

4/6/11 - DUBBO

Photos Tim Pankhurst

# KEEPING THE FAITH

**With the arrest in Iran last week of Farhad Sedghi, brother and brother-in-law of respected local businesspeople Nasser and Farzan, the decades-long persecution of Baha'i faithful in the religion's birthplace struck close to Dubbo's own heart. JEN COWLEY spoke with the well-known Iranian born Australian couple about their fears, their long battle for change and their love of the community they've called home for 24 years.**

**A** LONGSIDE the family portraits and photographs of life's milestones that line the walls of Farzan and Nasser Sedghi's comfortable Dubbo home sits a framed inscription which, translated, offers the fundamental tenet by which these gentle Iranian-born Australians live: "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens".

The well-known local business couple and community stalwarts are inspired in their everyday lives by the teachings of their Baha'i faith, which urge followers to "let your hearts burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path".

So it is with genuine bewilderment and a deep sense of pain that the couple waits for news of Nasser's brother Farhad (a lecturer in accounting with the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education) – imprisoned without charge last week by the extremist Islamic regime in his homeland of Iran.

The Sedghi's nice home with its pretty garden in its quiet suburban cul-de-sac seems a world away from the lawless shambles that is modern Iran, but Farhad's arrest has again brought the brutal reality of religious persecution crashing into the peaceful existence the pair has forged with their son, their daughter and the many friends they've made locally.

And for Farzan and Nasser – who have lived, loved and worked in Dubbo for the best part of a quarter of a century – the notion that freedom and respect could be denied anyone on the basis of their faith is anathema, and the decades of hurt continue to cut deep.

AS a young Bachelor of Commerce graduate, Nasser left Iran in 1978 – on the eve of the Ayatollah Khomeini's ousting of the Shah – bound for a Master's in Business Accounting in Bombay (now Mumbai). He would never again call Iran home.

The following year, the young woman who would become his wife also left her homeland to undertake a degree in commerce and accounting. Farzan too would not return.

Unable to go back to what the couple, who met in India, still often refers to as Persia, they came to Australia as refugees – victims of a brutally intolerant Islamic fundamentalist regime that has continued to harass and persecute followers of the Baha'i faith since its ascension to power in 1979.

"When we were married, our families were not allowed to leave Iran to attend our wedding – the government would not grant them visas," says Farzan. "They (the government) did dread-



ful things to the Baha'i people – particularly the educated. When they first came to power they just executed 200 of the most educated and high ranking professional Baha'i people. Just like that," she says, shaking her immaculately groomed head.

"The Baha'i people had suffered persecution before the Islamic regime came to power, at the hands of the Mullah who were anti-Shah. The Baha'i people were and are well respected and trusted, and the bulk of Iranian people still

support them, and actually prefer to deal with Baha'i in business because they are so honest. But unfortunately, the government is so strong and it's not accountable at all, to anyone."

According to Nasser, the worst of the persecution is reserved for those Baha'i academics and educators who refused to leave Iran, even as the harassment escalated to lethal proportions. "At first, the regime would not let Baha'is leave. But then they realised that the followers of our religion had so much support in Iran that it would be better to get rid of them, so they actively sought to force them out of their own homeland. Yes, many left, but many others – like my brother – were so dedicated to Iran and to the birthplace of their faith that they decided to stay despite growing fears of escalating persecution."

From the outset the newly ascended Islamic Republican government banned those of the Baha'i faith from higher education institutions, and removed lecturers, academics and professors from their positions within universities. "So what they did was to set up an 'Open' Baha'i university in Iran, which they did 24 years ago – quite legally and with the knowledge of the government. There was nothing clandestine or subversive about it."

Threatened by its international success, the hard-line Iranian government began a systematic campaign of harassment against the university's officials and students, conducting raids across the nation's cities, confiscating equipment and resources.

"The Baha'i faithful cannot take violent action of any kind, so what these dedicated people did was to keep building the university back up again and carry on. My brother included."

Now Nasser's beloved big brother – "a gentle, sincere and knowledgeable man" – is paying an unjustified price for his faith, and it's a price both Nasser and Farzan fear might well go higher, such is the unpredictability of Iran's so-called judicial system.

IT is hard to comprehend, from the comfort of an Australian upbringing, the heartbreak of being forced from one's homeland, wrenched from the bosom of family and friends, by a government so devoid of democratic tolerance that it would seek to destroy so many of its own people.

But for Farzan and Nasser, their deep belief in what they call their "international connectivity" has helped to ease that pain. "Yes," says the diminutive and gently spoken Nasser, "It was painful – and I have so many loving memories of and deep affection for Persia. But we have a heartfelt belief that wherever we are in the world, wherever our hearts are, is home. ►

**The authorities there are just waiting for an excuse to do something really terrible, so we need to make sure nothing is done to make it worse. Farhad's wife said to us, 'please tell the authorities there, please tell them the facts but please be careful'.**