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Mapping Tehranto: The Tirgan Boys

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Sima Sahar Zerehi – They're not exactly the kind of people you would imagine behind the largest Iranian arts and cultural festival outside of Iran.

When I think arts, I think hipsters lounging about in non-descript cafés on Queen West, lanky emaciated boys in skinny jeans and trendsetter girls in vintage-inspired slouchy shirts synched at the waist.



I certainly don't think of clean-cut lawyers, businessmen and preppy marketing executives, but these are the volunteers who have been donating their time and energy to bring Iranian artists and performers to Toronto's Harbourfront.

Behrouz Amouzgar, an articling student at Gardiner Roberts Law firm is one of the new volunteers behind this year's Tirgan festival. The ambitious mover and shaker is the Public Relations Director for the festival, a position that suits him well despite his lack of media training.

Amouzgar is the kind of go-getter that everyone wishes for when organizing a campaign, with a gift for gab and a personable approach he's the sort of guy that can win over a room and motivate an army of willing volunteers.

Like most of the other Tirgan volunteers, Amouzgar became involved in the festival through his community contacts. It was a sense of civic duty and community responsibility more than his love of arts that attracted the soon to be lawyer to the project.

Amouzgar explains, "In late July of 2010 I got involved with the Babak Nahiddi campaign who was running for city council in Willowdale. I began helping him as his campaign manager and as part of my job reached out to many community members to get them involved in the electoral process."

It was while campaigning for Nahiddi that Amouzgar became connected with the Tirgan team. He goes on, "In early October 2010, the Iranian Canadian Congress had organized an all candidates debate for the mayoral race at North York Civic Centre and at that event I had the pleasure of meeting Nima Ahmadi, the Marketing and Sales Director of Tirgan."

Amouzgar explains that while he was in search of recruiting supporters for his candidate, it was Nima who ultimately recruited him. He recounts, "I met with Nima for lunch in November after the campaign and he briefed me about Tirgan. While up until that point I was under the impression that we had lost the election, I got to realize that through this campaign I had met individuals and had become familiar with groups that could open doors for me to life changing experiences. Tirgan was definitely one of those."

Within a short time span Amouzgar moved through the ranks of the Tirgan team. He notes, "I began as a volunteer in the Marketing and Sales department under Nima. Through Nima I met with Mehrdad Ariannejad, the CEO and mastermind behind Tirgan. Mehrdad offered that I join the Public Relations team as a volunteer and in about a month I was offered to act as the Public Relations Director of the festival. It should suffice to say that I accepted with no hesitation."

As the Public Relations Director Amouzgar coordinates the efforts of nearly 70 volunteers. Together the

group strives to promote the festival through media and community contacts.

Amouzgar states, “We contact Iranian organizations of a non-political and non-religious nature from North America and around the world and inform them about Tirgan and request that they become our affiliates. Our affiliates promote Tirgan in their communities and raise awareness and our local affiliates provide the Tirgan outreach team with an opportunity to attend their events and provide the attendees with information about the festival. To date, we have 33 affiliates ranging from student organizations and professional groups to charitable and artistic foundations.”

Amouzgar’s adds, “We also contact local media for our media sponsorship program. We have three categories of media sponsorships through which our media sponsors provide us with in-kind contributions. We currently have 22 media sponsors. We also contact mainstream media in order to obtain coverage.”

The Tirgan PR team is also responsible for coordinating the publication of the magazine as well as the monthly newsletter.

While traditionally outreach channels take up the bulk of the group’s time, the PR team has also been making strides in terms of using new media. Amouzgar’s team has been working hard to promote the festival via Facebook, LinkedIn as well as Twitter.

Much like Amouzgar, Arian Shojai, a young Iranian-Canadian with a background in business, was also recruited to the Tirgan team by Nima Ahmadi. Shojai is a veteran from the first annual Tirgan festival in 2008. Shojai was initially part of the Marketing team but in 2011 he took on the role of the Director of Operations.

For Shojai the opportunity to meet and work with a diverse group of volunteers is a key benefit of being part of the Tirgan project.

He states, “As I had started my work with Tirgan in the Marketing Committee and now direct the Operations team, I have had an opportunity to meet many of the members of the Tirgan family. In my opinion one of the beauties of Tirgan is that it attracts a variety of people from different groupings; people of various ages, backgrounds and professions.”

Shojai adds, “The combination of energized youth and experienced adults are a perfect formula; amongst our volunteers we have people who are newcomers to Canada and thus speak Farsi fluently, as well as others who were born in Canada and may not speak Farsi very well, all of these groupings have been contributing selflessly to the festival as volunteers. Its their efforts that have made Tirgan possible.”

Amouzgar also stresses the centrality of the volunteers that have been working tirelessly to promote the festival. He notes, “Tirgan has volunteers from all age groups. We have young volunteers in their early 20s as well as mature volunteers in their 50s or 60s. This dynamic in Tirgan provides a bridge between the new generation, some of whom were born and raised in Canada, with the older generation, many of whom immigrated from Iran to Canada and have invaluable experiences for us all.”

Amouzgar notes that in addition to the age range within the volunteers, there’s also a great variety in terms of educational and professional experiences among the Tirgan team. He states, “Tirgan volunteers come from various educational and professional backgrounds and this also provides for an interesting dynamic. In our meetings I am always impressed by the interesting ideas and creative perspectives that the volunteers have to offer on different issues. I think one of the reasons for Tirgan’s success is the diverse nature of its volunteer body, which makes us a truly competitive team.”

Amouzgar speaks passionately about his commitment to this project as a young Iranian “We, the younger Iranian generation, are the future face of the Iranian community in Canada.”

For Amouzgar this project is a community building initiative. He explains, “A glance at our history would attest that political differences have resulted in hostility and division amongst Iranians and have consistently distanced us from one another. It is unfortunate to see that as a result we have not managed to hold a uniform front in representing Iran and Iranians outside of Iran. It is time to set aside our differences and focus on our commonalities.”

According to Amouzgar an arts festival is the ideal means of unifying a fragmented community. He notes, “Art and culture, unlike politics, by nature provide for a medium where we can all unite, with one goal, and that is to spread and share our appreciation for the beauty and brilliance inherent in Iranian art and culture with the world.”



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