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Iranian American Jews mentoring new generation of leaders

By Jane Ulman



Mentee Aaron Eslamboly, left, chats with mentor Sam Yebri over frozen yogurt at a Young Iranian Jewish Leadership get-together at Berri Good in Beverly Hills. Photo by Jane Ulman

"It's amazing. It's awesome," Nicole Lavi said. "I have an older 'sister.'"

Lavi, 17, a senior at Beverly Hills High School, reached over to Donna Pouladian, 23. "She's the best. I love her," Nicole said.

The two were meeting in person for only the second time, but already they'd discovered many common characteristics -- both are outgoing and energetic, both have an older brother and both want a career that will help people.

And most pertinent, both are Iranian American Jews born in the United States and assimilated into American society but raised by parents steeped in the culture and traditions of Iran.

Pouladian, who is finishing her doctorate in occupational therapy at USC, and Lavi are part of a pioneering Young Iranian Jewish Leadership Program developed to give motivated Iranian American high school students the direction, encouragement and skills needed to shine as professional and community leaders.

This is a project of 30 Years After, an organization founded a year ago to engage the Iranian Jewish community more intensely in American civic life and the broader Jewish community, in partnership with Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Los Angeles and Beverly Hills' Nessah Synagogue.

On this night, the two young women are one of 11 pairs of mentees and mentors -- Los Angeles area high school students matched with successful young professionals in their 20s and 30s -- who have gathered at

Berri Good on South Robertson Boulevard in Beverly Hills to chat, play board games and feast on frozen yogurt, competing against a background of piped-in hip-hop techno music.

Some, like mentee Aaron Eslamboly, 17, and mentor Sam Yebri, 27, sit together at a table, swapping life histories and aspirations.

For Eslamboly, a junior at Santa Monica High School with dreams of becoming a journalist, lawyer and/or entrepreneur, it's an opportunity to explore those options one-on-one with Yebri, an attorney.

"My parents are not as immersed in American culture as Sam and the other mentors," Eslamboly said, adding that he and other Persian American high schoolers feel pressure from their parents to be successful.

The genesis of the Young Iranian Jewish Leadership Program can be traced to Nessah member Fariba Behnam, who helped organize a Career Day panel for students at Milken Community High School. "This is something the Persian community needs," she thought at the time.

Later, in April 2007, Behnam convened two panels of young professionals at Nessah Synagogue to speak to an estimated crowd of 350 high school students and their parents, allowing them to see that different professional paths -- such as careers in entertainment, engineering and psychology -- were available, in addition to the standard occupations in business, law and medicine.

Afterward, the panel participants, most of whom had not previously met, remarked about how they wished they had had someone to help them navigate the challenges and decisions regarding colleges, careers and community involvement.

But what the panel discussion couldn't do was provide meaningful opportunities for individual mentoring, according to Yebri, co-founder of 30 Years After.

Thus, a series of discussions ensued between Morgan Hakimi, a psychologist and president of Nessah Synagogue, and representatives from Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters and 30 Years After. And the Young Iranian Jewish Leadership Program, which Hakimi said is revolutionary for the Iranian Jewish community but generally welcomed, took form.

Hakimi sees the program as an effective means to bridge the gap for a generation going through an identity struggle.

"It will help these kids cherish the traditions and identity of their parents, but meanwhile practice and live as American Jews," she said, ideally resulting in what she calls the "Iranian American descended community."

Nessah is providing meeting space, food, public relations and some financial support, while 30 Years After is creating activities and coordinating the overall program.

For Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters, it is "important to reach populations in new ways," according to Dan Witzling, director of communications. Thus the organization, with its long history of mentoring and administrative expertise, interviewed potential mentors and mentees, conducted background checks, trained the mentors and made the matches.

Eleven mentors were chosen, receiving an initial one-and-a-half-hour group-training session that was facilitated by Ze'ev Korn, director of school-based mentoring at Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The training helped the mentors understand that they are not therapists, parents, classroom teachers or occasional ATMs, said Korn, who explained that ideal qualities in a mentor include "listening, empathy and curiosity as to who this [mentee] uniquely is and uniquely wants to become."

Korn added, "The gift they give to the young person is themselves, with all their limitations."

To give mentees a full range of possible opportunities, mentors and mentees are not matched according to specific career goals but rather by common interests, needs and strengths and personality characteristics.

The inaugural group has committed to the program for a full year and met for the first time on April 8. The long-term goal is to come together as a group twice a month, with one event or workshop focused on a substantive topic such college or social justice and another purely social, such as bowling, where mentors and mentees can continue to forge deeper relationships.

Additionally, optional activities will be offered such as "You, Me & the Troops," a community service event sponsored by Nessah and Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters, which took place on Sunday, May 25. Mentors and mentees were invited to help assemble care packages for American soldiers serving in Iraq.

The current program has openings for two mentees. And next fall, according to Yebri, the Young Iranian Jewish Leadership Program will expand to include a second contingent of two-dozen mentors and mentees, who will also sign on for a full year.

In the meantime, the Young Iranian Jewish Leadership Program gives successful twentysomething and thirtysomething professionals a grass-roots, cost-free opportunity to give back to the Jewish and American communities and to inspire and guide a new generation of Iranian American Jews.

Many of the mentees already expect the program to extend beyond a one-year relationship.

"I'm building a friend for life," said mentee Lavi.

For those interested in becoming involved, contact Jewish Big Brothers at C323) 761-8675.