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A CHARISMATIC IRANIAN AMERICAN ENGINEER

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ABSTRACT—This is the story of Iranian engineer Mostafa Jamshidi and his twenty-five years in Nebraska: his student days, his experiences with the immigration department and his eventual citizenship, his work history, and his personal life as told by his English teacher and surrogate mother. His language skills, soccer playing, and personality enabled him to combat his homesickness and the harassment of the immigration officials. The University of Nebraska at Omaha and the Nebraska Department of Roads gave him a place to learn and grow despite the time and geography in which he was born. The Great Plains, with its friendliness, openness, and fairness, has been fertile ground for this struggling, successful young engineer.

Key Words: American student, citizenship, surrogate family, immigrant, Immigrations and Naturalization Services, Iran, soccer

When talking about immigrants who settled the Great Plains, one thinks of the 19th century; however, today's arrivals continue to impact the changing face of this region. For example, one of these 21st-century pioneers, Mostafa ("Moe") Jamshidi, brings his determination, engineering talents and skills, and his rich cultural background to the Great Plains. As both his surrogate mother and English teacher, I have been in close contact with Moe. He and his family come for holidays, birthdays, and Mother's Day, and in between they make frequent visits. One Saturday in the spring of 2003, Moe and I taped an interview about his quarter century in Nebraska. We talked about his student days, his experiences with the immigration department and his eventual citizenship, his work history, and his personal life.

We started with the year it all began: 1978. In Iran that year, the destined-to-be last shah was losing the support of his people. In the United States, peanut farmer Jimmy Carter, the American president, was promoting an Israeli-Palestinian relationship by planning to host a Camp David weekend with Israeli premier Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat. In Nebraska, the University at Omaha had instituted a program called

Intensive Language/University of Nebraska at Omaha (ILUNO) to teach its 180 foreign students, many of whom were Iranian, to speak, read, and write the English language before being admitted to the university.

In Moe's life, the fall of 1978 was a fast-moving turning point. Two-and-a-half weeks from the time Moe's friend Fazin Mohammadi first invited Moe to come to America (as all Iranians then called the United States) with him, they were on the airplane en route to Nebraska. Moe had already finished his first college semester, turned 19 years old, was a math major, and vowed he was coming to America for one year only. The Iranian shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was a great promoter of Western education. He felt his power eroding, so he was trying to get as many Iranian students as possible off to the United States to better ensure their futures. Moe and Fazin had no trouble exiting the country.

They had decided on the University of Nebraska at Omaha because its Afghanistan studies program, established in 1973 and the only one of its kind in the United States, could process their applications in less than two weeks, whereas schools such as the University of California–Los Angeles or Stanford University took at least two months.

The university found them housing at the Colonial Hotel at 38th and Farnam streets and got them started in the ILUNO program, a postsecondary English as a Second Language (ESL) program, which would help them prepare for the international Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a four-hour computerized exam required for admission to most US universities.

Some Iranian students had great trouble understanding English even though English was a required class for the last six years of their middle and high school curriculum in Iran. Moe, who had also gone daily to the Iran-American Society in Tehran after his high school classes for more English training taught by Americans, became the interpreter for the group.

But they all understood the game of soccer and how they loved to play it. They were always starting a game on any open area of the campus. Moe, who wore his soccer pants under his jeans, got involved in a game his second day on campus. He stripped off his jeans and hung them in the nearest tree. Both he and Fazin had come with their funds for the year: \$8,000 in \$100 bills, all in their jean pockets, and Moe's were now hanging in the tree. When he finished the game, he absentmindedly walked off toward the hotel, never missing his jeans until he was a couple of miles from campus. Frantically, he ran into the street and tried to flag down a passing car. He was hesitant to stick his thumb in the air because in Iran, thumbing someone is a disgusting gesture like giving him the finger in the United States. But the

driver, my husband, Bob, stopped, and Moe in his broken English sputtered, “UNO! UNO!” and kept pointing to an area of his soccer shorts where a pocket should be. Bob understood “UNO” and figured the boy had lost his wallet there. Indeed, he had.

Bob got him back to the campus where they both found the jeans swinging in the tree with all the cash intact. This dilemma fostered an unending relationship between Moe and my husband, who opened our home and family to this 19-year-old.

Moe soon was a member of the Iranian soccer team, which played in and always won the city league. Like all foreign students, Moe had called the game football, but when the game came to the US, it was called soccer, a name derived from the term “Association Football.” Now the most popular team sport in the world, being played in over 195 countries, soccer in 1978 was not “the sport of choice” in the US. But by playing some teams from Lincoln and the surrounding area, the Iranian team was able to get a schedule of games slated, and it gave Moe and his teammates a chance to meet American boys and to begin to socialize with them. The American girls were always much friendlier. They were good, encouraging listeners, helping Moe to be understood, but the boys were not personable. “The American boys were cliquish and refused to let anyone new or different into their preferred circles,” Moe said, but playing a game of soccer with them broke down some of their aloofness.

In addition to Moe’s soccer prowess, he was very good at math. He had taken three levels of calculus in Tehran, so he was given ten hours of college credit and also was able to test out of some of the engineering classes required for the degree in civil engineering he wanted to earn.

Though Moe’s English was better than most Iranian students, he had embarrassing troubles with *he* and *she*. The Persian language has no personal pronouns: there is no distinction between the genders. A person or a thing is simply *ü* regardless of sex or species. When Moe heard Americans refer to a ship as making her maiden voyage or a country as the motherland and her people, he was again confused.

After passing the TOEFL exam, Moe started his engineering classes in the spring semester of 1979 and then planned to go home as his school year was over, and many of his Iranian friends were leaving. But his dad said, “Moe, the revolution is going strong; the university is closed! You’d better stay where you can continue your education.”

Homesick and unhappy, Moe stayed put while the home situation worsened. Radical young Iranians seized American diplomats and embassy employees in Tehran in November 1979 and kept them hostage for 444 days.

As a result of the seizure, all Iranian assets in the US were frozen, so Moe's money from his dad could not get through. By this time, Moe had lived with many different roommates. (He estimates that he had 20 to 25 different Omaha addresses between 1978 and 1984; in between roommates, he would move in with us.) A friendly fellow, he became well known at the university, where he was able to delay his \$99-per-credit-hour, out-of-country tuition. He shared used books with fellow students, and to eat, he washed dishes at different restaurants. Although he had no green card (work permit), he could get food instead of wages. He also learned that one could exist on peanut butter sandwiches, which he once did for a three-week period.

In 1980 he was finally able to get home. But either Tehran with its 12 million people had changed, or Moe had. When the University of Tehran (founded in 1935) reopened under the Ayatollah Khomeini's takeover regime, its new emphasis was a religious one: the Shiite sect of the Islamic religion. Moe could not get an engineering degree. The women had to now cover themselves completely before leaving home as in pre-1928 days before the shah had decreed the wearing of European-style clothing. They seemed more subservient than Moe remembered. Much of the religious focus was on life after death, so if life were hard and unhappy, as Moe found it to be, then the people would still accept it.

Over a million people were killed in the near decade-long war between Iran and Iraq (1980–88), and a new kind of martyrdom was spreading. Thousands of teenage boys were recruited to form human chains to walk hand-in-hand across the oilfields that the Iraqis had loaded with mines. These human minesweepers wore bandannas around their heads as the sign of a martyr and also were given keys to wear around their necks. These keys, they were promised, would open the doors of paradise. Their families were given honor and monetary rewards. This quasi-religious psychology became the stimulus for many of the suicide bombers of the ensuing decades.

This was not the same Iran that Moe had known under the shah. "Although I didn't agree with the Shah's dictatorship," he told me, "it was never as repressive as this new Iran I returned to in 1980." Moe saw himself facing at least two years in the army fighting Iraq and then not getting the career he had begun to prepare for, so he decided to return to America.

But the American hostages in Iran had still not been released when Moe flew back to New York, and the greeting he got from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) made him wonder if he'd made the right decision. They took him out of the customs line to a room with no windows, where they dumped out all of his luggage. His I-94, a form each immigrant must have in order to stay in the US, was in his briefcase along with other

papers and photos of his family. As they threw around all the pictures, pointing at the people and making disparaging remarks, they discovered some food stamps, which they said were illegal for Moe to have in his possession. Having never seen these coupons before, Moe thought one of the inspectors had planted them among his papers that were flying around the room.

Looking at his school records, another INS man said, “You have forfeited your student visa because you aren’t a fulltime student. Your student record doesn’t show any classes for the summer of 1980. You’ll be deported.”

“You are a fulltime student if you are registered for at least 12 hours in both the spring and fall semesters,” Moe tried to explain.

After the INS agents had interrogated Moe for hours, they turned him back to the airport authorities with a summons to report to the circuit judge on Monday morning. This was Friday night, so the airline representative arranged for a limousine to take Moe to a five-star hotel for the weekend. How confused he was to have been treated as an enemy by one group of Americans and then to be treated as an important guest by another segment of American society.

When Moe showed up in court the following Monday morning, the judge looked at his summons curiously and asked, “What in hell are you here for?”

“I do not know, sir,” Moe replied.

After hearing how the INS inspectors had harassed Moe and delayed him for three days, the judge inquired, “How can I compensate you for this unfortunate treatment?”

“I really do need a student work permit, sir, because I can’t take or get any money out of Iran.”

“Good!” the judge said, as he stamped Moe’s I-94 with a seal that signified an open-ended work permit.

Soon after Moe returned to Omaha and got a job, the INS was busy again. A call went out to all Iranians living in eastern Nebraska to report to UNO on a certain day to have their visas checked. About 250 people came, 25% of whom were deported. The soccer team lost four of its players.

No infraction was too small for the INS to consider. “I see you’ve been working,” one agent said to Moe. “You know that’s an offense! You’ll be deported.”

But when Moe presented his I-94 with its student work-permit seal, the man backed off and said, shaking his head, “I don’t know how you got this—it isn’t even temporary, it’s open-ended.”

And Moe used it well, working in many different restaurants: Village Inn, Angie’s, El Hombre, and Grandmother’s. Waiting tables was a new experience for him; he loved it. His 30-hour workweek also forced him to learn time management to get all his studying done and still have soccer time.

In 1981 Moe was one of over 200 students enrolled in English 1151, an individualized English composition course. How he ended up in one of my small sections of four students amazed me. He wasn't living with us at the time so probably didn't know when I was on campus, but he wanted and got a familiar face. We did lots of sentence-combining and cloze techniques where one must supply the missing words. How he dreaded those drills, but they certainly helped convert him to an English writer. He soon wanted to write his letters home in English instead of Persian.

Getting acquainted with Moe as a student helped cement our relationship. He didn't lose any of the spontaneity or enthusiasm he had exhibited around the dining table with our five children, but he did show a determination to learn that I witnessed then and many times later when he lived with us and often studied all night long.

When one of our daughters was taking an intensive, condensed nursing course, Moe was struggling with upper-level engineering design courses. They would sit at opposite ends of the long dining-room table, drinking coffee, studying, and occasionally checking to see if the other were awake. I would come down in the morning to find each asleep, face down in a pile of books.

When two of our children graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with the class of 1981, they moved home to reorient, and Moe was also living with us. I was having difficulty coming up with enough grocery money, so the three of them called the *Omaha World-Herald* and reopened the paper station we had operated when they were in grade school and high school. They serviced 13 news routes by distributing papers to and collecting funds from the carriers. Their profit, \$100 to \$150 weekly, was our grocery budget.

The newspaper carriers also gave Moe an introduction to American grade-schoolers and their entrepreneurship. But it was not all work and play. Moe always shot a few baskets with the carriers at the net over the garage door before loading their bags with the heavy bundles of newspapers.

Basketball wasn't Moe's only new sport; he eagerly learned many new games. Our son Pat introduced him to racquetball, at which Moe was a natural, beating Pat even in the instructional game. From racquetball, he went on to tennis, and eventually he took up golf. He was also fascinated with horseracing, attending the Ak-Sar-Ben track many times and sometimes even taking the bus to Grand Island for the early-season races.

Moe had many cars in his college years. He didn't rent a wreck; he bought them. His first car was a yellow four-door Mazda, for which he paid \$1,200. Later, when he was staying with us for a semester, he had a \$250 Pinto. It was such a wreck that he didn't want to embarrass us by parking it in front of our home, so he parked it on another street and walked home. We

didn't even know he had a car. The Mustang he owned later was strictly a summer car: it would not start in the wintertime. Hoping to improve on his weather-beaten car ownership, he bought a Dodge Colt only to discover it would not start during a rain unless one lifted the hood. In the 20 years since then, Moe has owned many good cars: today he drives a new Toyota Camry.

Not only did adjusting to cars bother Moe, but he also had trouble with the American calendar, the holidays, and the customs. He missed the Muslim New Year's celebration that occurred close to his March birthday. Celebrating the New Year was important to him, and he often sponsored his own parties, inviting our family and his many other American friends to share the celebration with him and his Iranian friends.

New Year's in Iran had meant new clothes and two weeks of visiting all the homes of the extended family, eating their special foods, and exchanging recipes. Many of them were stir-fry recipes using lamb, beef, or chicken—but no pork since Muslims don't eat pork. There were always lots of fresh fruits, particularly apples, grapes, and pomegranates, and fresh, crisp cucumbers, and pistachio nuts. The bakers were artists, lavishly decorating their cakes, cookies, and baklava. In addition to eating, the children looked forward to the brand new money they would receive from their many aunts and uncles.

Though Moe missed the Iranian holidays, he tried to orient himself to the American holidays but often found them confusing. When he came to our home for his first Thanksgiving dinner in the US, Bob passed him the very full turkey platter, and he was completely flabbergasted. He thought he was expected to eat the whole plate. Later, at Christmas time, he was joyfully helping decorate the tree as he listened to Christmas carols he'd never heard before. Our daughter Molly gave Moe the angel that belonged at the top of the tree. As he pulled the top branch down to procure the high center position for the angel, the tree tipped, spilling water all over the presents. Never having suspected that the colorful tree skirt covered a pan of water and not thinking that a tree already cut down needed water, Moe was dumbfounded.

During his 25 years in the US, Moe has become accustomed to the name drawing, the Christmas shopping, and all the Christmas trees and decorating. From the beginning, he has always celebrated Christmas with us, his adopted American family. Recently, in 2002, he was home in Iran and missing Christmas. He looked for a Christmas tree to decorate, and he nostalgically told his nieces and nephews about the American customs.

However, in December 1983, during his senior year, Moe almost didn't get to stay and learn those customs. As his graduation neared, the INS reminded Moe that he would have to return to Iran as soon as he graduated.

His American soccer friends did not want him to go, so they decided he should marry one of their girlfriends so that he could stay. After much cajoling, they convinced Moe to go through with it. A few days later, on a routine checkup of the many Iranian students living in Moe's apartment building, the INS discovered that Moe and his bride did not live together. So the agent jailed Moe for fraud and listed him as an "illegal alien."

Moe was jailed in Council Bluffs and was allowed one phone call, so he called us. Bob contacted members of the soccer team, who raised Moe's \$2,000 bail, and a lawyer friend of ours, who directed us to an immigration attorney. Moe said it was very cold at the Pottawattamie County Jail, so our daughter Molly took blankets, books, and food to the jail. The immigration attorney got the marriage annulled, and after a weekend of confinement, Moe was released from the cold jail.

He was free to go back to his job with the Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR), where he worked on a surveying crew for six months. Moe had requested a summer job, but there were none available. However, when school started again, most student engineers had quit work. Moe had only a few classes left and could work full time to finish the many heavy construction projects that the summer interns had begun.

Happy with his work, the state officials asked him to continue. They had five entry-level engineer positions open the summer of 1984, and he took one at Columbus, NE. There were 22 people on the job, but none were other engineers or foreigners; all were older technicians. It was a formidable environment. But Moe found one friendly person who made him feel welcome. As Moe continuously exemplified hard work and openness, these Great Plains workers' sense of fairness was ignited and the work environment improved. Together they built bridges across the Platte and the Loup rivers, and they made Highway 81 a four-lane road. When Moe was promoted to bridge designer and requested a move to Lincoln in 1986, he had 22 friends who didn't want him to leave.

On a social level, Moe has been equally successful. His goal was to live like an American, eat American food, and have American friends. Soon after coming back to UNO from Iran, Moe got to know an American engineering student who was very outgoing and knew a lot of people, and they enjoyed studying together and became roommates. In the fall of 1983, his roommate introduced Moe to his future wife: an Iowa farm girl working as a secretary in Omaha.

When Moe brought Rhonda to meet us, she had her darling three-year-old son, Carl, with her. The young couple talked excitedly about Moe's civil

engineering degree, which he would receive in May 1984, their upcoming marriage in July 1984, and his new job with the NDOR, which would begin July 1984.

Moe's parents, Asgar and Eman, didn't arrive in time for the wedding, though they had been making travel arrangements since 1983. They finally came in the summer of 1985. Visiting both Columbus and Omaha, they found the language and culture very difficult. They had planned to stay all summer, but despite their unhappiness with the conditions in Iran, they were happy to go home after only one month in the US.

In 1986 Moe was promoted to bridge designer and moved to Lincoln, the central office of the NDOR. Soon he applied for and received his professional engineering license, which requires a degree and four years of experience. In 1989 he became a geotechnical engineer, working with soils and designing bridge foundations.

Becoming a US citizen (see Fig. 1) and having a second son the same year, 1988, gave Moe a big boost. When he got his green card in 1984, he was a permanent resident of the US. But to be a citizen, Moe applied and then studied American history, took an exam (which he said wasn't really that hard), and was sworn in August 18, 1988. His son Devin was born July 12, 1988. Having been in the US for a decade, Moe was now an established American citizen with a family, a lovely home, and a good, stable job with an opportunity for advancement.

And advance he did. In 1990 he produced a slide presentation of a case history of foundation and piling testing and presented it to all local geotechnical service groups. When Federal Highway Administration officials heard about this report, they invited him to present it at their annual meeting in Austin, TX. He became the second in command of Nebraska

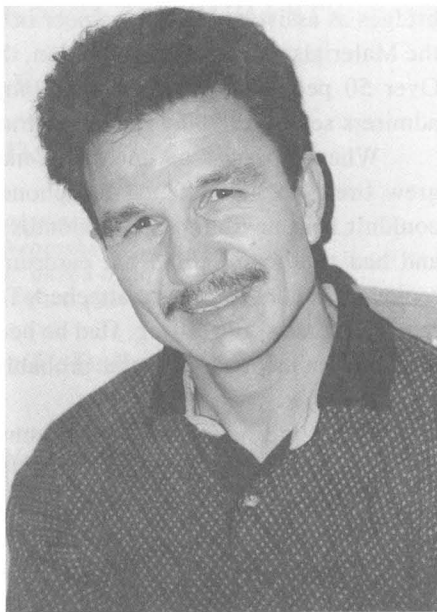


Figure 1. Mostafa Jamshidi was born March 23, 1959, in Tehran, Iran, and became an American citizen on August 18, 1988, in Omaha, NE.

bridges as assistant bridge engineer in 1991. In 2000 he was named head of the Materials and Research Division, the second largest division of NDOR. Over 50 people across the state comprise this group. His many NDOR admirers sent over 100 e-mails congratulating him.

When Moe was on one of his many job-related phone calls, his arm grew tired, so he switched the phone to his left ear and discovered he couldn't hear anything. Some months later, Moe braved the surgery table and had the bone behind the eardrum, which was affecting his hearing, removed and the eardrum reattached. The procedure was quite involved and required some skin grafting. Had he been in Iran, he would have had to wait his turn for medical care and probably wouldn't have gotten his hearing back so quickly.

Moe's job has taken him to conventions all across the US, and his family often accompanies him. In 1990 he was able to adopt his wife's then 10-year-old son, Carl, who also became a star soccer player with Moe as coach, of course. The family helped Moe fulfill a lifetime dream in 1996 when they attended the World Cup in Houston, Texas, which was the first time the world championship soccer competition was played in the US. Soccer has been the one stable in Moe's life; it was the same whether he was in Iran or the US, but his allegiance to the sport is being challenged. He has become an enthusiastic fan of Cornhusker football. "As a kid," he said, "I didn't know what football was, but now I can't wait for the Husker football season to start."

Though he has traveled a lot, Moe has returned only twice to Tehran since his first trip back in 1980. His younger brother, Morteza (Morey), left Iran with his family in 1992 seeking refuge in the Netherlands, and it was there that Moe has been able to rendezvous with his sister and his parents. It was to the Netherlands that he took seven-year-old Devin in 1995 to meet his Iranian grandparents for the first time.

When Moe returned to Iran in 2002, he met a talented young nephew who reminded him of himself when he first immigrated to the US. Although this young man would like to come to America, Moe says, "It is just impossible; the waiting lists for the next twenty years are filled."

Moe realizes that he just happened to live at the right time in history to be granted such an opportunity: the opportunity to succeed. The University of Nebraska at Omaha and the Nebraska Department of Roads gave him a place to learn and grow despite the time and place in which he was born. The Great Plains, with its friendliness, openness, and fairness, has been fertile ground for this struggling, successful young engineer. He in turn brought his talents and determination to this region. Will this exchange of benefits continue, or is Mostafa the last of the new pioneers?