

Tony Shaheen  
A Profile by Tony Seton

It was a familiar story of second-generation Americans. The grandparents had emigrated from poverty and oppression to start new lives in the United States. They made enough money to then bring over their families. Tony Shaheen's parents were in that second wave, brought to America from a small village on the West Bank near Ramallah in 1948, just as war was flaring up in the Middle East. As it happened, they met in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, married, and started a family.

They later migrated to San Jose at the suggestion of relatives who pitched the South Bay as featuring "the weather's just like home in the old country." There was a burgeoning Palestinian-American community there. "They were all in the grocery/liquor business. In San Jose that's what everyone did. Every little mom-'n-pop grocery store, corner store, was probably one of my relatives or somebody that we knew."

Later the Shaheens moved down the coast to Marina where they started a grocery store. His parents divorced, and not even finished with high school, Tony assumed the role of the man in the family that included his three younger brothers.

Family is important in his culture, so Tony was always part of the family business. "When my parents had me, I was kept in the back room in a crate." He laughed. "I grew up in the store. I grew up around the customers. I stocked, I cleaned, I took out the garbage. I didn't know anything else but stock the cooler and take out the bottles, and the weekends were the same thing."

When he got out of high school, Tony was thinking he would take over the family business, but after a year and a half, "I realized that I can don't this all my life. There has to be something better out there." His parents never encouraged him to take over the business. Instead they told their boys, "Whatever you want to do, we'll support you." Education was considered important.

He had always been interested in math and science and technology so he decided to go to college. He started at Monterey Peninsula College where he got interested in medicine, and then he went to UC-Santa Cruz as a pre-med student. He worked at the store during those years - "I had my chemistry book under the counter" - and next was off to medical school in Milwaukee. Then he was recruited by a professor there to follow him to the University of Louisville to complete his internship and residency.

Tony returned to Monterey to work at the community hospital in 1994 and went into private practice in 2002. His brothers also went to MPC and Santa Cruz, followed Tony to Louisville for medical school, and then did their residencies at Stanford. Emile is an



anesthesiologist and Raymond is a vascular surgeon. Brother Camil is in hospital administration.

I asked him if he'd faced discrimination over the years. "When I was young I used to feel picked on or discriminated against, just because of my culture or ethnicity or my name. But I grew up in a big Italian community in San Jose, and most of my friends in Monterey were Italian, so I fit right in...the Mediterranean culture."

Family has always been very important to Tony. Part of it is culture, and part is personal. When his parents split, he felt responsible for his brothers. Today, Tony lives with his wife and one daughter in Carmel. They have two other daughters; one has graduated college as a business major, and the other is in a nursing program. The family has traveled extensively together, to give the children a broader view of the world.

Food is also important. Tony spends a lot of time in the kitchen. "I love to cook, and I love being in this area because the bounty of food and produce and everything here is exceptional." Exercising some of the skills he gained growing up working in the butcher shop of the family store, he's very good with meats. His speciality is Beef Wellington.

"My wife couldn't believe how much food we served. Her family, when they would have dinner, they would have a roast, and that was it. Whereas in our family, in order to be a great host or hostess, you needed to have more than one entree. You needed to have three or four...chicken, beef, lamb."

Does he eat healthy? "It took me twenty years to figure it out but I do eat healthy." He also exercises regularly.

The Saturday morning that we met at 10:30 for an interview, Tony had already dealt with an early morning case at the hospital. Also, the night before, another patient had called him asking for help with a catheter from a recent surgery, and Tony had told him to meet him at his office at ten, where he would be doing paperwork. And now he was expecting his phone to ring again, this time summoning him to the hospital for an emergency surgery. He is on call half the time, for his own patients, emergencies, and covering for a colleague. Two minutes later, the phone indeed did ring and he was off to the operating room.

Tony and his family live in Carmel.