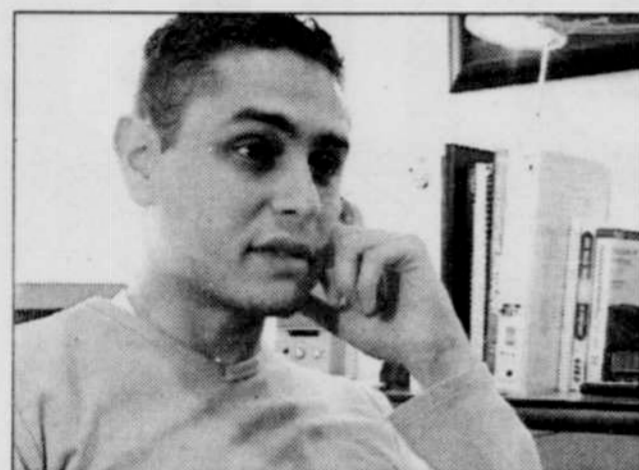


MIDEAST CONFLICT

Documentary reveals societal pressure put on gays and lesbians of Arab and Iranian descent by Nadia Ali Maiwandi



Mark (left) and Chris are two of the subjects interviewed in the documentary *I Exist: Voices from the Lesbian and Gay Middle Eastern Community in the U.S.*

As marginalized as Middle Easterners are, there are some within the community who remain nearly invisible.

Although Middle Eastern cultures are known for close family ties and strong relations to community, when coupled with the shame put on homosexuality, it can lead to a life of secrecy for gays and lesbians. Those who risk coming out risk losing their family and community permanently.

The documentary *I Exist: Voices from the Lesbian and Gay Middle Eastern Community in the U.S.*, which will screen June 26 in Portland, takes these uncharted issues head on. Through interviews with gay and lesbian people of Arab and Iranian descent and some of their relatives, the film explores sexual orientation, suicidal ideation and family discord—subjects not commonly discussed in public among Middle Easterners.

Out of the dozen or so interviewed, Ghazaleh's story is the most alarming. Her family became deeply hostile after learning she is a lesbian. During a confrontation, Rafati's eldest brother tried to choke her and had to be pulled off by two other brothers. Repeated threats from her family forced her and her partner to move out of their home for fear of their safety. That was four years ago, and family relationships have improved little, if any.

"To lose everyone all at once was very hard," says Rafati, who immigrated from Iran with her family in 1983. "I didn't have anyone on my side."

Subsequently, these events prompted the making of *I Exist*. After finding no reading material on Middle Eastern queers to help her deal with the tumultuous time, Rafati approached the filmmakers of *De Colores*, a documentary on Latino gays and lesbians and part of the Unlearning Homophobia video series, to film something on her community. She says they agreed with enthusiasm.

Rafati, a clinical psychologist, notes that it is not simply culture that caused the hostile reaction from her family. "That's too easy," she says, acknowledging the homophobia that permeates in many corners of Western culture. "Also, many Iranians I know have had very supportive families when they came out."

Bitu Shooshani, also featured in the film, is one of those Iranians. Her family immigrated to the States when she was 5 years old. She says she grew up in a "small Iranian town in the San Fernando Valley" of California, alluding to the tight-knit

community that was part of her upbringing. Yet, unlike Rafati, Shooshani lost no family or friends when she came out.

Her mother was surprised but became "much more accepting" as time went on, Shooshani says. In the film, she relates a story where she and her mother are walking near a lake, and her mother is explaining her concern.

She tells Shooshani: "I see you drowning. I see you going down the wrong path."

Shooshani points to a spider sitting on the water and says, "What if to you it looked like I was drowning, but really I was happy splashing around and doing my own thing?" She says from that point on there was a shift, and her mother realized she could actually be happy this way.

The Bay Area resident—who will participate in a panel discussion after the Portland screening along with Rafati and another woman featured in the film, Parandeh Kia—doesn't see a conflict in being who she is. "A lot of people feel they have to choose. There's always this sense of either/or. But being Iranian, Jewish and lesbian has forced me to become whole," she says.

The film's groundbreaking subject matter impressed two Northeast Portland residents last November in Los Angeles. Goudarz Eghtedari, an Iranian American, and Gabriele Ross, originally from Germany, were attending the First Conference of Homosexuality in Iranian Society, where they saw *I Exist*.

Eghtedari is considered an expert on Iranian sexual minorities and spoke at the conference. "I've been involved with gay and lesbian issues in the Iranian American community since 1996," when he wrote a research paper on the subject. Eghtedari also testified in Japan for an Iranian gay man facing deportation.

In March, the domestic partners—or "joint cat owners," as Ross calls it—decided to organize a public showing of *I Exist*, securing grants from Equity Foundation and A Territory Resource. Ross hopes the event will raise awareness among Middle Easterners about queer issues and illustrate that "Middle Easterners are no different than anyone else." □

I EXIST: VOICES FROM THE LESBIAN AND GAY MIDDLE EASTERN COMMUNITY IN THE U.S. will be shown 6 p.m. June 26 in Room 53 at Portland State University's Cramer Hall, 1721 S.W. Broadway.

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