

Local engineer becomes filmmaker

BY RYAN MCCROSSIN
Daily Post Staff Writer

Many engineers fantasize about coming up with the next big idea and launching a start-up; Saira Kariat, 54, daydreamed about making movies during a career at IBM and other Silicon Valley companies.

The Los Altos resident's dream will become a reality when her movie, "The Valley," makes its world premiere at the Cinequest Film Festival, which begins Tuesday in San Jose and the following day in Redwood City.

The film, which she wrote, directed and co-produced, tells of an Indian-American entrepreneur in Palo Alto who's living the Silicon Valley dream until his young daughter kills herself. It draws from Kariat's personal experiences.

Inspired by classic films

Kariat, who was born in Berkeley, fell in love with movies at age 10. While many children were watching cartoons, she was a student of Hollywood classics. They included the court drama "12 Angry Men," and romances such as "Casablanca," "Roman Holiday" and "John and Mary."

"I always watched movies that were designed for people much older than me," Kariat told the Post.

She admired directors who emphasized strong stories and acting but shot their films simply. Kariat allowed the



DIRECTOR SAIRA KARIAT, right, consults with actors, from left, Suchitra Pillai Malik and Aly Khan on the set of "The Valley." Photo by Siana Smith.

greats to program her. As she watched the classics, it was as if the code for a great filmmaker was being written deep inside her.

By the time Kariat was 13, she had lived in Berkeley, India and Canada. She was exposed to a wide variety of cultures and movies. Inspired by the things she saw and learned, Kariat started imagining her own movies. She envisioned the stories from beginning to end, including all of the scenes. Kariat adhered to her programming by thinking up heartfelt stories including one about a disabled girl.

But she didn't write them down. Kariat projected the stories in her

mind, where only she could enjoy them, and then the future engineer stored them in her mental hard drive.

Steered away from movie career

One might expect a budding director to study film when she started college at Syracuse University in New York. But others' expectations pushed Kariat in a different direction. She said many Indian Americans have a narrow view of success that includes becoming an engineer or a doctor. Besides, Kariat's father was a math professor and she was a math whiz.

"In my family, if I said I was going to be a filmmaker, they would have

About Cinequest

The Cinequest Film Festival, which has long been based in San Jose, is expanding this year to Redwood City.

The festival runs from Tuesday through March 12 at multiple venues in San Jose and at Cinemark Century 20 multiplex located at 825 Middlefield Road in Redwood City. Cinequest will feature more than 100 U.S. and world premieres, as well as celebrity speakers, forums, workshops and chances to experience virtual reality cinema.

Tickets for movies cost \$8 to \$11 and festival passes starting at \$100 are also available. For more information or to buy tickets, visit cinequest.org.

thought I was crazy," Kariat said. "It wasn't a respectable profession." So Kariat started studying electrical engineering, filling her mind with algorithms and coding. She mentally transported her imagined movies to a cloud server for dreams.

Kariat earned a doctorate in electrical engineering, then worked at IBM and other companies including Cadence Design Systems in San Jose.

But in 2002 she quit engineering to spend more time with her two girls. She taught part time at Santa Clara University for two years. Then she

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