment when he started looking into film school. "I just couldn't meet all of the requirements to get in," he admits. Frustrated and disillusioned, he settled for following in his family's footsteps and began working in the hospitality industry. For a time, he was complacent. But in his early 20s, life in London was plenty exciting. Deep down, however, he didn't wonder *if* he would resume the pursuit of his passion for filmmaking, but when.

Go Further West, Young Man

It would be an extended journey spanning different countries and decades, but Jahangir did finally catch the elusive dream of his youth. After living in Paris in his 30s and working in the hospitality industry, he decided to relocate to sunny Southern California, where a nephew, Max Golestan-Parast, also resides to this day. Max, a major player in the Southland's commercial real estate market, encouraged him to switch industries and get into the insurance business.

Still yearning to realize his dream, Jahangir also decided to enroll at a community college. "I took a few classes, some because I was interested and some because I was just hoping to meet a girl!" Sure enough, Jahangir met his wife of 17 years, Brenda, at Santa Monica College. The couple has two children together: Arabella, age nine, and Grant, age seven. "We try to teach them love, passion, respect," he says.

After being married a short time, Jahangir began appreciating how important his homeland, Iran, was to him. He missed his family there. He decided to return to Iran armed with a camcorder. On his sojourn home, he recognized the inherent wisdom of another old adage: the more things change, the more they stay the same. He took his camcorder all over the country, visiting the 2,000-year-old citadel in Bam, walking the streets of Tehran, and going back to his hometown of Esfahan. "I've been to over 40 different countries in my life," he says. "Everywhere I go, it always brings me back home."

Jahangir considers Iran his passion and filmmaking his calling. Still working at Prudential to support his family, he took a couple of filmmaking classes at the renowned UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television.

When talking of his filmmaking career, he speaks glowingly of his wife, who has always supported his drive to be an artist. In fact, it was a conversation about filmmaking Jahangir and Brenda had more than a decade ago that finally pointed him in the right direction. With much work and the support and love of his family, he was able to achieve his goals.

The Story of Bam 6.6

In the auditorium where *Bam 6.6* is premiering, Jahangir takes a seat next to Brenda and their kids, and his excitement is palpable. "Ever since the earthquake happened on December 26, 2003, I've wanted to find some way to tell the story," he tells the audience after the screening.

Jahangir dispatched a film crew to the site of the disaster about one week after it occurred. Later, he made visits of his own to Bam in order to witness the devastation firsthand. "Ninety percent of everything in Bam was destroyed; the 2,000-year-old citadel that Bam is renowned for—gone." Estimates vary, but it is reported that around 30,000 people perished in the quake and its aftermath.

However, many of the audience members at the screening were struck by the fact that *Bam 6.6* is less about the widespread devastation and more the personal narrative of Dell'Oro and Freedman, who were visiting Iran for the first time when the deadly quake hit. They had arranged to stay in downtown Bam to be closer to the citadel and the rest of the city's historic sights. Unbeknownst to them, this also brought them

closer to what would soon be the epicenter of the magnitude 6.6 earthquake. Once the earth had finally stopped shaking, Tobb and Adele found themselves trapped in the rubble. Their tour guide and a few other Bam locals managed to dig them out. They were both critically injured, but it was evident that Dell'Oro had fared worse, and in the coming days, he succumbed to the terrible trauma. As Jahangir's documentary comes to a close, Adele Freedman is shown in physical therapy, well on her way to a full recovery. But with the loss of the love of her life, it's evident how much of a Pyrrhic victory that recovery will prove to be.

Jahangir first became aware of the American couple's ordeal after reading about it in a magazine and immediately set out to contact their families to request permission to tell their story. "You hear so many bad things today," he says. "I thought it was important to show the other side." Despite the great sadness prevalent in the film, Jahangir and others see it as a tale of redemption and inspiration for the Iranian people. Indeed, the people of Iran documented in *Bam 6.6* are hospitable, overtly gen-

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Jahangir (right) with a cameraman at the ruins of the citadel

erous, and unfailingly kind—an encouraging reminder that the goodwill of average Iranian citizens is remarkable, though so often obscured. Freedman believes that the care she and Tobb received after the earthquake is the best they could have gotten anywhere. Furthermore, when Freedman’s father inquired about the hospital bill, the doctor instantly responded, “Bill? She doesn’t have to pay me a cent. She is a guest in my country. That is the Iranian way.” After hearing that story recounted, the audience at the premiere erupted in rapturous applause. “When I watch the movie,” Jahangir says during his address afterward, “I am happy because it says exactly what I want it to say: Let’s not wait until a disaster happens to help one another, to reach out to one another.” If anything positive can be gleaned from such a tragedy, perhaps this is it.

Humanity Without Borders

That’s the tagline of sorts for *Bam 6.6*, and Jahangir wants that to be what people walk away from the screening



Jahangir (far right) picking dates with Bam locals

with. His is a message of hope, humanity, and transcendence. Active and healthy and going strong at 55, Jahangir is finally seeing his lifelong goals come to fruition, and he credits it all to the principles of love and passion that he tries to uphold. “I feel blessed to live in America, to live the life that I live,” he says. To others, he can offer little advice other than to always follow their dreams and always seize the moment.

“Ah, children,” he sighs, gesturing

at his son, Grant, who is running up and down the aisle at the end of the evening. “We could learn a lot from children. They wear their love, their emotions, on their sleeves. They laugh. They live only in the moment.” He refers back to his uplifting documentary, which reveals how Dell’Oro was planning to propose to Freedman in Bam, at the 2,000-year-old citadel, before disaster struck. “Tomorrow could be too late. Live today.” **JOL**