A History Of Achievement

For unknown reasons Acadiana seems to have welcomed Middle Eastern immigrants with more warmth than some other areas of the United States.

If there was discrimination in the earliest days, it was not prevalent enough to prevent such people as Bo Ackal and Ted Haik from being elected to the Louisiana Legislature. Likewise, Judge Kaliste Saloom Jr.'s years of service on the bench have earned him the respect of all of Lafayette.

And everyone seems to like the food. Middle Eastern fare is popular here: Long-standing restaurants like Cedar Grocery and Sahara and a newer one, Green Olive, attest to that. And even when they aren't offering food from their native land, Middle Easterners must be doing something right. Kamal Borchalli, for example, owns B.J.'s Pizza & Deli and has been in the pizza business for 10 years. Borchalli is also from Lebanon.

Immigrants of Middle Eastern descent have gone into business in a range of sectors.

Hesham Mohd's six-year-old business, Serviceking Restaurant Equipment, is now prospering in a hot market. Mohd is from Palestine and has a degree in civil engineering from the University of Texas at Arlington.

In 1984 he moved to Lafayette to begin working with a company that designed restaurants and cafeterias. Four years later he opened his own company, Serviceking, which does planning and design, as well as offering equipment and supplies. The company recently moved into a new location at 608 Surrey St. and opened a showroom. It has expanded to sell not only used equipment, but new equipment and supplies.

"We started in a very small warehouse with basically me and another employee," says Mohd.

Samir El-Helou is in the Persian rug business, with three locations, the first in Lafayette and now two others in Baton Rouge and Monroe. His brother Faysal is in the car-repair business, with an operation on Gloria Switch. And Samir and another brother, Ghassan, also recently launched a Lebanese restaurant, called Café Phoenicia, located on The Boulevard.

Gabriel Shaik moved to Lafayette from Lebanon in 1969 with plans to attend USL and return home to join his family's jewelry business. "I'm a third generation jeweler," he says. His family has operations in Beirut, Tripoli and another in Accra, West Africa—where it also has a factory, as well as a retail store.

"I was supposed to finish school and go home," Shaik says. Just three years ago he broke away from a partnership at Park Avenue Jewelers and opened Gabriel's Fine Jewelry in Acadiana Mall. "Business is great," Shaik says. "It's the best thing I ever did."

"I have never, honest to God, one day felt discriminated against. Ever since I came here I felt right at home. That's why I stayed."