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## Vida Ghaffari, a story of baklava and apple pie

Paul Strikwerda with Vida Ghaffari

**It has been said that our parents give us two vital things to live life: roots and wings. Vida Ghaffari's is a second generation Iranian-American, and her career has certainly taken off since she left the nest. Actress, red carpet reporter, voice-over talent... Vida is as vivacious as she is versatile.**

**PS You come from a famous and influential Iranian family of actors, directors, writers.... That's quite something to live up to. Is it a blessing or a curse?**

**VG** I think before the revolution (Iranian revolution of 1979), it would have been a blessing as the Ghaffaris were well known for their contributions to the fine and dramatic arts and were active in the media and the performing arts.

Sometimes, it's a curse as a lot of other (Iranian) people expect me to do anything: paint, direct, be a scholar, rocket scientist, politician... the list is endless.

**PS In what way has this rich family background influenced your career choices?**

**VG** Well, my dad is in the sciences, but I always had an interest in the arts as my mom was an illustrator in the old country before she married my dad. My grandmother was a suffragist and she has been such a source of inspiration in my life. She was also a poet, so the house was full of art and impromptu poetry recitals. I'm pretty sure that most Iranian families quote full verses of renowned poets such as Hafez, Saadi, Khayyam, and Rumi at the dinner table, but for me it was a constant. My mom also was a child actress. She performed in a play for the Shah and Ambassador Grady, the former US ambassador to Iran at the time, and many other prominent political figures of that era.

Unfortunately at the time in Iran, the performing arts weren't highly regarded as a path for young women to pursue, so my mom was forced to quit acting at her father's insistence at the tender age of 9. I'm sure she would have been very successful. So fast forward to years later, and my dad being the very practical mathematician and scientist, he wanted me to get a job at the World Bank, because he had friends there who got great salaries, benefits, and job security.

I suppressed my artistic side and studied Economics at the University of Maryland and minored in theater and journalism. Even though these weren't my majors, I was very involved with theater at Maryland and wrote for the school paper. I even DJ'ed my own radio show on WMUC, the campus radio station. It was a tough pill for me to swallow as in high school, I was invited to enroll into a couple of great performing arts magnet schools, but chose to go to regular high school at my dad's insistence. After college, I had some stints on Capitol Hill, where I was awarded journalism and research grants from the Woodrow Wilson Center and the National Journalism Center.

**PS Immigrants and/or political refugees usually have two choices when coming to a new country: assimilate or hold on to their own identity. It's a choice between blending in or standing out. You were born in the U.S. and you sound like an all-American girl. However, you seem to have embraced your heritage with open arms. How do you reconcile both worlds?**

**VG** My parents have lived here in the US for many years (my dad was invited here in 1948 and my mom



came here in the 1960's), so I think they have assimilated very well and truly love this great nation. I was born and raised in the DC area and I have a sense of pride, being raised in such a historically significant and political town. I'm often told that I have the warmth of an Iranian and the integrity of an American, whatever that means. I guess I'm a paradox of sorts in that I can seamlessly incorporate the two. I love baklava and apple pie!

I also feel very grateful and privileged to be born here in the land of the free, but I truly have a profound respect for my heritage. The pony express was created in ancient Persia and there have been countless contributions made to mathematics, the sciences as well as poetry and literature. The renowned poet Saadi's poem used to grace the entrance to the "Hall of Nations" of the United Nations building in New York, with a call for breaking all barriers:

"Human beings are members of a whole, in creation of one essence and soul. If one member is afflicted with pain, other members uneasy will remain. If you have no sympathy for human pain, the name of human you cannot retain."

The first Declaration of Human Rights was created by Cyrus the Great. Also, Iranian-Americans have become so successful in this country, not only as businesspeople, but as doctors, lawyers, engineers and other professionals. It's so inspiring to see how they're making so many contributions to this society in such a short time. I know this is true of most Iranian immigrant communities internationally as well. I'm very proud of the struggle of the brave Iranian youth in search of the freedom they so rightly deserve and have covered many protests in LA as a journalist.

**PS I've heard that casting agencies sometimes list you as "ethnically ambiguous". What does that even mean? Is that a good thing?**

**VG** Ethnically ambiguous means that one is ethnic, but not categorizable as what nationality he/she actually is. There are more and more casting notices looking for "ethnically ambiguous" actors, so for me and many of my friends and colleagues, it's a good thing as there are more roles and opportunities out there for us.

**PS Actors from Middle Eastern countries are often typecast as terrorists or as the stereotypical submissive women. In other words: as caricatures. Do you think that's fair?**

**VG** Not at all. After all, the renowned poet Ferdowsi referred to them as lionesses. I think Middle Eastern women are very strong and silently brave, considering the sexist culture(s) they live in. As for me, I can't even get seen for any Middle Eastern roles as many casting directors don't think I look ethnic enough. There's such a strong stereotype of what a Middle Eastern person should look like. I usually go in for Caucasian roles. I even used to be a translator back home in DC and I worked for Persian TV here, so my Farsi is pretty good if the role calls for it.

**PS At some point everyone in the entertainment industry faces a tough choice: Should I specialize and make it easy for the public to put me in a box, or should I diversify and risk being accused of a lack of focus. What's your answer?**

**VG** As a character actress, I have a little bit more room in terms of the variety of the roles I play. I feel very blessed and lucky about that. As an artist, I like widening my range.

**PS You're a big proponent of networking. Why is it so important to make the rounds and make sure you stay in the picture?**

**VG** Because we're in a business of referrals and contacts. It's very important to network and put yourself out there. But I also love meeting new people, especially other folks in the arts. I guess I'm a people person! I do have to add that what I spent the most time on is my craft first and foremost. I'm either in a class, workshop, acting workout group, staged reading, etcetera.

**PS At what point does networking become a nuisance?**



**VG** It doesn't really become a nuisance, but it can be very time consuming... meeting like-minded people, staying in touch with them, planning meetings with them. It's very hard to schedule things properly also when one takes into consideration this crazy LA traffic!

**PS It must be nice to have a rolodex full of contacts, but then what? What tips do you have for maintaining these relationships?**

**VG** Staying in touch via email is great. Let folks in the industry know what you're up to by updating on facebook and twitter, but not so much that you're doing status updates 24/7! I also give back to my friends as much as possible if they need a referral, advice, or I inform them of a project they'd be right for. I even give free voiceover lessons to some actors from time to time who really want to study voiceover, but can't afford it. I think it's so important to be a part of the community and give back, especially in an artistic one.

**PS You've also mentioned that you think it's important to have a mentor. What does a mentor mean to you? Who's your mentor and what's the most important thing you've learned from him/her?**

**VG** A mentor for me has been like a total career guide. I was lucky enough to meet mine by chance. I enrolled in instructor Doug Rye's excellent voice over class at LA Valley College and soon he became my mentor. There's also, Ivy Bethune, a legendary character actress, whom I consider to be a dear friend and she's like a mentor to me. I aspire to be like her one day! She's one of the sweetest, most generous, talented and humble artists I've ever met. I met her in my voiceover workout group and I've learned more from watching her read her copy in the booth for a 30 second ad that I have in many years of classes, workshops, etc. I also was on the planning committee for the Ivy Bethune Tri-union diversity awards that were named in her honor. Speaking of volunteer work, I contribute to various causes such as voicing many charity events as well as the NOH8 campaign (a silent protest photo project against California Proposition 8, PS). I even acted in their PSA. Here's a link at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXR3a5yIWRw>

**PS You're not only an actor, reporter, presenter... you're also a voice-over professional. You're obviously comfortable in front of the camera and an audience. Voice-over talents usually hide in dark studios and talk to an audience that's not there. Yet, you say it's your passion. What do you like about it? Is it easier or harder to do than the on-camera stuff?**

**VG** Voice over is a lot of fun. I love that I can play a wider range of characters from sultry leading ladies to sassy bosses to pushy soccer moms. You name it. And don't even get me started on dialects! Voice-over actors tend not to get typecast like on-camera actors as they're not being seen, just heard. Voice-Over is a different medium, so I can't really compare it to on-camera work, but I have fun doing both.

**PS Pretend for a moment that I am a budding actor/voice-over talent. What mistakes have you --Vida- made that I could learn from, and what are those lessons?**

**VG** I've made more mistakes on-camera than in voice over, probably because I've done it longer. I would have probably invested more time and money in my career early on. I would also reach out to more people in the industry more often and try to maintain contact with them. As I mentioned earlier, I think the most important thing to do as an artist is to continually work on your craft on a daily basis, be it on the stage, in a booth, or even in your living room. I think it's also to find a community of like-minded people you can collaborate with. Also, as I mentioned earlier, finding a mentor would be great thing to do, especially in a career path like this one that is constantly changing and evolving.

**PS If I could offer you a dream job today, what would it be and why?**

**VG** I think being a correspondent for "the Daily Show" would be the perfect fit as I have a strong background in journalism, news, comedy, acting, and sometimes I hear the correspondents do voice-

overs. Besides John Hodgman, I think I'd be the only correspondent with a journalism background and I think with my unique point-of-view I could add a lot to the show. Did you hear that Jon Stewart? :)

**Vida just wrapped two web series pilots. In "Alternative Brother," she plays a flashy damsel in distress and in "Green Manor," she's an Armenian housewife alongside Tony Moran, the original Mike Myers from "Halloween."**

**In "Summer of Massacre" directed by cult filmmaker Joe Castro, she will be play a white trash chick, a role she never imagined to be getting the opportunity to play. This is the third time Joe cast Vida in his films and this project will be hitting the film festival circuit soon.**

**She will also be narrating the Heritage Trails documentary series created by Mark Capehart.**

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