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Leaders & Legacies: Hossein Jamali, restaurateur and humanitarian



Naperville humanitarian and restaurateur Hossein Jamali has made helping those in need a core focus of his businesses and personal life. (*Courtesy of Hossein Jamali*)

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Leaders & Legacies: Stories of Local Impact is an ongoing series brought to you in partnership with the Daily Herald and DuPage Foundation. It highlights the inspiring stories of local individuals, families, and businesses that have made or are making a lasting impact for our community through their generosity and leadership.

The series continues with restaurateur and humanitarian Hossein Jamali.

Naperville's Mesón Sabika, the award-winning flagship of restaurateur Hossein Jamali, has quite a story behind it.

Most people think of it as a phenomenal venue with outstanding cuisine and service. But others know it, and its unassuming proprietor, as a force for good to bring about positive change for those in need.

Over the years, Jamali and his staff have leveraged the sterling reputation of Mesón Sabika and its sister restaurant, Tapas Valencia in Chicago, to raise millions of dollars to help those who are struggling. It is an extraordinary story, and it began with the vision of an immigrant who made his way to the United States at the age of 18.



Mesón Sabika, which opened its doors in 1990, is housed in a mansion built in 1847. The four-acre estate near downtown Naperville has been the site of numerous special events and fundraisers throughout the years. - Courtesy of Mesón Sabika

Hossein Jamali grew up in Iran, the second youngest of six children, and recalls the hardships faced by his parents and siblings during his early years.

"Our family home did not have any basic conveniences," said Jamali. "We did not have a refrigerator; we did not have a stove; and we did not have a washing machine. My mother cooked over a kerosene fire. She used the same kerosene fire to boil water to do our laundry by hand."

Though his family was considered to be poor, Jamali witnessed his father, who often worked two jobs, always finding ways to help those in need. His father's example instilled in Jamali a deep sense of empathy for those who are less fortunate.

Third grade was an important milestone for Jamali and his family. His father was not able to attend school beyond that age but believed an education was a path to financial security.

Therefore, he was determined that his children would be educated.



In third grade, Hossein Jamali (shown here, second row from the back, third child from the right) learned a poem by 13th-century Persian poet Saadi Shirazi. The poem about selflessness remains close to his heart. - Courtesy of Hossein Jamali

And it was in third grade that Jamali learned a poem at school that, years later, would have a profound impact on his life:

"Human beings are members of a whole,

In creation of one essence and soul.

Should one organ be troubled by pain,

Others would suffer severe strain.

If you have no sympathy for human pain,

The name of human you cannot retain."

-- Saadi Shirazi (13th century Persian poet and scholar)

The poem has remained close to Jamali's heart and is featured on Mesón Sabika's website. It speaks to the selflessness he carried with him when he made his way to the United States in 1972 to attend college at the University of Illinois in Chicago.

By the time of Jamali's arrival in America, his family had moved beyond cooking over a kerosene fire and doing laundry by hand.

They now had modern appliances, even a television, although watching television was strictly supervised. They were not, for example, allowed to watch any shows with kissing.

Jamali said his sister, the first girl born into the family, was clearly their dad's favorite.



A photo of Jamali's parents and siblings in Iran in 1971, taken shortly before he left to travel to America for college. First row, his parents Mahmoud and Fatima with his youngest brother, Amir; and back row, from left, brothers Mohammad and Ali and sisters Zahra and Mahnaz. - Courtesy of Hossein Jamali

If Jamali and his siblings wanted their father to agree to anything, including watching programs that may have otherwise been forbidden, they would have their sister make the request of their father.

Although things had improved for Jamali and his family, money remained tight.

In order to afford Jamali's \$1,100 one-way flight to America (which included five stops and would cost nearly \$7,000 in today's dollars), his parents sold two Persian rugs that covered the floors of a special room in their home that was used to entertain guests.

They also purchased a suit and dress shoes for Jamali so he could make a good impression when he arrived in Chicago.

What they didn't realize was that he would be arriving in the dead of winter and actually needed a coat, snow boots and gloves.



Hossein Jamali, left, shown in the new suit purchased for his trip to Chicago in February 1972, didn't realize he also would need a coat, snow boots and gloves. - Courtesy of Hossein Jamali

Jamali had not learned to speak English before arriving in Chicago. His older brother taught him a single sentence: "I am looking for a job."

But Jamali couldn't understand anyone's answers to his question. He ultimately found work at a diner in Berwyn doing menial labor and was paid \$1 an hour, even though minimum wage was \$2.25 at the time.

It didn't take long for Jamali to realize they were taking advantage of him. He soon moved on to a job as a dishwasher that paid the full minimum wage before moving up the ranks to working as a busboy, then server, then bartender, then manager.

Even though Jamali arrived in America with only \$20, did not speak the language, and had several underpaying jobs, he managed to contribute every month to a cause that helped children in need, which was a pattern of selflessness he continues to this day.

Jamali gradually learned English and continued to work while going to school. After graduating with an engineering degree in 1979, he began working for a firm in St. Charles.

A career as an engineer would have offered set hours and financial security, but Jamali found it unfulfilling. He simply wasn't passionate about his office job.

Instead, he made the decision to return to the restaurant industry despite knowing he would be putting in long hours for unpredictable pay.

It was a life decision that has paid off in many ways, including helping countless people.

Ray Kinney, a local businessman and longtime friend of Jamali, describes Hossein as "one of the most humble, generous and kind humans I have ever met."

Kinney spoke of the typically high turnover rate for employees in the restaurant industry.

But the turnover rate at Jamali's restaurants is far below the industry average. Kinney believes the reason is due to Jamali's demeanor.

"He treats everyone with respect and, in return, his staff is exceptionally loyal," Kinney said.

Kinney also shared a story about his daughter's World Cultures class at Naperville Central High School, which was taught by Todd Holmberg.

Jamali was asked to speak to the class about his experience as an immigrant living in this country. Jamali invited the students to Mesón Sabika and shared his story, emphasizing how fortunate the students were to live in the United States.

It is something Jamali continues to do, graciously giving of his time to help students understand the challenges faced by immigrants.

Kinney also noted Jamali's deep admiration for teachers and the value he places on education. To show his appreciation, Mesón Sabika offers a 40% discount for teachers in Naperville school districts 203 and 204 for up to four guests.



Proceeds from a fundraiser hosted by Mesón Sabika and Naperville resident Doris Wood contributed to the 2018 purchase of a new truck for Loaves & Fishes Community Services. - Courtesy of Loaves & Fishes Community Services

Jamali's concern for people dealing with food insecurity has made Loaves & Fishes Community Services, an area nonprofit committed to providing healthy food and impactful programs to support self-sufficiency, a natural beneficiary of his support.

Longtime Naperville resident Doris Wood and her family became close friends with Jamali and his family more than 20 years ago. They soon began working together on an annual event in support of Loaves & Fishes.

The partnership began when Wood's son-in-law, Dan McQuaid, was part of a Shakespeare group that needed to add a venue to their summer performances.

McQuaid mentioned that Wood had a big yard and it would be a perfect site to put on a show.

Jamali offered to provide food for the event from Mesón Sabika but was told there could be 200 to 300 people attending and that such a donation was asking too much of him.

Jamali suggested that they could use the event to raise money for Loaves & Fishes, a charity about which the Wood family had not previously known much.

Rather than charging a fixed amount to attend the dinner and the show, the invitation simply asked people to make a monetary donation in whatever amount they would like.

To date, the now annual fundraiser, which has evolved into a Roaring '20s-themed lawn party, has raised enough money to buy more than a million dollars' worth of food, thanks to the buying power of Loaves & Fishes, where every dollar donated can buy nearly \$8 worth of food. ^[P]_[SEP]One year, the event raised enough money to help buy a new truck for Loaves & Fishes.

Another year, the event raised enough money to buy a forklift for the new Loaves & Fishes facility in Aurora. And this past summer, the event raised enough money to pay for gas for the Loaves & Fishes trucks to rescue food from local grocery stores for the next year.

Wood refers to Jamali as "One of God's Noblemen," a phrase used by her father, the late Honorable Win G. Knoch, when speaking of someone he held in high esteem.

Mike Havala, CEO of Loaves & Fishes, shared a story about Jamali's support during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The restaurant industry had been decimated by the inability to serve people in their restaurants.

"Even though Hossein's own future must have seemed uncertain, he sent a check to help Loaves & Fishes, anticipating that our need for help would be substantial," Havala said.

Jamali gives a great deal of credit for the success of Mesón Sabika and his ability to support multiple charities to his landlord, the Polivka family.

George Polivka purchased the property in 1945 and it has been owned by the family since that time.

According to Jamali, "The Polivka family members have been wonderful stewards of the property. They have become part of our own family. They have been so much more than landlords. They are truly outstanding people."

When asked about which organizations are most special to him, Jamali said, "I care most about supporting anyone in need without regard to boundaries, race, religion or politics. It simply comes down to a matter of need."

When pressed to name the causes that are closest to his heart, Jamali spoke of food insecurity and education, both of which can be traced back to his childhood growing up in poverty in Iran.



Mesón Sabika staff prepare to hand out complimentary Thanksgiving meals to-go for needy individuals and families in 2021. - Courtesy of Mesón Sabika

One of the most impactful efforts taken on by Mesón Sabika and Tapas Valencia occurs at the start of each holiday season.

Both restaurants provide complimentary Thanksgiving dinners for people facing hardships. They began taking reservations for meals in October and have already reached capacity for this year.

The tradition began more than 20 years ago as a sit-down dinner at both restaurants -- inspired by a wish to brighten the lives of people dealing with financial challenges.

Both Mesón Sabika and Tapas Valencia shifted to a carryout format after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a switch that has allowed them to reach even more people in need.

With this new approach, the restaurants can now provide Thanksgiving meals for 3,000 people -- a figure that could not have been possible if constrained by hosting a sit-down dinner.

Mesón Sabika recently hosted an event on behalf of the American Red Cross to support people who were victims of Hurricane Ian.

At the end of September, a similar event was held for UNICEF to support families impacted by flooding in Pakistan.

The list of charitable beneficiaries goes on.

Jamali's restaurants have hosted numerous fundraisers throughout the years to support people who have been impacted by catastrophic events.

Often, these fundraisers donate 100% of the revenue generated that day to the cause -- not just profits, not just food sales, but 100% of everything sold, including the bar.

Stephanie Penick, owner of Positively Naperville and another longtime friend of Jamali, shared a story of her first time visiting Mesón Sabika when she and her family first moved to Naperville in 1993.

Jamali stopped by their table to meet them and recommended a Chilean wine.

Penick still has the cobalt blue bottle, a keepsake and a reminder of the great impression he made on them.

While thinking about Jamali and the many memories her family has shared at their "go-to" favorite restaurant, it struck her how blessed our community is that Jamali chose the hospitality industry over a career in engineering.

"Hossein not only serves delicious tapas and fine sangria, he also serves the world in many ways," Penick said.



Helping people in need has been a way of life for the entire Jamali family. Pictured, from left, are Omeed, Hossein, Monireh and Naveed Jamali celebrating the holidays. - Courtesy of Hossein Jamali

- A special thanks to Hossein Jamali and his family for allowing DuPage Foundation to share his inspiring story as well as to the following people for

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The Leaders & Legacies series is brought to you by the Legacy Society of DuPage Foundation. Suggestions for future stories can be sent to Mike Sitrick, executive vice president for advancement, at mike@dupagefoundation.org. Interested in learning more about how you can make an impact or create a legacy for your community and favorite causes? Learn more at dupagefoundation.org (<https://dupagefoundation.org/>) or call (630) 665-5556. DuPage Foundation is located at 3000 Woodcreek Drive, Suite 310, in Downers Grove, IL 60515.

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