

Iran Native Becomes Mayor of Beverly Hills

Bridging Cultures Is A Big Part of His Role

By Sonya Geis
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, April 1, 2007; A03

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. -- Jimmy Delshad promised in Farsi-accented English to faithfully serve as mayor, and a crowd of nearly 1,000 stood to cheer. And so Beverly Hills got its first Iranian American chief executive, marking the political arrival of an immigrant community that has quietly reshaped this famously posh city over the past 25 years.

Delshad, 67, is now widely regarded as the highest-ranking Iranian-born officeholder in the United States. It's a source of pride for Iranian emigrants around the world. He was reelected to the Beverly Hills City Council for a second term earlier this month and rotated into the mayor's seat last week.

"I've had more calls and e-mails from outside the U.S. than inside the U.S.," Delshad said in the mayor's office the day after he was sworn in. A congratulatory bouquet dominated the table next to him. "You name the country, I've had calls."

In his inaugural speech, Delshad spent more time on the intractable traffic problems in Beverly Hills than on his ethnicity. He suggested programming parking meters so they could be paid by cellphone, drawing gasps and enthusiastic applause.

But Delshad knows he is a cultural ambassador as much as a city administrator. "I wanted to open doors for others who would see me as an example," he said in his speech.

And Delshad, who is Jewish, chose a Holocaust survivor to swear him in. Going off script, Delshad said from the lectern, "Don't let anybody doubt the Holocaust, because if you do, I'll buy you a one-way ticket to Auschwitz."

"That was directed to [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad," he said the next day. "They put in the paper in Iran: 'Persian Jew Will Be Mayor of Beverly Hills.' "

After the fall of the shah in 1979, Iranians, many wealthy and well-educated, fanned out across the United States and Europe. While some have found success in business and academia in this country, fewer have entered politics, preferring not to draw attention to themselves, said Trita Parsi of the National Iranian American Council.

In Europe, by contrast, it is "easier to get into the political life than the economic life," Parsi said. An Iranian immigrant serves on the Swedish parliament, and, until last year, another served in the Dutch legislature.

Los Angeles absorbed thousands, and a large contingent of Persian Jews found their way to Beverly Hills. Now, about 8,000 of the city's 35,000 residents are Iranian. They have made their mark -- and sometimes ruffled feathers -- in this sunny oasis of palm-lined streets.

Here the public schools give students the day off for Norouz, the Iranian New Year holiday in March. This month, for the

first time, ballots were printed in Farsi as well as Spanish and English.

Some Iranians' preference for large houses with columns and gates has transformed streets of single-story bungalows with lush lawns in front, prompting an outcry from older residents, who scorn the new two-story flat-fronted houses with paved yards as "Persian palaces."

"We have lots of family gatherings, lots of parties," said Parvin Shahlapour, an Iranian immigrant and sociology researcher at the University of California at Los Angeles. Groups of 50 or more may congregate weekly in one home, so "we like big guest rooms, large dining rooms," she said.

The festive ways of Persian culture have also drawn noise complaints from neighbors. "Beverly Hills is used to going to sleep at 9 o'clock," Delshad said. "This is the time we get started." One of Delshad's tasks as mayor will be to respond to Iranians who want to bring late-night restaurants and clubs to the city, something other residents may resist, he said.

But if they are remaking Beverly Hills, their political engagement -- and acceptance -- has been slow. In Delshad's first campaign four years ago, he received death threats and felt he needed bodyguards. But reaction to his reelection this month was more subdued, though hundreds of people did call the city clerk to protest the printing of ballots in Farsi. Delshad won a narrow victory.

Nooshin Meshkaty, who worked on that campaign and is now a member of the Beverly Hills school board, said persuading Iranians to vote was difficult.

"They have to accept that it's not stepping on anyone's toes to participate," she said. Also, Delshad said, many feared putting their names on any kind of official list, since in Iran such lists often meant "someone would come after you."

Delshad, a slight man with graying hair and a wide smile, sees himself as uniquely suited to bridge his native and adopted cultures. He immigrated with his brother 49 years ago, and when later waves of immigrants arrived, their cultural differences "hit me in the face," he said. As he earned a bachelor's degree and became a successful computer engineer, Delshad used his fluency in both cultures to mediate between them.

Among his fans is Mimi Rastgar, who stood in the back and wiped away a tear as Delshad took his oath of office this week.

"I am so happy that he is the mayor," she said afterward, "especially now that the Iran government is not positive about Jews. We are second-class people in Iran."

"This," Rastgar said, cocking her head toward Delshad, "is proof that if we have a chance, we can do anything."