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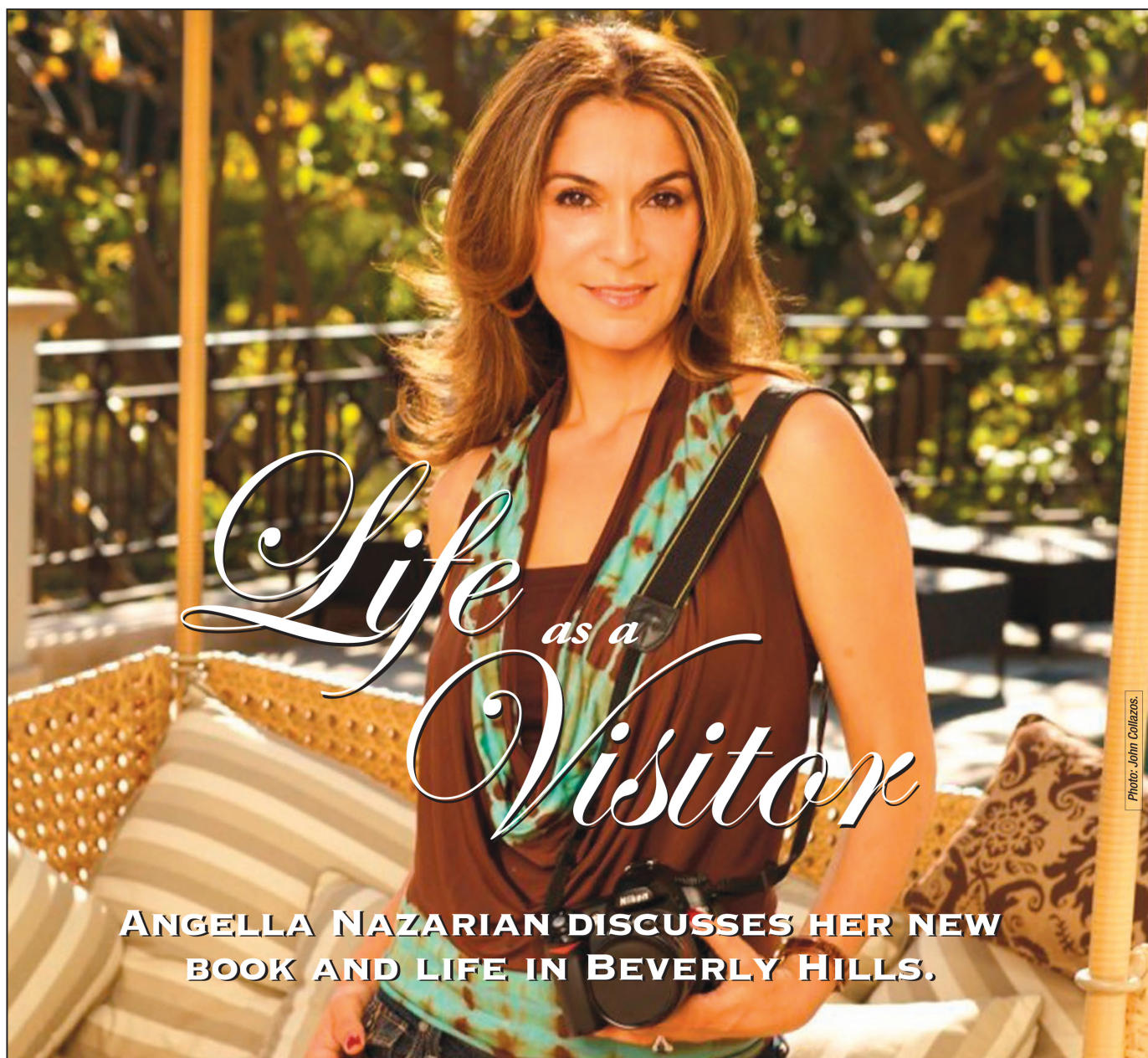


Photo: John Collazos

## *Life as a Visitor*

**ANGELLA NAZARIAN DISCUSSES HER NEW BOOK AND LIFE IN BEVERLY HILLS.**

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# coverstory

# LIFE AS A VISITOR

**Angella Nazarian discusses her new book and life in Beverly Hills.**

**By Kimberly Cheng**

**Why do think many young Iranians don't know anything about Iranian history?**

It depends on what age they came here. I can only speak from my own experience and I can tell you why I didn't know. I came here very young, and the first thing on my list to do was really try to assimilate to the American culture, and at the time that we came, it was probably one of the worst times for Iranians in general. Iran was involved with the hostage crisis, which was really a very shameful time for us as a community. A lot of people didn't want to say that they were Iranian. They would refer to themselves as Persians, partly to off the edge of Iran being in the news all the time.

And even when you look at the news right now with what's happening, and it's very funny that I'm meeting you today on the 24th because [President] Ahmadinejad is going to be talking in the UN, and there'll be mass protests everywhere in the UN against this guy. He is a leader nobody is proud to be associated with. And on Friday, he was talking about how the Holocaust ever happened and Israel and the U.S. are his greatest enemies. So you see how, when you're a child and you're very self conscious and you haven't had much schooling in Iran, you come here and right away you want to distance yourself from that humiliating experience of what Iran is doing.

**Why didn't older generations of Iranians talk about what happened or what was going on in Iran?**

I think for a lot of them it had been such a painful experience. The younger people wanted to assimilate, and the older people just found it very hard to adjust. When you think about it, people who were groomed to have a high standing in the government, they were very educated, and they come here, and they have nothing, or they're taxi drivers, or they have to start life all over again. It's very hard to revisit those painful experiences. For example, for my mom, I really didn't know the details of her escape until I interviewed her for the book. And many times when I would ask she would say, "Oh, why do you want to

talk about it?" Because talking about it really triggered a lot of uneasy feelings for her.

**Explain pre-revolution Iran and the tensions that were bubbling up until the revolution and your departure to America.**

I have to say from the eyes of an 11-year-old, what I saw was a lot of chaos and not knowing what's happening, and the city really being under siege. There were a great many people that were dissatisfied with having a kingship. Perhaps they wanted a form of government where they had more of a say, but what really happened after the revolution is that with the Islamic fundamentalist government coming into place, there's even less freedom for a citizen. I strongly doubted that [the people in Iran] ever thought that it would become what it is right now.

**Explain the process of acculturation for you, especially after you moved to the U.S. and attended Hawthorne School.**

I think it was quite difficult. I was one of the luckier students because I had gone to a bilingual school in Iran so I studied English. But even those five, six years of study did nothing when I came here, and people were talking so fast with an accent that I had no idea. And you feel lost. Half the time when people are saying remarks or using slang, you don't even know what they're saying. So there was a good one-year period that I would come back home completely disoriented and very lost and overwhelmed, not knowing how I was going to do my homework, how I was going to find friends.

I really give a lot of credit to a lot of my American friends. When I look back in 7th or 8th grade, I really had a good core of American friends who always invited me to places. We did things after school, and I do think that even with all being said and done, the American community is one of the most open societies, that they take you in much easier than other countries. So I think it's one of the biggest blessings to be somewhere where people greet you, they ask you some questions, they really

want to know you, they invite you to their home. I don't think you'd have a similar experience in other countries. It wouldn't be as easy.

**Tell us what Hawthorne was like at that time.**

Actually, I haven't gone inside the halls for a very, very long time, but I pass by Rexford [Drive] all the time, and I see that the south yard has changed so much. But it was a huge difference for me. First of all, although I went to a very progressive bilingual school in Iran, it was a small school. Hawthorne School to me was big, and there were lots of colorful things pasted all over the walls. That was never done in Iran. The teachers were extremely friendly. One thing that happened in Iran is that you had a formal relationship with your teachers. You would have to stand up as they walked into the room. Here, the teachers would crack jokes, which was very refreshing. They were available to help you [after class].

The other thing that I found so unbelievably interesting is that the school had its own library. That was something that we didn't have in our school [in Iran]. And then the fact that physical education was a requirement. Nothing like that in Iran. Nothing. And then all these opportunities for after-school sports and arts. To me, that was, I mean it's like a world opens to you when you look at all the things you can get with a public school education. And I had gone to a private school [in Iran].

**Who were some of your favorite teachers at Hawthorne?**

I had a great 7th grade teacher, Ms. Miller. She was amazing. They used to call her Momma Miller. She taught history, and she was actually a very strict teacher, but what was amazing about her was they way she taught. She never talked down to people. She really wanted all the kids to succeed. I remember in 7th grade, the first time I took a Scantron test, and I didn't how to fill [it] in. I mean, [it's] that simple, but when you come from a different country, you don't know. And so, I had completely filled in the wrong bubble for

the answer and [Ms. Miller] knew that I was a really good student so the next day asked me come in and meet her, and she said, "You know, you completely failed the exam, but Angella, I know you knew these things so could you tell me how you answered them?" And she didn't show me the Scantron so I went through each and every one of them, and she said it was obvious I didn't know how to do the directions, that I did the Scantron wrong. And she sat there and said, "Well that one won't count. Your next grade will count twice." She always showed a lot of compassion and during my office hours with her she asked, "How are you doing? How is your family life?" Things that some teachers would never ask, and that was the time I told her that my parents were not around [because they were still in Iran]. The amount of care she put into me that year was quite unbelievable. It tears me up.

**Who were some of your 7th and 8th grade middle school friends?**

I lost touch with quite a lot of them. I didn't go to my last reunion, but [they were] Ann Rosenberg, Riva Resnick and Michelle Louie, Cheryl Rivin and Teri Goldman. One thing about Teri is I ran into her. I found out that she is writing, and studying with the same writing teacher [as me] with Jack Grapes. He has a really strong following. I couldn't believe that one of my closest 7th grade friends was sitting there writing herself. I seem to have kept in touch more with my high school friends. I run into so many of the Beverly Hills graduates all the time.

James Fogelman. I talk to him all the time. He used to be the class president. And I see him. Yaniv Teper. I see at least once or twice a year at different events. And then I belong to Sinai [Temple] Council, so a lot of Jewish families that use to belong there, they still come there during the high holidays, so you still run into people that you know.

**Who do you still keep in touch with on a regular basis?**

The Iranians, you keep in touch no matter what because it's such a small community that you're bound to run into each other at one of the parties on a monthly basis. So I actually have kept in touch with a lot of my Iranian friends because they haven't moved. They didn't go to other states. You know one of the things that, for a first generation family, when they moved from a different country their priority is to want to stay together because they've already lost quite a few families in Iran and they want to keep their nuclear family together. So a lot of my Iranian friends are still here, and I absolutely see them all the time. Sheila Kamran, she's actually one of the PTA moms at Sinai Temple right now. Kathy Azizadeh, I've known her since 7th grade.



### Do you they still live in Beverly Hills?

No, they don't. One lives in the Valley and one lives in West L.A. I don't even live in Beverly Hills, but we've kept in touch. There's a core group. And then there's also quite a number of girls my age. When we went to Beverly Hills, we decided to form this charitable organization called Looking Beyond, and us Looking Beyond ladies are always working on a yearly basis for fundraising, so we see each other at meetings.

### In what ways did you conform to American ways, and in what ways did you stay true to your Iranian roots?

The way I conformed, first and foremost, is that you change your way of dress, you change the way you talk, you change the expressions you use. By nature, Iranians are little more introverted. Americans tend to be more extroverted, so I became more outgoing. I was on the basketball team [in elementary school]. In some ways I've held on to the more traditional aspects of my heritage. I tend to be still more conservative. When I was growing up, even in high school, there were certain things that I couldn't do as a girl that some of my female American friends were allowed to do. Curfew was much earlier. It wasn't really encouraged for you to have a boyfriend or to travel by yourself or with other girlfriends. So there were still a lot of restrictions that I abided by.

At Beverly High, I was one of those girls that took the AP courses, so I was more into my studies and less into sports. Iranian boys were really strong in sciences so there were many [of them] taking AP courses. On the girls side, I was one of the fewer girls. I think [the reason] is the culture of my family. My parents were not around, and the people I looked up to were my siblings, and they were all always academically overachievers, so there was a very strong family value for doing very well in school. Especially because I had two brothers who wanted to be doctors.

### How did you try to reconcile the incongruous value systems of the East and the West?

I think I still sometimes have a challenging time with that because some things are different from one to another. One thing I've started doing in the past couple years that has worked for me is not thinking if this is an Eastern value system or a Western but what really fits into my life. And doing that has been much more healthy for me.

### Is it the same idea, as you said in your book, of what your friend told you, that maybe the goal in life is to not try to change but to be who you are?

That's what it is, especially as an immigrant, you come here and you want to blend in and fit in, but you're changing yourself. The people I'm most attracted to

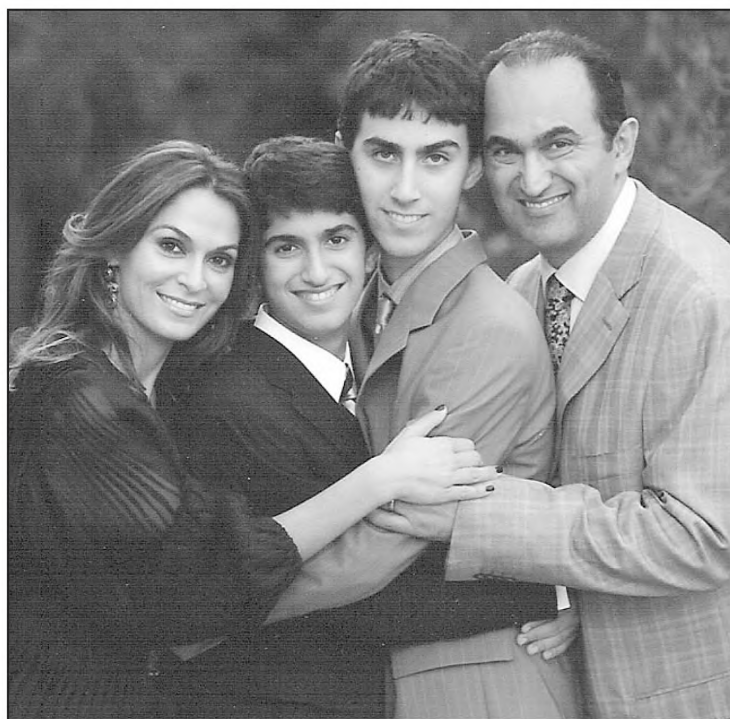
and have the deepest admiration for are the people who are really themselves.

### Does it lift the burden of always trying to fit into everyone's ideals?

Well, sometimes there's even a burden by being yourself because you know you're not like other people or people will not cut you the slack of, you know, you stand out. But you're doing it not to stand

someone told me that my book was number 43 on Amazon for my category. And I'm happy, but I feel like it takes time for me to process things. My first instinct is to be numb. I've had a lot of surreal moments, even with this book.

One of the things I did last week was I wanted to send a copy of the book to her Majesty, the ex-queen of Iran, Queen Farah. And I had her contact information, and I called her offices so I could send her



*Nazarian family (left to right: Angella, Eli, Phillip, David)*

out, but as a natural reflection of who you are.

### In your book, you said you always felt the need to qualify the fact that you were Iranian by saying you were Jewish. Why?

Especially that was true when we first came here because you'd look at the Islamic republic of Iran and you think about the crazy things they were doing. They were the ones that kept on saying, "Death to Israel and death to America." They were supporting terrorist groups all over the world. Certainly, you don't want to be associated with that. We really wanted to tell people, "No, no, no, I don't espouse that kind of thinking."

### In your book you spoke of a defense mechanism you use when you reminisce about your past. What are you defending yourself against, and why?

It's from feeling overwhelmed or being cluttered with a lot of feelings that you don't know what to do about. And I still think that I do that even now. I'm embarking on a book launch, and today

a book. And her assistant picked up and asked me my name and told me her Majesty was going to call me. So believe it or not, her Majesty called me from Paris to talk about the book. I had a 15-minute conversation with her. She called me and left a message on my cell phone. I think I'm going to keep [the message] for a long time. I've never met [her Majesty] up close, but I sent her the book and I hope I get to meet her. I'm having book signings and speaking engagements in New York, and I know she lives part-time in Connecticut so maybe she'll come to one of my book signings.

### Where else are you having book signings?

I'm also going to Dallas, Portland, Chicago, Washington, and Seattle. The first week, I'm having six book signings in L.A. My book comes out October 4, that's the launch, but right now, Amazon is selling it.

### Lili and Jon Bosse are throwing a party to celebrate the release of your book. Tell us about that.

Here's one thing that has been a tremendous gift. When I wrote this book I said that I didn't know at one point I would be talking to [Queen] Farah. This book has taken me to new experiences that I really cherish and one of them is Lili. Lili and I had known each other earlier, but through this book our friendship has blossomed. I really count her as one of my closest friends. And I think that was one of the gifts of this book as well.

[The book release party is this Sunday] in the evening, and I can't wait. If anybody has ever gone to any of Lili's parties, anything she puts together, it's always done in the most beautiful manner. It's the Jon and Lili Bosse way. Lots and lots [of food and champagne]. She has her guest list, and I have mine, [and it's] over 200 people.

### Tell us about your husband and his family.

I really count myself lucky that [my husband David and I] have been married 21 years and known each other for 22. That at that age, I came across someone that I could share my life journey with. More than anything is the fact that he's the type of person that really wants me to grow and that has made me a happier person, which in turn, I want to give back to him and my family. David is in business. I came from a family where we all wanted to be doctors, and David's family is more along the side of being entrepreneurs, businessmen. We have two boys, Phillip [who is 17 years-old] and Eli [who is 14 years-old], and he's a great father to both of them. The way he's involved with their lives, that's also not traditional Iranian. In a formal Iranian family, men tend to be less involved with the kids.

My mother-in-law [Soraya] is an artist. She's a sculptor, and I have a wonderful relationship with all of David's siblings. One of them was my high school classmate, Sharon. She was one who introduced me to David, and now she's my sister-in-law. Parviz [Nazarian] is Younes' brother. They're all entrepreneurs.

### What is the main message of your book?

My whole personal journey showed me that we are much more similar than we think we are. But really what made me feel so different when I first came here was not because of my cultural background but it was my sense of feeling different. I think the other thing is that obviously the tone of some of my chapters are definitely sad, but I wanted to express all parts of me.

### Why is it important for others to learn?

When you are truly comfortable with yourself and allow yourself to be who you are, you have a far better chance of finding a community where you belong than anywhere else. And I wanted people to really know the story of an immigrant through the eyes of a younger child that comes here.