

# THE LEBANESE AMERICAN FOUNDATION, INC.

## *THE FIRST 10 YEARS*

By HANNA SHAMMAS, M.D.

*In his book "The Tipping Point", Malcolm Gladwell explores how certain events shape societies. I had the honor and the pleasure to serve as Founding Chairman and First President of the Lebanese American Foundation, Inc. Looking back at the "House of Lebanon" journey, I can recall multiple episodes that helped shape our Foundation in the first 10 years of its existence.*

### **1999: The Lebanese American Foundation, Inc. is established**

Soon after his appointment as Consul General of Lebanon in Los Angeles, Dr. Jean Makaron invited a group of prominent Lebanese Americans to discuss the creation of a non-profit foundation that will establish the "House of Lebanon".

In September 1999, the group decided on the name of the corporation, adopted the Purpose and Ultimate Goals of the Foundation and elected me Chairman of the Board and President. The bylaws were drafted, and through the diligent work of Mr. Jack Chammas, Esq., the Foundation received its 501 (c) (3) status from the Internal Revenue Service on April 10, 2000.



Dr. Makaron was determined to rally the community behind our project. For the first two years, we were constantly on the move. We met with many Lebanese American groups and individuals, discussing our project and soliciting their support. We held numerous fundraising activities at homes or restaurants, hosted by generous donors, namely Mr. and Mrs. George Naddour, Mr. and Mrs. Anis Garabet, Mr. and Mrs. Nabih Abou Elhosn, Dr. and Mrs. Jason Boutros, Mr. and Mrs. Karim A. Jaude, and Mr. Tony Vincent Zehenni. I can never forget the special fundraising dinner organized by the Armenian Lebanese Community to benefit the "House of Lebanon".

The first youth meeting, "Return to our Roots", was held at UCLA on October 27, 2000, featuring the Lebanese American star, Mr. Casey Kasem and attended by over 250 persons. Other "Return to our Roots" meetings followed and the movement ultimately inspired the formation of the Young Professional Group.

The first gala event was held on November 19, 2000 at the Waterfront Hilton Hotel in Huntington Beach, CA. This first gala dinner had a dual purpose, to fundraise for the "House of Lebanon" and to celebrate the Lebanese Independence Day. Dr. Paul and Connie Wakim served as chairpersons. Our resources were limited. Coincidence had it that Sabah and her then husband, Fadi Lebnan, came for a visit at my office. Hearing about the "House of Lebanon", they got very excited about the project and volunteered to donate their time and their talent to entertain us. The event was attended by over 350 persons in the presence of multiple dignitaries including Congressman Darryl Issa. Suffice it to say, Sabah's performance brought the attendees to their feet as they clapped and sang in unison to her songs. We did not hold any gala dinner in 2001. We resumed in 2002, and we have been holding them on a yearly basis ever since.



#### **2002: Dr. Ray Irani supports the Lebanese American Foundation, Inc.**

Dr. Irani's endorsement of the "House of Lebanon" project was undoubtedly a major pivotal step. His involvement was cemented by generous donations, not only from Dr. Irani, but also from Dr. Joe Jacobs, Mr. George Hage and from Ambassador Gilbert Chagoury. Our generous donors were elected Honorary Board members, and Dr. Irani became our Honorary Chairman.

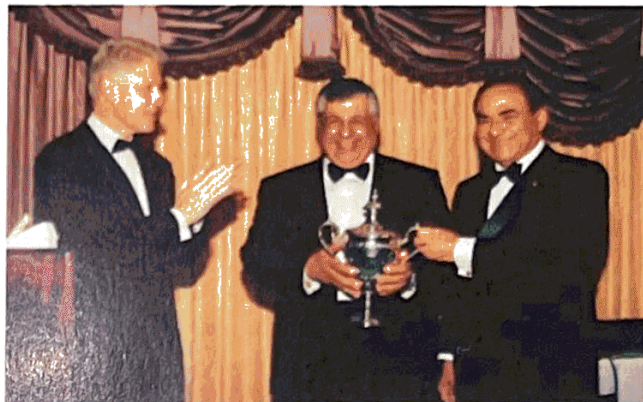


#### **2004: New officers are elected**

On February 4, 2004, Mr. Kanan Hamzeh was elected President and I remained Chairman of the Board. For the ensuing 5 years, we worked diligently and hand in hand with our dedicated board members, our chief financial officer, Mr. Rachid Eletel and our legal advisor, Mr. Jack Chammas, to solidify the Foundation's basis.



The gala dinners became more elaborate with the establishment of the "Ray R. Irani Pride of Heritage" award, and the venue was moved to the Beverly Hills Hotel. The first recipient of the prestigious award was Ambassador Gilbert Chagoury. We are all grateful to Ambassador Chagoury for his commitment to the House of Lebanon. At the banquet, he spared no effort to make the event one of the most successful ones. Thanks to him, the House of Lebanon had the privilege to have President Clinton as its guest speaker. This definitely raised the bar for the subsequent banquet events.



Get-together parties were held every two months to allow more mingling between the Board members and the Lebanese American community. Yearly picnic events attracted thousands of Lebanese Americans and friends sharing lunch, volleyball, tawle, card games and dancing to Lebanese music.

Activities of the young adults started in 2002 led by our own children. Zeina Hamzeh and Lina Shammas were driven by the need to learn about their Lebanese heritage. The group became very active after 2004 with multiple get-together and social evenings. The Young Professional Group is still very dynamic with programs focusing on cultural events, discussion forums and lectures and, of course, social events.



The Artist Group was started in 2006 by Mrs. Carol Choucair Ouaijan. After meeting with Carole the first time, Kanan and I were very impressed with her enthusiasm and her vision for the Lebanese artists. The group started with 7 members and quickly grew to include over 70 visual artists, performers, composers, musicians, actors, film makers and writers. The group put together the very successful "Beyond Borders" art exhibition, an annual event that aims to celebrate the wealth of artistic talent within the American Lebanese, Middle Eastern and American communities.



Mrs. Karen Srour was appointed Executive Director on September 17, 2007, and the Lebanese American Foundation established an office in Century City. The office was later moved to Studio City. The LAF office has given us the ability to create an LAF identity and uniformity in event programs and invitations. Under Mrs. Srour's direction, the office became responsible for the day to day operations of the organization, including the Pride of Heritage Banquet, annual picnic, golf tournaments, art exhibitions and social dinner details. Accurate record keeping allowed us to have over 4500 names in a detailed donor software program. The software program gives us the ability to send out acknowledgement letters to all donors upon receiving donations. The House of Lebanon website was redesigned to include the organization history, board of directors and trustees photos and biographies, information on current events, including online ticket sales for all events. The office sends out a monthly House of Lebanon E-Newsletter keeping the readers up to date on all activities and includes articles of interest about the HOL Artists' Group, Young Professionals and Board activities.



The first Lebanese American Golf Classic was held at the Braemar Country Club on Monday, May12, 2008, chaired by Mr. Fouad El-Abd. Over 60 golfers participated in the tournament that was followed by a lavish dinner, silent auction and entertainment. The second tournament was also held at Braemar Country Club in 2009. Then, on January 10, 2011, the tournament was moved to the Wilshire Country Club, under the sponsorship of Ambassador Gilbert Chagoury. The golf tournament is a main event for the House of Lebanon and the "Chagoury Cup" has become a very prestigious golf trophy.



The bylaws were amended on January 20, 2009 with the establishment of the Board of Trustees, and Dr. Irani was voted chairman of this new Board. The Board of Trustees is entrusted with the mission to safeguard the structure and the mission of our Foundation.

### **2010: The real estate push**

We started looking at properties for the House of Lebanon ever since the Foundation was established. A real estate committee was formed as early as 1999. We held numerous meetings and even a strategic session with our friend, Mr. Ed Salem, to determine the size and the location of the proposed House. We visited hundreds of properties through the years. Most of these properties were too small or too large, too expensive or located in undesirable areas.

On January 27, 2010, the Honorable Judge James Kaddo is voted Chairman of the Board, and Mr. Mike Ahmar as President. Mike re-energized the real estate committee and the search for properties intensified. I remember one Sunday afternoon; we visited six properties along the Wilshire corridor. Once we stepped into the property located at 4800 Wilshire Blvd., we were all in awe, and when we presented it to the Board, it received a unanimous approval, which had never happened before when we presented other properties. Mr. Ahmar started negotiations. We agreed on a favorable deal, and with a financial boost from Dr. and Mrs. Ray Irani, Mr. and Mrs. Vache Manoukian, many Board members, we closed escrow. We now own the property free and clear.



*I am so proud that our dream has become a reality.*

*Thank you to Dr. Makaron for establishing the Lebanese American Foundation.*

*Thank you to Dr. Irani for believing in our mission.*

*Thank you to all the Board members that have served and those who are still serving,  
for your generosity and your dedication.*

*Thank you to the Foundation's officers who have served and those who are still serving,  
not only for your generosity and dedication but especially for your hard work.*

*Thank you to all our generous donors for allowing us to reach our goals.*

*Indeed, we are all proud to have achieved the first phase of our mission  
by acquiring the "House of Lebanon".*

*Now, the work continues so we can turn the "HOUSE" into a "HOME".*





*Pride of Heritage Banquet*

*President William J. Clinton Surrounded by  
the Board of Directors of  
the Lebanese American Foundation.*



*May 14, 2005*



*2009 Pride of Heritage Banquet Honoring Vatche Manoukian with Jay Leno*



