

## WEST OF MIDDLE EAST

A podcast by Neda Nobari Foundation

Interview transcript

Neda Nobari

TITLE: An Iranian Immigrant Goes From Hiding Her Identity, To Finding Her Calling

Summary: An Iranian immigrant who became a millionaire in the U.S. is using her resources to support arts, education and podcasts like this one, that help create understanding about the Middle East diaspora.

WEB: [Neda Nobari](#) and I are sitting in her kitchen in Orinda, a town in the hills about an hour east of San Francisco. She's there with her mother, who is visiting from Sweden. As she pours us some Persian cardamom tea, Neda tells the vision behind founding [Neda Nobari Foundation](#), an organization that pursues social justice and supports M

"It's about curation. It's about editing," Neda says. "I would like to give that opportunity to those individuals from my community, from my diaspora and similar diasporas from our region who have a lot to say and have contributed so tremendously to our communities with their actions, their activism towards social justice, towards environmental justice, building an equitable community, those people need to get the opportunity to have the mic in front of them so they can tell their stories."

Neda spends her days between her home Orinda and in Beverly Hills with her two sons. Neda is a community activist and a philanthropist. She and her ex-husband were behind the huge success of the women's clothing brand bebe.

"There were five stores in the early 80s. I was was a 21 year old software engineer right out of college. I left my job and joined my ex-husband at bebe. Over the next 22 years bebe grew and it became a billion dollar public company. We had stores everywhere. But it wasn't just the two of us that made bebe a success. It took a village. It always does...So many wonderful hardworking committed passionate people contributed so greatly to our success in the 90s and early 2000s. And the end it's always about the people, relationships, respect, trust and reciprocity."

Neda left Bebe in 2006 and founded her private foundation. She went back to school and got her masters in liberal studies. That's when her focus turned from fashion and business, to refugees and diasporas.

"It takes a community to build anything, a company or a diaspora," Neda says. "It's all built on the same principles of treating people with dignity. So that's what I'd like to see

us do with the refugees, the immigrants and the displaced: to treat them with dignity. Trust me most people would rather stay home with their families. I know I would have. But when you don't have control over your life because of a war that you didn't start, you're at the mercy of others and their humanity."

In 2016, Neda started the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies, a program at San Francisco State University researching Iranian diaspora communities and their contributions to host societies. Neda says our public education system is a powerful tool to share stories of diasporas.

"I believe in the power of art, film, as means of storytelling, so I'm hoping that this center for Iranian Diaspora Studies will provide a platform for us to do a lot of that with less emphasis on the politics of it," Neda says. "I think that once we realize how much we have in common, just as a human race, in terms of challenges that we all face as a planet, it will bring us closer together, rather than all the emphasis being put on how different we are."

Neda recently supported a shadow puppet play called '[Feathers of Fire](#)' by Hamid Rahmanian, an Iranian immigrant from New York. It's an ancient Persian fairy tale turned shadow play for all ages -- and all ethnicities.

"I believe in the power of storytelling," says Neda "When I meet people I ask them about their stories. And inevitably it creates this intimacy and this connected that when when part it's as if we've know each other for so long. As a way of storytelling for my foundation work we've supported film, documentaries, as well as features. Anything that we can use."

Neda wants to support the Iranian diaspora because she's a part of that diaspora. Neda was born in Iran and came to the U.S. when she was 15 years old to escape violence around the Iranian Revolution. She moved in with her aunt in San Rafael, California. That same year, in 1979, the Iranian Hostage Crisis happened. Sixty-six Americans were held captive in the U.S. Embassy in Iran. The handful of Iranian students at her school got bullied a lot.

"High school can be brutal," Neda says. "The environment is not as forgiving and tolerant. So when the Hostage Crisis happened all I remember is one morning I got to my school and the front giant wall to the building where the administration building was was graffiti spray painted, 'Go home camel jockeys.' I didn't even understand what that meant."

Neda withdrew. She hid her identity. Her big hazel-green hair, light skin, and long black hair didn't give away that she was Iranian.

“I come from an Azaree family, from Azerbaijan region in Iran. I speak fluent Turkish. I went into this mode that I’m Turkish. I’m not Iranian, I’m not Persian. Whatever you want to call that where the hostages are. I separated myself that identity for my years.”

Today Neda feels like she’s making up for lost time, by putting her time and her resources into supporting Iranian and other Middle Eastern diasporas.

“Not to be melodramatic but I feel like I betrayed my identity for so long,” Neda says. “And now that I have a strong voice and I have lived experience, and I have accomplished so much according to what the successful standards look like in this country, I’m in a place of strength, so I’m paying it forward. I want to be the voice for those who aren’t in the same position that I am. And there are many.”

Neda says so much of history has been written by the victors—the conquerors perspective, and that it’s time to give others a voice. One way to do that, is through film. Her foundation is the Executive Director of [Coup 53](#), the working title of an upcoming documentary by Taghi Amirani, an Iranian filmmaker in London. Coup 53 is about the CIA staged coup in Iran back in 1953. It led to the overthrow of Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh. Then there’s the upcoming documentary film campaign [Humanity on the Move](#). The project shares the stories of diverse people living through the global refugees crisis, from the Middle East and North Africa to the U.S. and Latin America. The projects explores our global migration crisis through the hearts and minds of those directly impacted.

“People are going to have to learn how to deal with the conflicts, and they’re real, that come up with having to coexist with people that they’re not used to seeing,” Neda says. “That they don’t know anything about. Whether it’s their history or culturally. But their are millions of people who have to face those realities now and millions more that have to accept those other people coming into their communities.”

Neda’s foundation is also Executive Director of a recent film award-winning film called [Radio Dreams](#). It’s about Afghanistan’s first rock band, now immigrants in San Francisco, and how they’re trying to coordinate a jam session with Metallica. Radio Dreams, though fictional, looks at the struggles of people from Iranian and Assyrian diasporas as they try to create a home, and a name for themselves America.

“Well whose voices do we normally hear? What narrative gets the air time? Who’s got the microphone has the power to disseminate a certain narrative,” says Neda “So anything that I can do now to contribute to changing that narrative, to communicating to the larger world that we are productive people, we are good people, we are successful people, we are educated people, and we contribute to whatever community wherever we live in positive way. And to bring that understanding and recognition to the larger audience, it’s become a passion and a focus of my life now.”

When Neda Nobari first came to the U.S. in 1979, she hid her Iranian identity to protect herself from racism and bullying at her high school. Decades later, Neda takes every

chance she gets to share stories about Iranians and others from the Middle East diaspora. Neda says sharing stories leads to understanding and empathy. At least, that's the hope. That way future generations may not have to feel like they have to hide who they really are to get through a day of high school.

Episode Credits:

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