

Tirgan Festival CEO Talks to Salam Toronto

By Azim Ahmed

When Mehrdad Ariannejad first arrived in Canada in 1997, he noticed that there were few Iranian events, but the demand for them was high.

“I remember when I first came and we had a simple talk (lecture), with no one famous speaking in particular,” Ariannejad recalls. “However, it was packed with so many people because it was one of the only Iranian events going on at the time.”

But thanks to people like Mehrdad, this is no longer the case. Today, there are a myriad of activities in and around the Toronto area pertaining to Persian culture. Talks, music concerts, live theatre, dance competitions, dinners, festivals; at times there is enough going on that the typical Iranian-Canadian living in the Greater Toronto Area can sometimes find that they have *too many* options.

Ariannejad, who is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the upcoming highly anticipated Tirgan festival (July 17th-July 20th), has been instrumental along with others in ushering in this explosion of events.

As a Masters student in Computer Engineering at the University of Toronto (U of T) upon his arrival in Canada, he helped set up the Iranian Canadian Centre for Arts and Culture (ICCAC), along with others, including Dr. Maria Sabaye Moghaddam, whom Salam Toronto also spoke to recently. The ICCAC began organizing talks, lectures and small events at the U of T campus. The success of these events gradually led to bigger events, including the ‘Colours of Iran festival’.

“It was a festival on a much smaller scale,” Ariannejad says. “We had performances, dance, music and some exhibitions as well. 500-600 University students, teachers and staff attended that event. It was very successful and we were very happy.”

Ultimately this led to 2006’s successful ‘Under the Azure Dome’, the prequel to this year’s Tirgan.

Ariannejad says, “To go from a smaller University event to a much large event was scary because the most expensive event that we had organized at U of T was something around \$10,000. And then we jumped to a \$100,000 event, which was Under the Azure Dome. We all expected 5,000-6,000 people to visit, but it turned out over 22,000 came out!”

“In some ways, we became a victim of our own success, as people had poor sightlines for the performances because it was so packed.”

The budget, for Tirgan, meanwhile, is expected to be over \$650,000. While this is a challenge, its CEO is not too concerned.

“We have worked really hard to raise funds for this, but we are still short,” Mehrdad says. “But we can manage this, because even if we don’t meet our target budget we can cut costs here and there to make it work.”

The festival organizers are using a combination of Government grants, corporate sponsorships, fundraising events and donations to help fund this large-scale event. The Haydary Hamilton Law firm, for instance, donated an impressive \$50,000 to the event. Harbourfront Centre is also taking the bill for much of the English-language advertising, while the Organizing committee is taking care of the advertising to the Iranian community.

As for weather conditions, for those events that are outdoors and uncovered, such as those scheduled for the Toronto Star Stage, the organizers will be at Mother Nature’s mercy.

“Although Harbourfront Centre does have contingency plans in case it rains,” Ariannejad explains. “They move the performance to another venue. But let’s hope it is a sunny day!”

According to the organizer, there are 56 events in total, of which 52 are free. All four of the ticketed events are covered, or indoors, Ariannejad says.

For Ariannejad, this festival is a culmination of his and his team’s efforts. Born in Tehran in 1964, he moved to Canada over a decade ago after he did his Bachelor of Computer Engineering in Iran. Upon completing his Masters degree here, he has been working for IBM Canada ever since. But what has been his motivation in investing so much of his time and energy into these events?

“One of our goals is to promote our culture and heritage and share it with the rest of Canadians,” he says.

This desire to share Iranian culture with non-Iranians is a big part of the festival’s mandate. In fact, Ariannejad projects that of the 100,000 expected visitors to the four-day event, 40%-50% will be from outside of the Iranian community. This optimistic outlook is attributed greatly to Harbourfront Centre’s extensive marketing and promotions. For instance, earlier on the very day he spoke to Salam Toronto, Mehrad had done a scheduled live interview with Sun TV.

This catering to non Persian-speaking people is reflected in some of the programming as well. While there will be no subtitles or English translation of the Persian music or visual arts, the storytelling, literature and discussion panels will all have a combination of English and Persian used.

Thus, as the Tirgan Festival nears, Southern Ontarians – Iranian or otherwise – can look forward to an eventful four days of culture.

Four days of culture, art, and enlightenment of any kind is indeed something to get excited about, and if the organizers have their way, the audience will come away content and happy.