

maryam GHYABI



building bridges to the future

by Bill Lazarus

A year or so ago, Maryam Ghyabi (pronounced Gee-ah-bee) probably wouldn't have been able to sit quietly in her office and talk with calm assurance about how she and a committee she formed were going to save Volusia County's economic hide. She would have been frantic incarnate, a one-woman beehive of activity in the consulting world, sprinting from phone to file and back again, issuing orders and directing subordinates with a rush of words as if each emotion-laden sentence were desperately late for an urgent appointment.

Apparently conjuring up \$134 million to build a bridge across the St. Johns River and then creating a coalition to attempt to span Volusia's development malaise can have a tranquilizing effect.

Ghyabi now exudes confidence. She's poised, almost relaxed, as if the coiled spring inside has been weighted. It's all a byproduct of hobnobbing with some of Central Florida's bigwigs. Virtually

off business into Volusia County and blocking efforts to boost this area's economic base, she says. Ghyabi's own consulting firm can find good potential employees and even pay them a lot of money, but they still too often spurn her offers because their spouses can't find comparable positions in this economically deprived region.

The problem: "No one wants to drive across that narrow bridge everyday," Ghyabi reports with venom.

Hence the need for a new bridge.

Now that it's on the way, Ghyabi has turned her attention on the second half of her firm's problem – creating good jobs for spouses.

"I lived the first 18 years of my life in a third-world country," this native of Iran says. "I don't want to live in a third-world county."

This time, she's starting from a stronger platform. Using her leadership role in the

George Anderson and VCBDC leaders Drew Page, Larry McDermott and Jerry Wells reflect the broad spectrum of interests and much of the leadership base of the region. Their enthusiasm and the spirited discussions at the early meetings suggest Ghyabi's vision may succeed where earlier efforts have ended up with reams of reports and little of substance.

Gray, who started 1999 by casting off on an 18-month around-the-world sailing odyssey, turned the chair of the Economic Development Coalition over to Halifax Community Health System's John E. Evans, whose community involvement includes chairing Volusia Visions, serving as vice-chair for VCBDC and as associate editor of this magazine. Evans says he and other members will have to run hard to keep up with Ghyabi's determination to create positive change.

"I know other committees haven't succeeded," Ghyabi admits. "But I think this

"I don't want to live in a third world country."

unknown outside engineering circles only a few months ago, the Ormond Beach resident managed to merge people like high-powered Orlando attorney Charles Gray, Sanford Mayor Larry Dale, Volusia Intergovernmental Coordinator Matt Greeson, Congressman John Mica (R-Winter Park), County Council members Pat Patterson (now a state representative) and Pat Northey, and Chairman of Orlando Metroplan Randy Morris, among others, into a cohesive lobbying organization.

The group then put pressure on the Florida Department of Transportation to build a new, wider I-4 bridge years ahead of schedule. They cajoled \$134 million in Federal funds that will have the bridge carrying all that traffic to and from west Volusia and Orange and Seminole counties perhaps as soon as 2000, well ahead of previously announced plans.

Concern about the flow of traffic from west to east underlies Ghyabi's effort. The old bridge has been a bottleneck, cutting

Volusia County Association for Responsible Development (VCARD), Ghyabi turned the partnership she had fostered with Charles Gray on the I-4 bridge into convincing him to be chair of an economic development group composed of Funcoast movers and shakers. Gray, who although an Orlando power-broker, has lived for years in Volusia, agreed with the proviso that the group would work to support and expand ongoing efforts of county government and the quasi-public Volusia County Business Development Corporation (VCBDC).

"Elected officials, business leaders and government all have to work together," Ghyabi says. "We have to be unified to get important things done. That was the reason the bridge effort was successful. That's how this committee will be successful." The participants in initial meetings, ranging from Chamber President George Mirabal and County Manager Larry Arrington to hoteliers Tom Staed and

is the right time for this one. If we don't do something now, we never will." She speaks with urgency in her voice, the same sound that has drawn leaders from around the county to her side. "It's time for the entire county to become unified," she pleads. "Let's forget east and west and speak with one voice. If we are unified, we can get important things done."

One of the things Ghyabi considers of utmost importance is that whatever development is coming must constitute *healthy* growth – healthy for the environment as well as the people. "We can't pave Florida. We must save what we came here for." To Ghyabi, that means development should be in pockets, with as much habitat as possible preserved for other creatures. (See *Can this Florida be Saved?* in the January issue of *HALIFAX*.) And what happens when these pockets run out of acreage? "We go up," she says with a thumbs up gesture.

She doesn't have to hold that thumb in

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the air to get a sense of which way the economic wind is blowing. If anyone in this area has an idea what direction things should be moving in, it's Ghyabi.

From her office window, she can't see the river of vehicles steadily flowing up and down Granada Boulevard in Ormond Beach. But she can hear them. That's enough.

The endless hum of commerce just a few hundred yards from her front door has become her theme song, an echo that rings through her files and reverberates down the many rooms that now constitute her firm's sprawling quarters. The relentless roar of engines has carried her as sure as a leaf on the wind across the ocean from her native Middle East into some of the major developments around Florida.

Other engineering firms may decide where sewers go or how to erect a bridge; only one firm in this area, Ghyabi Lassiter & Associates, decides where people drive.

"It's not just numbers," says Ghyabi, who has spent the last 13 years listening to that motorized siren song. "I'm working with human behavior, trying to figure out what will make sense. It's like playing chess, like reading minds."

Among the dozens of tasks on her desk include some of the biggest in the area: Oceanwalk, the mammoth \$100 million redevelopment project next to the Adam's Mark hotel on AIA; Ocean Center expansion; and the new judicial center in DeLand.

Her decisions regarding traffic flow, entrances and parking will naturally be controversial because they impact anyone who drives to, from or near those buildings.

A graduate of the University of Central Florida with B.S. and M.S. degrees in engineering, Ghyabi is ready for the complaints. She's been there before.

Her firm helped design the traffic flow for Wilmette Avenue, the Ormond Beach connecting link between Nova Road and Beach Street that opened in mid-1997. Wilmette residents, frustrated by the long construction process, even snuck out at night to cut off pumps draining water from the street. Ghyabi, now 39, was one of the people who met with homeowners, calmed them and allowed the project to finish.

When drivers were not allowed to enter The Trails from Wilmette, which ends facing the entrance to that large development, the outrage enveloped city officials.

"I recommended people be able to drive into The Trails," Ghyabi says. That's the way it is now.

Her success has led her into the corporate offices of some of this area's largest companies — Consolidated Tomoka, Root Corp., Charles Wayne Group, and Intervest Construction, (which, not incidentally, is owned by her brother Mori Hosseini). Now, her company handles projects from Miami to Jacksonville, and from Melbourne to Tampa.

Those connections served as her entrée into bridge building and have helped opened doors for the new economic initiative.

Her firm, started with \$3,000 in the bank and some exhausted credit cards, now has 18 employees — seven added in just the past year — and sales have topped \$1 million a year. As a result, the company has swallowed up most of its building. Not to mention any spare time of its owner. "I'm working long hours, no vacation, no time for myself," says Ghyabi. "And I'm so pleased."

Her office phone rings; her secretary interrupts, associates walk in for advice. Always businesslike, Ghyabi handles all the questions with her new calmness, moving easily from one pro-

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ject to another, keeping them straight without notes.

A Deltona business is waiting for traffic projections before seeking a building permit. The deadline is now; the information is still sketchy. A colleague is told where to find more data. He takes back his preliminary report and sets to work.

Ghyabi is decisive, confident. Like the cars that crisscross her research, she, too, is driven.

"I made up my mind to be an engineer when I was 14 years old," Ghyabi recalls. "I love the math. I'm good at it." Her other choice was to become a doctor, but she didn't think she could handle people going through pain.

The second youngest of five children of an Iranian businessman, Ali Hosseini-Kargar, Ghyabi had received a lot of encouragement at home. After she fixed a broken tea kettle, her grandfather told her she should be an engineer. It didn't matter that women in Moslem Iran then (and now) were expected to be housewives. "They really didn't go to a university, especially not from my city," recalls Ghyabi, who lived in Mashad, which is about an

tant rumblings of war seeped through the family walls. The first sounds she actually listened to in her career were the shouts of Moslem fanatics about to launch the takeover of the American embassy and bring the Ayatollah Khomeini into power.

The year was 1978. Her father wanted her to stay in Mashad, but the break came after police attacked students at her university. A good friend was crumpled by a police baton. Another was executed. Her mother sent her to Daytona Beach where her brother, Mori, had almost completed his coursework at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and was two years away from starting a construction company, now this area's largest. Another brother, Mike Kargar, joined them soon after. He now has his own construction company.

Ghyabi was met by Mori and his best friend Paul Ghyabi at the airport on July 4, 1978. Within two years, she had married Paul, who still works with Mori at that construction company. The couple has a daughter.

Barely 20, Ghyabi found herself lost in a strange world. Having attended an American school in Mashad, she spoke

She didn't need a road map. "I always wanted to be independent," she says.

That has meant long hours, along with a realization of the unseen obligations of the job. "A doctor may kill one patient at a time," Ghyabi says. "An engineer can kill many people at the same time. And an engineer's mistake may take years to recognize."

Then, too, she had begun to understand the importance of her work. Those aren't just numbers lined up on a computer print-out or a dry conclusion based on some lengthy analysis. "Good roads are a key to economic success," Ghyabi argues. "A company won't want to move here unless we have good roads." The new bridge is an extension of that oft-repeated thesis.

She preaches that message to political leaders in a variety of communities and works with the Metropolitan Planning Organization, among other groups, in an effort to promote transportation.

This day, she had been up since 4 a.m. and would remain in her office until evening. The strain does not show in her face or weaken her smile. Her daughter calls: advice must be given via the phone. "Daddy will be home soon," Ghyabi soothes.

"Good roads are a key to economic success."

hour northeast of the capital, Tehran.

She didn't care: "I didn't want to depend on someone to bring home the bread."

Her voice is firm. Ghyabi describes herself as shy. If so, she hides it well. She's not wearing any jewelry this day, admittedly so "the focus remains on me, not my jewelry." Nor is there a hint of shyness in her comments or the way she thrusts her chin forward to emphasize her opinions. Her manner is warm; her posture reflects authority.

Social customs in her native land meant nothing to her. "I wouldn't let [culture] block me," she says. Her brown eyes flash with determination; her voice, still graced with an accent, hardens as she talks about her plans. "I was not going to let being shy stop me from doing what I wanted to do."

Nothing has, not even an intellectual roadblock: to get into an Iranian university, applicants must take an exhaustive examination. Only 1 in 300 applicants are accepted. Ghyabi was the one. "It was a miracle," she says.

But not a surprise, based on her personal philosophy: "God has a purpose for me in life," she says. "I keep pushing the envelope."

She began studying computers and mathematics as a freshman while the dis-

English, but it was the version used in England. She couldn't understand American lingo.

On her first day at college in this country, lost and upset, she sat down and cried. "After awhile," Ghyabi recalls, "I sat up and told myself that was enough." She got up, went to class and hasn't looked back.

In 1984, while still a student, she interned at an engineering firm in Orlando. Her boss was R. Sans Lassiter, who later became her partner. The Orlando office remains busy. "There isn't enough business in Volusia County," Ghyabi explains.

Remember the bridge?

In 1985, she landed a job with a Jacksonville firm as a traffic engineer. Positions with the Florida Department of Transportation and with Volusia County as a traffic-transportation engineer followed. In 1995, Ghyabi was ready to take the next step. Her father had died in her arms in 1990; her mother, Pari, had moved to Ormond Beach. Her friends and family encouraged her to go into business for herself.

"I have become successful because of the encouragement of my parents and the opportunity this country gave me," Ghyabi says.

The workload is relentless. Success demands intensity. Ghyabi Lassiter only gets about 33 percent of the jobs the firm bids on, but each proposal must be carefully worked out, documented and professionally produced. "Every one is like a baby to me," Ghyabi says. "When we get the job, we celebrate. When we don't, there's heartbreak."

Then it's back to work. "What I do involves people," Ghyabi continues. "I want to have an impact. My business is helping people in subtle ways."

The conversation is brief. She wants to work on enhancing her presentations, eliminating some of her accent, improving her speaking ability. That will have to wait. A major bridge might have been obtained, but there's still an economy to fix. And, outside, the cars continue moving in a seemingly endless flow.

To keep up with them, Maryam Ghyabi – even with the calmness built on growing success – has to maintain the pace, too.

