

Recipe for Peace

By Linda Hagen Miller



By the time Victor Azar was 17 years old, he had survived seven of the Middle East's most notorious conflicts and lived in hot spots like Basra, Ramallah, the West Bank and Baghdad. Born in Karak, Jordan, of Palestinian-Lebanese heritage, Azar and his sister Viola followed their Seventh Day Adventist minister father and mother to cities that have become all too familiar in the lexicon of conflict. As a child, he frequently heard missiles whine overhead and explode blocks away. He has seen bodies in the streets, neighbors and friends beaten and hanged.

Today, it is difficult to imagine the charismatic Spokane entrepreneur cringing at the sound of gunfire or living with the threat of arrest and death. Azar is best known in Spokane for food – exotic, colorful Greek and Middle East cuisine that has been served in the family's restaurants since 1973.

Given Azar's heritage and the turbulence he witnessed as a child, you might even imagine him as a firebrand zealot intent on revenge and war in the Middle East at all costs. Your assumption couldn't be more wrong. Just as Azar's trajectory from a combat zone to a peaceful eastern Washington city took many side roads, his career and philosophy of life has arched equally far from violence and hostilities.

By 1973, Pastor Najeeb Azar's congregation had grown significantly, putting the minister under suspicion by Arab authorities. After being arrested and held for a brief time, Pastor Azar decided it was time to leave the Middle East. With relatives in Tekoa, Wash., Spokane was a logical choice.

The Azars bought a convenience store in north Spokane at the corner of Empire and Nevada streets, and 17-year-old Victor enrolled at Eastern Washington University. He worked in the family businesses, including the first Azar's Restaurant, while attending EWU. In 1982, Azar graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration and a minor in math. The following year he gained a degree in government and political science.

"I loved every minute of EWU," Azar says. "There is so much interpersonal interaction with professors and lots of direct contact. Dr. Robert McGinty at the business school and Dr. Keith Quincy in the government department had a huge influence on my outlook."

EWU would not only influence Azar's philosophy and career choices, it would follow



Photos courtesy:
Victor Azar

A young Victor Azar with his mother Najla, father Najeeb and sister Viola in his grandparent's garden in the northern Jordan town of Husn



Victor with sister Viola in Ramallah (now the capital of Palestine in the West Bank)

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him across the country to Pittsburgh, Penn., where he enrolled at Carnegie Mellon University.

“I had a statistics book written by two EWU professors that was so good,” Azar says. “Easy to read, logical, a powerful book. I got to my class at Carnegie Mellon and the instructor walked into the room and held up the same statistics book. ‘Buy this,’ he told us.”

Azar graduated with a master of science degree from Carnegie Mellon and the corporate world called. He went to work for PNC Financial Corporation in what was at the time the leading-edge technology field of electronic data interchange. He authored an article on the subject for a professional association journal and wrote another piece for *PNC Financial* magazine on electronic payment systems.

Wells Fargo lured him to San Francisco where he served as vice

president and senior product manager in the wholesale banking division for three years. But the homeland called, and Azar, his wife and two daughters returned to Jordan where he went to work building a five-star hotel near Petra. The fabled “rose red city, half as old as time” is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site, but it is more commonly known to American filmgoers as Harrison Ford’s stomping grounds in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

While overseeing the hotel’s development from land acquisition to turnkey operation, Azar aggressively promoted the property and, before the doors were opened, secured a 95 percent occupancy rate for the first year of operation. American and European travelers were obvious target markets, but what about Jordan’s neighbor, Israel?

It was 1994 and the mood was right. As United States President Bill Clinton helped negotiate a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, Azar decided on a grassroots path toward peace. He approached an Israeli tour operator with a novel suggestion: Bring Israeli and American Jewish tour groups to Petra. The idea worked and Azar became the first Palestinian/Lebanese businessman to successfully broker a joint business agreement between Jordan and Israel. Azar and his Israeli partner held a press conference announcing their joint venture just hours after the peace treaty was signed between the two countries.

“I thought, maybe we can implement our own peace treaty,” Azar says. He went on to become part of a multinational delegation delivering keynote speeches to audiences of travel agents and tour operators in Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

On its simplest level, tourism is an economic driver. When it is done right, local people own the hotels, restaurants, sightseeing and adventure tours, keeping tourist dollars in the local economy. On a slightly more complex level, tourism promotes peace by introducing travelers to new cultures and opening the path to multicultural understanding. As Mark Twain said, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness.”

Victor Azar’s campaign to promote peace through tourism came to an abrupt halt in the aftermath of the 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin. He returned to Spokane and the family food service business in 1997. In the past five years, Victor and his partner and sister Viola have expanded their catering business (recently renamed and rebranded as D’Zaar Catering & Food Service), and acquired industrial food service contracts with Triumph Composite Systems and Avista Utilities. This year, D’Zaar took over Café Mac at the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture in Spokane.

“My heart is still in the peace movement,” Azar says. “It doesn’t matter who is right and who is wrong, because the cycle has to stop somewhere. I want to be part of the solution, to make a difference in people’s lives, and I look forward to a time when I can do more with the peace through tourism project.” E