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"Mr. President, we're hurting. Are you going to rise to the challenge?"
- Samantha S., 12th grader

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Iranian American Jewish community seeking power in politics



Source | Lisa Daftari

Congressman Henry Waxman

By Lisa Daftari, Youth Vote '08 reporter

Los Angeles -- Congressmen, journalists, professors and members of the clergy gathered together in a civic engagement conference Sept. 14, urging almost 1,000 members of the Iranian American Jewish community in Los Angeles -- the largest enclave of its kind in the United States -- to participate in political affairs, particularly, to vote in this year's presidential election.

The day-long conference was organized by a non-profit group comprised of more than three dozen young students and professionals -- almost all U.S. born -- to promote civic and political participation in the community. The group, 30 Years After, entitled the conference "30 Years After: The

Iranian American Jewish Community at a Crossroads."

"We as Iranians have power of money and power in our education, but we don't have power in politics," Councilman and former Beverly Hills Mayor Jimmy Delshad said to an audience of all ages at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Beverly Hills.

As the first Iranian Jew elected to public office, Delshad is the poster child for political and civic engagement for this community. When he became mayor last year, he was featured on half a dozen magazine covers, Iranian, American and Israeli television stations and became an overall curious media magnet.

Delshad shared with the audience stories of when he first arrived in Los Angeles, prior to 1979, and Iranians were not well accepted. They were a small minority and sometimes felt discriminated against, even in their own synagogues and schools. As more Iranian Jews immigrated to the area, their constituency quickly grew and with it their viability as a strong immigrant group.

"We are not here as guests. We are here to stay, and when we are here to stay we have to contribute," Delshad said, referring to a time when Iranians viewed the U.S. as a temporary haven. "We all thought we were going back. Now we have to set the precedent that we are here to stay."

The conference was scheduled to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, when the Shah of Iran was brought down and replaced by a clerical Islamic regime. The significance and timeliness of the conference was also paralleled by the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel, Iran's increasing nuclear threat, and the overlapping juncture of the upcoming Presidential election.

"You came here from an utterly different culture, a different part of the world, and in one generation became one of the most successful minority communities," nationally syndicated radio talk show personality and political commentator Dennis Prager said, supporting his statement with community emphasis on education and wealth.

As one of the most admired public figures in the Iranian Jewish community, Prager is frequently invited to address synagogues, universities and other venues, usually commenting on Middle East politics, but sometimes preferring discussions about love and happiness.

Prager's popularity was easily detected as early morning stragglers -- rushing to enter the ballroom--whispered to the staff, "Did Prager go on yet?"

"To others we say practice as you preach. To this community, I say preach what you practice," Prager said, urging the community to take its values and opinions as a successful émigré group to the polls.

The Iranian-American Jewish Identity: 30 Years After

Many in this immigrant group sought refuge in the United States following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when the fate of 30,000 Iranian Jews took a turn. Most settled in southern California, which currently has a population of 50,000, and others settled the northern shore of Long Island--now with a population of about 15,000--mainly centered around the town of Great Neck.

Over the last 30 years, a majority of Iranian Jews have become part of the American landscape, topping lists of

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high ranking doctors, lawyers, academics, entrepreneurs and more recently stepping onto the Hollywood scene, breaking through former cultural stigmas.

"There was the realization that there is a disconnect between the passion of the Iranian Jewish community and their actual involvement in the issues they care about," Sam Yebri, president and co-founder of 30 Years After, said about the origin of the organization.

With his idea, Yebri emailed a handful of friends and members of the community to meet in his apartment one Sunday afternoon in Nov. 2007. Since then the group has gained many more members and volunteers who saw a longstanding need for civic engagement in the community, Yebri said.

The group was awarded a \$200,000 grant by the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles to plan a conference discussing political life in Iran, Israel, the United States as a whole, and Los Angeles specifically. Fifty sponsors as well as service donations from the surrounding community contributed the rest.

"Groups make a difference and individuals make a difference. We are looking at a Presidential election this year, which I think is going to be historic," Congressman Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) said in a panel discussing politics in the U.S. "In this country we are proud of the fact that everyone makes a difference. Every vote counts. To participate in the political process is something that is available to all of us."

The issue of government is not a comfortable one for Iranian Jews. Historically, though they felt more secure under the rule of the Shah, they were a religious minority living side-by-side a Muslim majority. They felt slighted and at the mercy of Muslim leaders who they say robbed them of their political and social rights. Often times, they would have to pay off Iranian government officials to receive fair legal treatment. They carried this mistrust of government and politics with them to the United States.

"It's important to be involved because we care. We care about what we can do in the community in which we live, and the expression of who we are as a community is often through our collective involvement in government itself whether it's the local, state, or the federal government," Waxman said.

Getting Out the Vote

Throughout the day students sat in the hotel lobby registering conference participants to vote. Since its inception, 30 Years After has held various speaking engagements, mixers and even a posh poolside soiree to educate members of the community about specific political issues, the candidates and a civic obligation to vote, registering almost 1,000 new voters in the community over the last seven months.

An important moment for the group came during their most successful event at a member's home Super Tuesday when 250 young professionals from the community gathered with local politicians to watch the California Primary results. When they realized that not even a quarter of these young professionals actually voted in the primaries, the group decided that voter registration would become an integral part of their organization.

"Among the older generation of Iranian Jewish Americans there's a lack of history of participation and involvement dating back to their living in Iran. They never had a meaningful opportunity to vote or make decisions in a democratic system," Yebri said citing reasons for voting apathy in the community. "Democracy like any other value is taught and passed down and unfortunately some of those failures have been passed down to the younger generation of Iranian Jews."

Using their current group model in Los Angeles, 30 Years After recruited members of New York's Iranian Jewish community to begin a sister chapter which will be holding its kick-off reception Sep. 21. The goal will be to link the two communities for the first time in 30 years.

Conference speakers included Congressman Henry Waxman (D-Calif), California State Assembly Member and Iran divestment bill author Joel Anderson, Councilmember and former Beverly Hills Mayor Jimmy Delshad, radio host and political commentator Denis Prager, Simon Wiesenthal Center founder Rabbi Marvin Hier, Consul General of Israel Jacob Dayan, Patrick Clawson of the Washington Institute and local prominent Rabbis Abraham Cooper, David Wolpe and Daniel Bouskila.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, an outward friend of the Jewish communities in Los Angeles, was scheduled to speak at the conference but could not attend due to a fatal Metrolink crash that occurred in Chatsworth Friday.

Lisa Daftari holds a master's degree in broadcast journalism from Annenberg School of Journalism at the University of Southern California and is a freelance journalist living in California.

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