

# Houston Chronicle



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Raj Shafaii, left, his wife, Norma, and son, Armand, have made their banquet hall business into a success by marketing to Houston's booming Hispanic population and

multiplying the services offered to customers: DJs, catering, tuxedo rental, photography, video, slide shows, a limo and dance lessons.



# Entrepreneurs a little older, wiser

AFTER FASHIONING  
BUSINESSES TO FIT  
THEIR SPACE,  
THEY LET THE BUILDING SHAPE THEIR ENTERPRISE

By DAVID KAPLAN  
Houston Chronicle

**R**AJ Shafaii is a native of Iran and an engineer by training. So how did he become one of Houston's leading hosts of *quinceañeras*, the coming of age parties for 15-year-old Hispanic girls?

It wouldn't have happened at all if his uncle Tyeb had not sent him eight Chinese tablecloths.

It was a bizarre turn of events, but when you move to America and get the entrepreneurial bug, you can call it serendipity.

Life takes strange turns.

The gift of eight tablecloths spawned a \$100,000 investment in more tablecloths, which generated a need for a storage site: an East Side warehouse. When the business went bust, the empty warehouse space inspired a foray into the banquet hall business.

With his wife, Norma Garcia Shafaii, he now owns four banquet halls in neighborhoods with large Hispanic populations.

His Shafaii Party & Reception Center in Galena Park is beside a Dairy Queen and across from an auto shop — not much from the outside. But inside are cloth-covered tables and chairs, floral bouquets, blinking lights of pink and blue, and a stage fit for young royalty.

A wedding or *quinceañera* is a momentous event in a family's life; celebrating in style is a necessity.

With a booming Hispanic population, Houston is seeing more and more of the banquet hall, and it is a challenging business.

"When you deal with people and their families and what's precious to them, you have to be careful," Shafaii said.

"Keeping everybody happy is hard," he says.

Each year, his operation has grown more sophisticated.

When, in 1995, he opened the first location on Broadway, a converted warehouse in the East End, he was

lar place for a young woman's *quinceañera*.

"It's her coming out party and something she dreams about," Rodriguez said. "And it's the time when the family introduces her to larger society. It plays an important cultural and symbolic function."

The event can also take place at a church, or, more simply, at a home or in a back yard, with balloons and pa-

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Five years later, his services include disc jockeys, catering, tuxedo rental, photography, video, slide shows, a limousine and even dance lessons.

The proliferation of local Mexican-style banquet halls reflects the prosperity of Hispanic immigrants, said Nestor Rodriguez, associate professor of sociology at the University of Houston.

A banquet hall has become a popu-

per decorations, he said.

*Quinceañeras* in Houston that Rodriguez has attended are more elaborate than those put on by American-born Hispanics in his hometown of Corpus Christi.

"From what I've seen, the ones in Houston reflect the prosperity of Hispanic immigrants," Rodriguez said.

Immigrants often hold large gatherings, he said, because they tend to

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# Party

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have extensive social networks.

At their four ballrooms, the Shafaiis strive to offer an interior similar to that of a hotel ballroom, only less expensive, which, Shafaii said, appeals to middle-class families.

When entering the ballroom business, it is important to specialize, said Judy Whitehurst, director of the San Jacinto College Small Business Development Center.

Whitehurst consulted for a couple who opened a wedding chapel in League City. They decided their target market would be weddings that are too big for a home and too small for a hotel.

The couple came up with a full-service package and soon came to realize that they needed to make it flexible because people have different budgets.

Some families may want to bring their own food or have a relative take the pictures, Whitehurst said.

The Shafaiis offer event packages ranging from about \$3,500 to almost \$8,000.

Word-of-mouth advertising is very important for a banquet hall, Whitehurst said. "The impression you make on guests is what sets up future business."

With its heavy concentration of Hispanics, the East End has many of these banquet halls.

The 8-month-old Marbella Banquet Hall on Harrisburg has a Spanish colonial design with a patio, gazebo, chapel and wishing well.

Marbella owner Julio del Carpio offers traditional wedding and *quinceañera* services, as well as a horse-drawn carriage and an Elvis impersonator.

The prices of his full-service packages range from \$6,000 to \$12,000.

Unlike del Carpio, Raj and Norma Shafaii got into the ballroom business circuitously.

After graduating from the University of Texas, where Raj met Norma, he took an engineering job in La Porte.

One day, his visiting uncle Ravak Tyeb Arjomand, an exporter from Dubai, told Shafaii that he saw a good opportunity for him selling imported Chinese tablecloths in Houston.

But Shafaii didn't want anything to do with the scheme. He only wanted to be an engineer.

Arjomand sent him eight tablecloths anyway.

A dinner guest saw one, loved it and told her friends.

Soon the Shafaiis were ordering tablecloths and selling them at house parties and flea markets.

After he lost his engineering job in 1983, Shafaii went to another uncle in Kuwait to borrow a large sum of money: \$100,000.

He flew to Hong Kong and spent it all on tablecloths.

"What a *stupid* thing to do," Shafaii observed.

With warehouses full of the coverings, he discovered that he no longer could find many buyers.

Looking for a way to unload the goods, he and Norma noticed that ladies' detachable collars were in vogue.

They cut a few of their tablecloths into pieces and turned them into lacey collars that adorned the front and back of a dress.

The collars were a hit. They sold them to mom-and-pop boutiques and department stores, including Palais Royal, Foley's and Macy's.

"My poor mom was working all day long" making the collars, Shafaii recalled. Eventually they hired 60 people to sew, and the Shafaiis were taking in \$100,000 a month.

"We got really excited and bought a big house and big car," Shafaii said, "and then the money stopped coming in."

He had to borrow money against credit cards to pay employees.

They had income from their business importing and exporting arts and crafts supplies, but

they were getting tired of traveling to craft shows.

They wondered if they might find a better use for their import-export warehouse in the East End.

Heeding the advice of friends, they turned it into a banquet hall.

It began as a simple business: They bought decorations from Arnie's.

After six months, they were booked every weekend for the year, and they began expanding their services.

For a fee, they now provide a choreographer who teaches traditional dances to the *quinceañera* and her *damas*, or attendants, and *chambelanes*, or escorts.

Along the way, the Shafaiis have learned tricks of the trade: For instance, it is better to hire Houston police officers instead of security guards because they carry more authority, Shafaii said.

And they enforce a strict dress code.

"People are spending lots of money, and it's for their family," Shafaii said, so it is best to keep the right tone.

Raj and Norma Shafaii have other family members working with them, including their son, Armand, and Raj Shafaii's brother, Fred.

"People think we work only weekends," Norma said, but preparing for the events is a seven-day-a-week job.

Norma, Armand and Fred frequently laughed when Shafaii told stories about their business.

"He gets so excited," Norma Shafaii explained.

His enthusiasm has actually helped carry the business, she observed.

"He may have no idea of how to do something, but he puts his mind and will to it and figures it out."

Recently he began taking Spanish lessons, which Norma says has been a drawback for her and her female colleagues.

"We can't talk in front of him now," she said.