

Word of mouth

Referrals to celebrities help fuel John's Tailors

by Mark Connor

IN 2001, on Lexington Avenue at Larpenteur, where Roseville rubs St. Paul's northern border, and Nadir John Can will flash a smile. He'll draw you so quickly into friendly conversation while promptly meeting your needs — whether as simple as sewing a button to your coat or as involved as measuring for a custom suit — that you won't notice right away the framed pictures of him with Hollywood legends.

Jack Lemmon, Walter Mathau, Ann Margaret, Sophia Lauren, Arnold Schwarzenegger — These famous actors and many more have been fitted for the screen by Nadir over the years. But servicing the stars only came after a decade of building the business, an immigrant story stretching from Turkey to Austria to Minnesota.

The Can family (pronounced "John," hence the name of the business) come from the small town of Midyat, in southeastern Turkey.

"It wasn't that many businesses to choose from in the town," Nadir Can says, mentioning his shoemaker father. "Either you will become a tailor, a shoemaker, a jeweler, a carpenter."

A middle child among four brothers and a sister, Nadir Can spent his teens under the care of an uncle and aunt in Vienna, where he trained formally in tailoring. Feridun eventually did too. Another uncle settled in Minnesota, and the two brothers followed, eventually welcoming their siblings and parents.

Working in the early 1980s at Cedric's, a fine clothing store in the Galleria mall in Edina, Nadir and Feridun planned to open their own tailor shop. Regularly transporting their father to and from an orthopedic shoemaker's job, they saw a vacancy in Roseville's Lexington Plaza Mall, where they began a quarter century of business that at one time included five stores with all siblings involved. Careful planning, extra work and a break from the landlord launched their voyage.

"I remember, it was just like yesterday," Feridun says.

The landlord was the son of a Russian immigrant, and he sympathized with their situation.

"We didn't have credit history in the country because we were new," Feridun says. "But then he realized that's how his father came in from Russia and he told us, 'When I see you guys I see my father's story.'"

Nadir says that strategic planning coupled with long hours, including keeping their jobs,

got them established and pushed them to the point of survival.

“We knew we were getting an income, we had salary at Cedric’s,” he says, “and we knew my wife, Zahura, would be here during the day.” He also had the other two brothers and their sister, who although working elsewhere, pitched in when possible. Measurements and orders taken during the day could be covered later.

So once the two brothers finished their shifts at Cedric’s, they headed to John’s, working into the night. They generated enough business for Nadir to quit the Cedric’s job after three months, devoting his time to John’s Tailors while Feridun kept his employment. By the end of 1982, Feridun was able to leave his job and they opened a second location at Southdale Square in Edina, eventually moving it to the 66th and Penn mall in Richfield, where Feridun maintains ownership now.

After opening in Southdale, they followed with locations in Ridgedale Center in Minnetonka, Highland Park in St. Paul, and downtown Minneapolis. Business thrived, and the whole family stayed involved, but the other siblings eventually moved on and the extra stores were sold.

“At the time it was a very good idea to expand,” Nadir says, “because we had more than one brother that we were able to use.”

Pulling back

But when their siblings left the business, they decided to focus solely on their respective stores. It’s a lesson both in business maintenance and in successful exit strategies. Expansion time is when you have the resources, but when circumstances change it’s better to pull back to sustainable levels and maintain the quality of service.

That dedication to quality is what built John’s Tailors reputation, and that is how they got into the movies. Feridun recounts that a customer involved with local television recommended them to a filmmaker shooting on location here. The first movie they tailored for, “Drop Dead Fred” starring Phoebe Cates, was filmed in Minneapolis in 1991, then “Grumpy Old Men” with Lemmon, Mathau, Margaret and Daryl Hannah shot in Center City in 1993. “Jingle All the Way,” starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, was filmed in St. Paul in 1996 and dozens more followed. But of course, without the decade of work in the beginning and the dedication to the average person who needs the professional look for business or the formal sharpness for ceremonious occasions, the reference never would have happened.

“That’s the way it happens,” Nadir says. “You get recommended and they use you once, then when someone else wants to make a movie you get recommended again.”

It’s also important to build relationships within the profession. For example, while working at Cedric’s, they were already building a clientele that followed them to their own business, and it’s essential for clothing stores to know you’re around.

Alan Witebsky, who with his brother Steve owns Nate’s Clothing, which moved in June from downtown Minneapolis to 3515 Hazelton Road in Edina, acknowledges John’s Tailors

as a premier Twin Cities service. “When we were moving our store we knew that for a short time we wouldn’t be able to offer alteration,” Witebsky says, “so we had to recommend tailors and John’s was on the top of our list.”

Nadir says that the tailoring business does not have huge overhead, but concurs with Witebsky’s assertion that running the boiler is a very significant expense. He says for custom suits he usually charges between \$1,000 and \$2,000, and cites the cost of materials, anywhere from \$130 to \$300 per yard, as a large expense. He also says that Yellow Book costs, which are the bulk of his advertising budget, are about \$800 a month, which, while running close to \$10,000 annually, amounts to no more than between 3 percent and 5 percent of revenue, depending on the year.

Labor is also significant, he explains, not just because of his full-time employee, Enver Ceric, who came to Minnesota from war-torn Bosnia in 1995 and has been working at John’s since 1996, but also the constant time he and Zahura personally put in.

“I average 60 hours a week,” he says. “Ten hours a day, six days a week.”

Although Zahura is not there as much, she maintains a steady presence and many customers ask for her. “Many customers deal with her specifically because they are comfortable with her,” he says.

Nadir and Zahura, who have three adult children and one teenager, don’t see their children going into the business, but that’s just fine, he says. “They see how hard their father works and they decide to do other things,” he says, smiling.

Nadir and Feridun, who with his wife also has two children, recognize tailoring as a special art that takes a specific temperament.

“In order to be successful you have to love what you do,” Feridun says. Tailoring won’t go out of style because people all come in different shapes and sizes, but it takes hard work that most won’t be happy doing. Others, like Ceric, who at 60 has been a tailor for 40 years and owned his own shop in Prijedor, a Bosnian city of around 100,000 before the war, enjoy the process as much as the finished product.

Both brothers likely have a significant number of years ahead of them in their respective stores, especially Feridun, who is only 45, and says he will look after the legacy as long as he can.

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