



Up to the challenge

Turning around Alvarado Hospital won't be easy, but brothers say their past has prepared them

By Keith Darc □
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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The 10-year-old even had to stop playing the piano in his Tehran home out of fear that spies would hear the music and report the family to revolutionary courts for violating the new ban on Western music.

In the streets of the capital, violent mass protests increasingly targeted the country's minority groups, intellectuals and professionals, such as Salimpour's father, an acclaimed pediatrician and researcher.

Salimpour and his older brother, Pejman, knew the danger facing their family was building because of their middle-class status and membership in an ancient Persian Jewish community centered in Tehran.

"People got caught up in the mind-set of self-destruction and got caught up in killing," Pejman recalled recently.



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The breaking point finally came late one night when a bullet fired from a crowd pierced the window of the bedroom where their younger sister was sleeping.

For the past 26 years, the brothers have lived their own versions of the American dream after immigrating to the United States, settling in Los Angeles and becoming pediatricians like their father. On Monday they become owners of Alvarado Hospital Medical Center, a troubled San Diego hospital that is being sold by Tenet Healthcare under pressure from federal regulators.

The Salimpours own CareNex Health Services, a Los Angeles-based firm that provides patient management services to hospitals and health insurers. They also operate NexCare Collaborative, a nonprofit that helps poor Los Angeles families find affordable health insurance and public health care services.

Pejman, 44, is a professor of clinical pediatrics at the University of California Los Angeles School of Medicine and a former chief of pediatrics at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

He co-founded Doctors Opposed to Child Sacrifice, a coalition of pediatricians who speak out against the use of children in combat in the Middle East, Africa and other regions. He also serves by appointment on the White House Task Force on Latino Health and the U.S. Small Business Administration National Advisory Council.

Pedram, 37, has authored 43 medical journal articles on a wide range of research projects and is working on his first novel, a story that chronicles life in medical school.

He is a leader in the Los Angeles County Medical Association and a two-time recipient of the American College of Physicians' Research Award.

Despite the brothers' accomplishments, it's likely they'll find that turning around Alvarado won't be easy. The College Area hospital lost \$3 million in 2005 and was the focus of a three-year federal probe into allegations some doctors were paid kickbacks for referring patients to the hospital. Tenet is selling the hospital as part of an agreement that settles the federal investigation.

The Salimpours and other investors are paying \$36.5 million for Alvarado and likely will spend millions more on renovations and equipment upgrades. The purchase is expected to close Sunday.

Much is riding on the brothers' efforts.

Community leaders say Alvarado plays a crucial role in the region's health care system. The hospital is one of two acute medical centers serving the eastern portion of San Diego County, and it operates one of two emergency rooms in the area.

Alvarado discharges more than 8,300 patients annually and cares for more than 105,000 outpatients. Medicare, Medi-Cal and uninsured patients accounted for 70 percent of the hospital's gross patient revenue in 2005, according to the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development.

The Salimpours, both self-described overachievers, say the turbulence of their past brought them to this point in their lives and helped prepare them for their new roles.

"It was important to me when I came to America that I succeed," Pejman said. "I had to try harder and work harder. I've been given an opportunity that millions of people dream of."

Pejman was 17 years old in the winter of 1979 when a commercial jet spirited him away from the danger and violence that had engulfed Tehran and dropped him in New York in the middle of a late-night snowstorm

He traveled straight from John F. Kennedy International Airport to Philadelphia and the home of an uncle who had emigrated from Iran several years earlier. He stayed up all night and was sitting at the kitchen table dressed for school when his uncle awoke. But classes had to wait because a raging winter storm had closed schools.

Pejman struggled initially in high school – mainly because he didn't speak English. He spent each night in a library reading books by looking up every word in a dictionary and translating it into his native Farsi.

"I did well in math because math is an international language," said Pejman, who still speaks with an accent.

Once the rest of the family arrived in the United States about six months later, the clan – which included the boys and their two sisters – moved to Los Angeles, where thousands of other Persian Jews had gathered in the wake of the revolution. Their father opened his own medical practice while their mother managed the household.

"She is the only reason we survived in America," Pejman said. "She kept the family together. It wasn't easy the first years. (Emigrating) was very difficult for my parents."

Pedram had an easier time fitting in.

He quickly mastered his new language by watching "The Flintstones" and other television cartoons that had been broadcast in Iran and dubbed in Farsi. "When I watched them again in English, I could make the association," he said.

By the time Pedram started junior high school in Woodland Hills in 1980, he spoke English fluently without an accent, said Matt Escobar, a Los Angeles chiropractor who met Pedram in seventh grade. "Right off the bat, he was one of the more popular kids. He didn't have to work to make friends."

As a youngster in Iran, Pejman dreamed of becoming a lawyer after watching "Perry Mason," the popular American courtroom television drama. But his father urged him to pursue another profession because discrimination made it difficult for Persian Jews to practice law in Iran.

Pejman said medicine was an attractive alternative because it had provided a fulfilling career for his father.

"He would come home exhausted but feeling good about what he had done. I saw how good he felt about it, and I wanted to feel the same," Pejman said.

Pedram was similarly inspired. "I remember that people would drive from villages in Iran far away on Saturdays to see my dad.

"Everywhere he went he received such respect. It was the respect that you get because of what is in your head and heart," the younger brother said. "Practicing medicine is the greatest thing you can do."

In medical school at Boston University, Pedram worked for Dr. Irwin Goldstein, a urologist and internationally known expert on sexual medicine who was a consultant to the pharmaceutical company that launched Viagra.

"We bonded quite well," Goldstein said. "He is really sharp in people skills. He is very outgoing and warms right up to you."

Goldstein said those traits played a key role in one of Pedram's biggest research projects, a groundbreaking and highly publicized study that tied erectile dysfunction to frequent bicycle riding.

Pedram persuaded members of a Boston cycling club to become the main subjects of the study and answer a long questionnaire about their riding habits and the most intimate details of their sex lives. The study needed a control group, so he recruited members of a running club to answer the same questions.

The study offered the first scientific proof that cyclists face a significantly higher likelihood of becoming impotent.

"I can't imagine how he got permission to do all of that stuff," Goldstein said of Pedram's delicate research. "I don't think many people would have had the gumption to do that."

Pejman can be equally persuasive, said Dr. Carol Berkowitz, executive vice chair of the pediatrics at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center and a former president of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

“He is politically savvy. He's not a person who takes 'no' for an answer very easily,” said Berkowitz, who first met Pejman when he began his medical residency at Harbor-UCLA in 1987.

Already, those people skills seem to be working at Alvarado. The brothers were greeted like heroes by hospital doctors and employees at a recent Alvarado holiday party.

Since announcing their plans in late October to buy the hospital, the Salimpours have repeatedly assured the facility's 1,000 workers that their jobs are safe and that the new owners will invest in badly needed upgrades.

“We understand that buying a hospital is different from any other business,” Pejman said last week. “We have a responsibility to care for patients, but also to care about people – our employees, the physicians who count on this hospital and the entire community.

“We are humbled by this responsibility,” he said.

■ Keith Darce: (619) 293-1020; keith.darce@uniontrib.com

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