

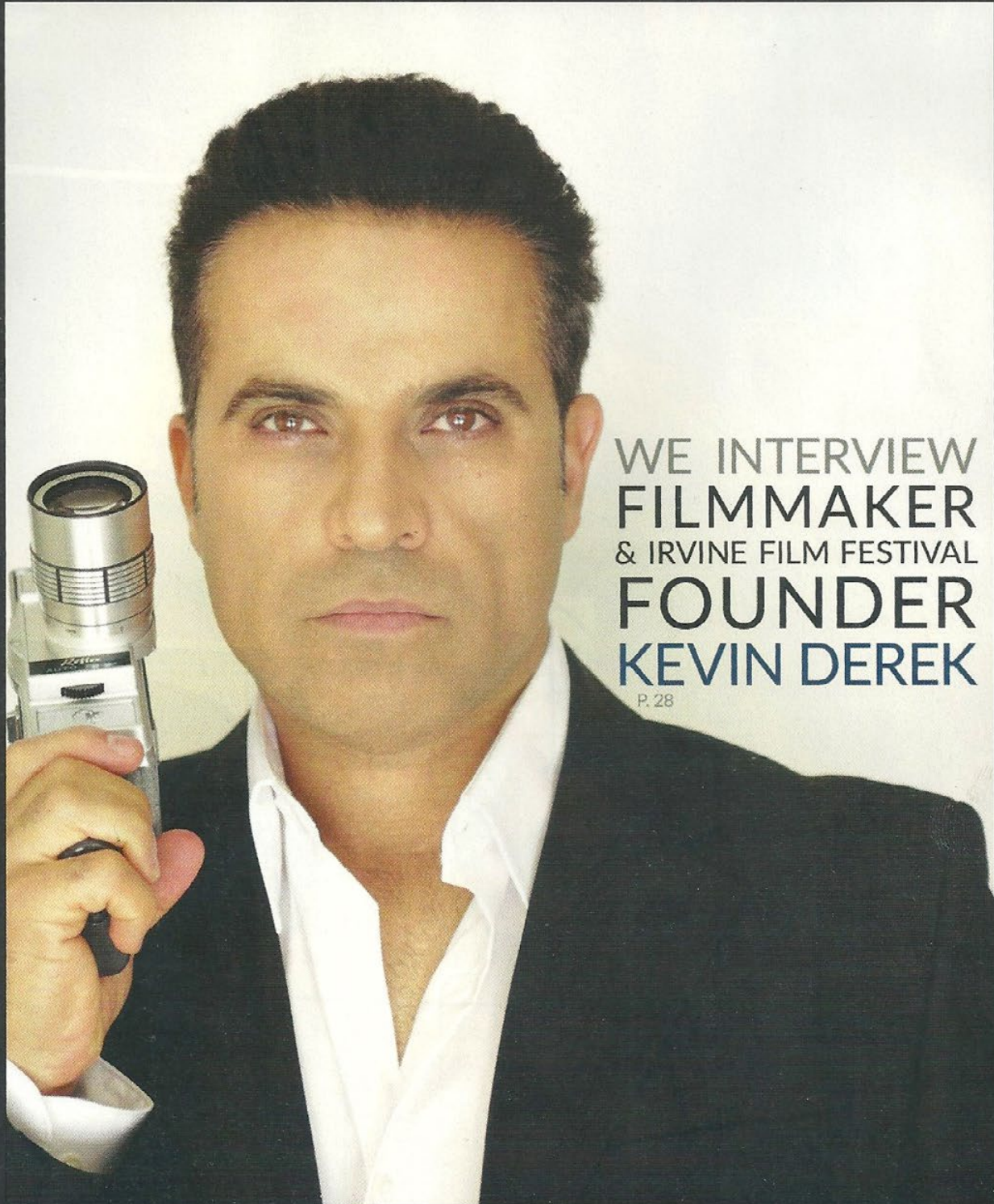
PAYAM

ASHENA



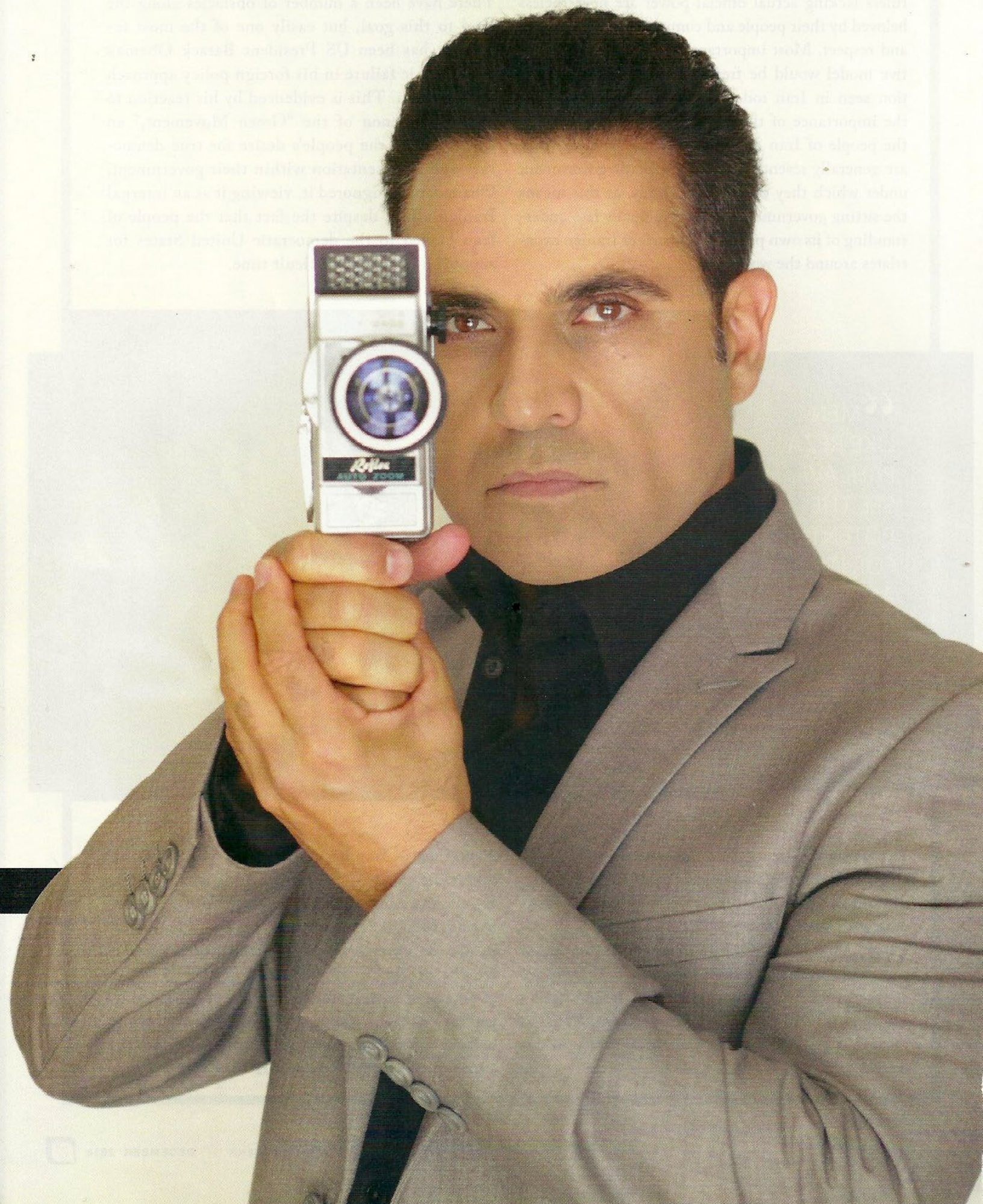
P. O. Box 60613 // Irvine, California 92602 // USA
Tel: 949.451.1440 // www.Ashena.com // Payam@Ashena.com

Volume 26 // Issue 310
December 2014



WE INTERVIEW
FILMMAKER
& IRVINE FILM FESTIVAL
FOUNDER
KEVIN DEREK

P. 28



Artist Interview:

KEVIN DEREK

Born in Iran and raised in America, Kevin Derek combined his childhood passions of directing and karate to make two documentaries: *The Real Miyagi* and *Empty Hand: The Real Karate Kids*. Here he tells us about growing up in a white American neighborhood post-revolution, founding the Irvine International Film Festival, and the story he feels he must tell.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO BE A FILMMAKER?

I remember the moment very clearly. I was in 8th grade; the portable VHS camcorder had just hit the market, when here comes my neighborhood friend Paksar showing off the state-of-the-art camera with title features that he got for his birthday. That weekend, with a combined \$18 in our pockets, we set out to create an epic masterpiece. Both of us were into karate at that time, so we decided it would be a martial arts action film in the tradition of *Enter the Dragon*. We called it *Enter The Black Belt*. We came up with the basic premise and pretty soon, all the neighborhood kids wanted to get involved. With a cast of eight, we began to shoot. Back then we had no editing equipment, so we edited in the camera as we were shooting. We shot the entire film in four hours, and that same night we invited our parents and friends for a screening. Even though the audience was made of our relatives and friends, their reaction to the film made me realize that even though I couldn't always verbally express my thoughts, this was a tool that I could use to make people feel a certain way or to express my thoughts. It was very clear to me at that point that this is what I wanted to pursue.

DO YOU COME FROM A TRADITIONAL FAMILY, AND WHAT DID THEY THINK OF YOUR DECISION?

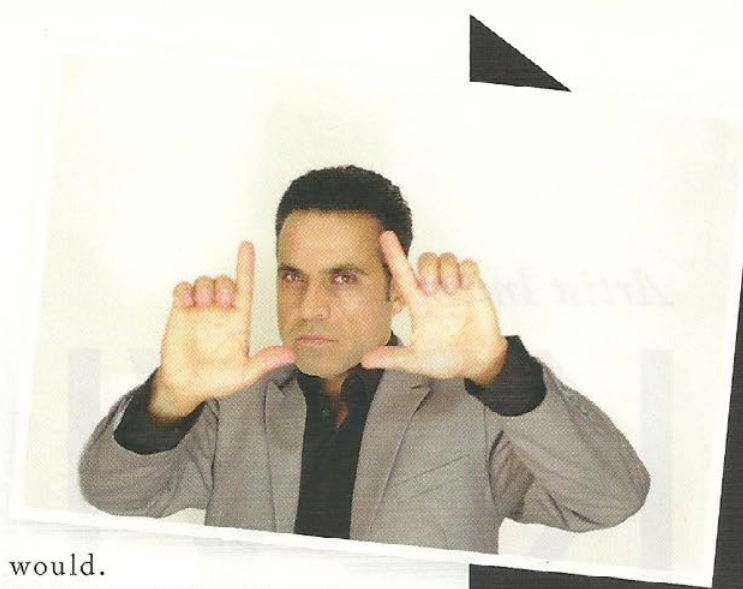
I would say most Iranians from Iran have traditional values. They want their kids to become prominent members of society just like any parent

would.

My brother held up his end of the bargain and became a doctor, putting more undo pressure on me to do the same. I knew from an early age that wasn't my path, but I never mentioned it to them until my senior year in high school. You could say that I was a closet filmmaker up until that point. Now, with all the information that is accessible online, people are more aware of the entertainment business. It's no longer a fantasy world like it was back in the 80s. I would say that my parents were disappointed solely because they were not aware of how the business worked. In the end they told me, "If this is your passion, then go for it." My dad even got me my first internship through some connections he had at KDOC. I was very grateful and learned a lot, especially from Rebecca De Mornay's father, who happened to have a talk show at that time called *Hot Seat with Wally George*.

WHAT TYPE OF FILMMAKER DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE?

I'm a filmmaker who is well rounded. I have been involved in all aspects of a film, from the screenplay to the



dis-
tribu-
tion to run-
ning a festival.

SO, YOU RUN AN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL RIGHT HERE IN IRVINE?

We are in our fourth year I'm very proud to have started this world-class event, where we screen approximately 70-100 films in one week.

I'm happy to say that for two years in a row, we have been the only festival in the US to select the 11 Oscar-nominated films before The Academy announced them.

Every year we also present two Lifetime Achievement Awards. This year the awards went to Oscar-winner John G. Avildson, the director of *Rocky*, and actor Ed Asner.

It has also been my mission to premiere a talented Iranian filmmaker every year.

Last year we had the privilege of premiering *Hush Girls Don't Scream*, and the director, Pouran Derakhshandeh, flew in from Iran for a Q&A.

The year before that, we premiered the acclaimed documentary the *Iran Job*, which made the *Hollywood Reporter's* Top Ten Best Documentaries list for 2013.

We'll continue to bring this great tradition to Orange County in 2015. This coming year the Laguna Hills Mall will be sponsoring the festival, which will be held January 16th through the 22nd. You can get more information at our website, IrvineFilmFest.com

HOW DID YOU END UP MAKING TWO FILMS ABOUT KARATE IN AMERICA?

Bruce Lee was and still is an iconic figure in Iran and I'm sure in the rest of the world. Growing up in Iran my brother and I used to make nunchuks out of broomsticks and imitate him. When we moved to the States my father signed me up for some karate at the local YMCA. To make a long story short, I took a liking to it and continued for 20 years, so karate has been a big part of my life.

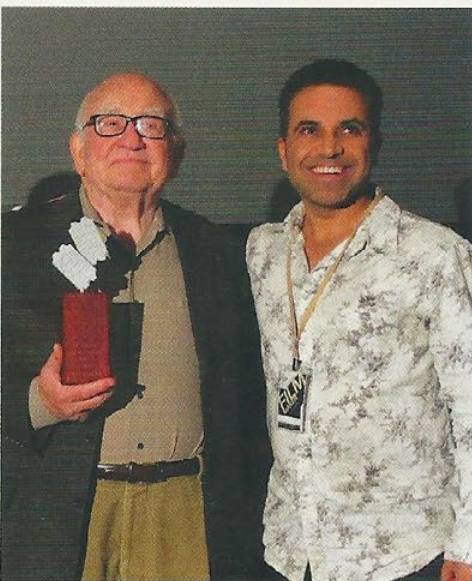
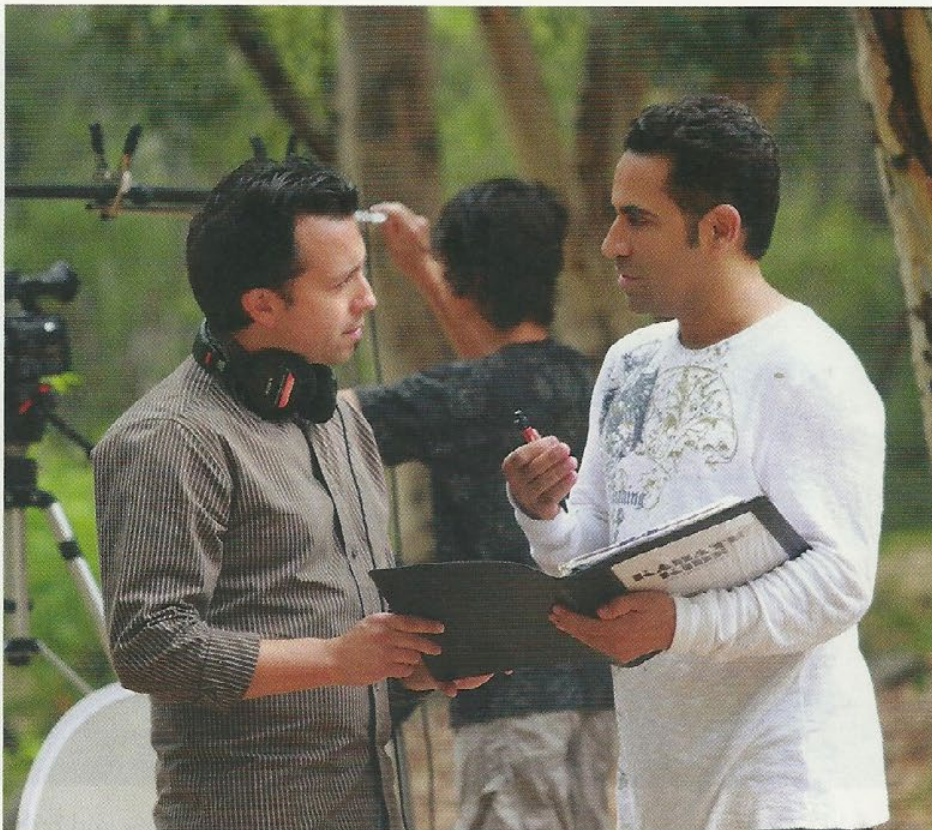
Top:
Producing
partners Oscar
Alvarez and Kevin
Derek

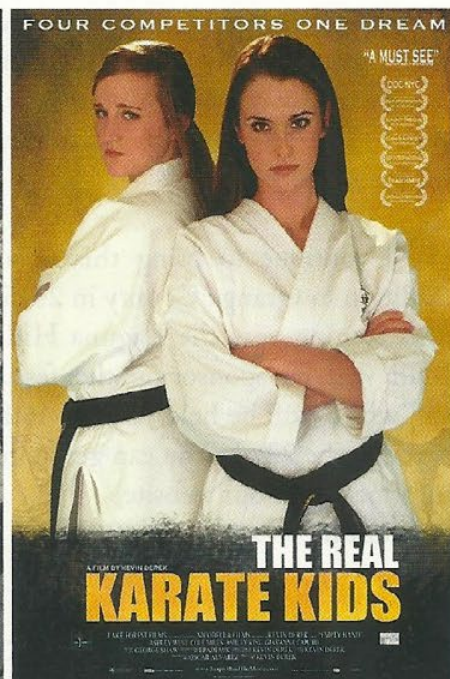
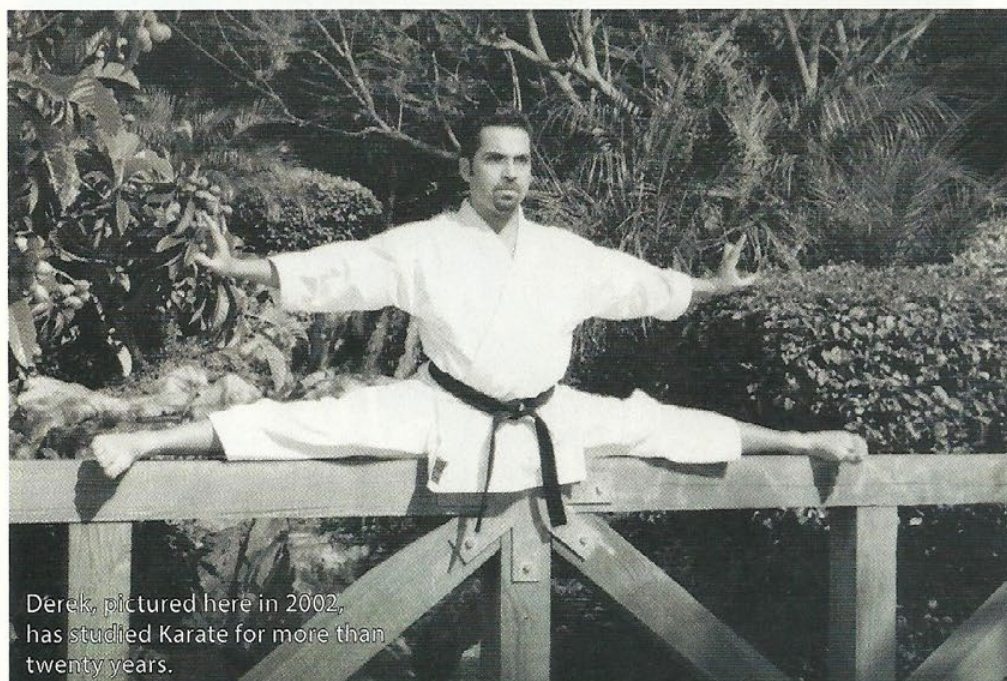
Middle: Shirley Knight, Martin
Landau, and Kevin Derek at the
Irvine International Film Festival.

Bottom Left: Lifetime Achievement
Award recipient Ed Asner and Derek
at the Irvine International Film
Festival.

Bottom Right: Derek
in a 1982 Karate
tournament

O n e
day my pro-
ducing partner
Oscar Alvarez and





I were hanging out talking about a project we could make. I knew I wanted to work with kids, and Oscar knew I had a passion for karate, so he suggested we produce a documentary about the real karate kids, and that was the start of my first documentary.

When I was in Florida, I ran into my first karate instructor, Fumio Demura. He is the man behind the biggest martial arts action heroes in Hollywood; he has trained Chuck Norris, Steven Seagal, Bruce Lee and many others. He was also the inspiration behind the Mr. Miyagi character that earned Pat Morita an Oscar nomination.

We went out for lunch and later I told him that I had wanted to make a documentary about his life for a long time. His response was, “Kevin, you better start now because I don’t know how long I have to live.” With that said, I called Oscar and he got the ball rolling. A year into the project we got a call from one of Demura’s

assistants; he was in a coma and only had a 5% chance to live.

We were all devastated, but we kept the news a secret as long as we could. A week later, he regained consciousness, and now is slowly recovering. After three years of working on this project and continuing support from investors around the world, the documentary is complete and we just started to submit it to film festivals across the globe.

IS IT IMPORTANT TO YOU TO
TELL STORIES THAT CENTER
ON IRAN OR PERSIAN CHARAC-
TERS?

For me, it is! It is important to keep this culture alive. I always jump on any chance I get.

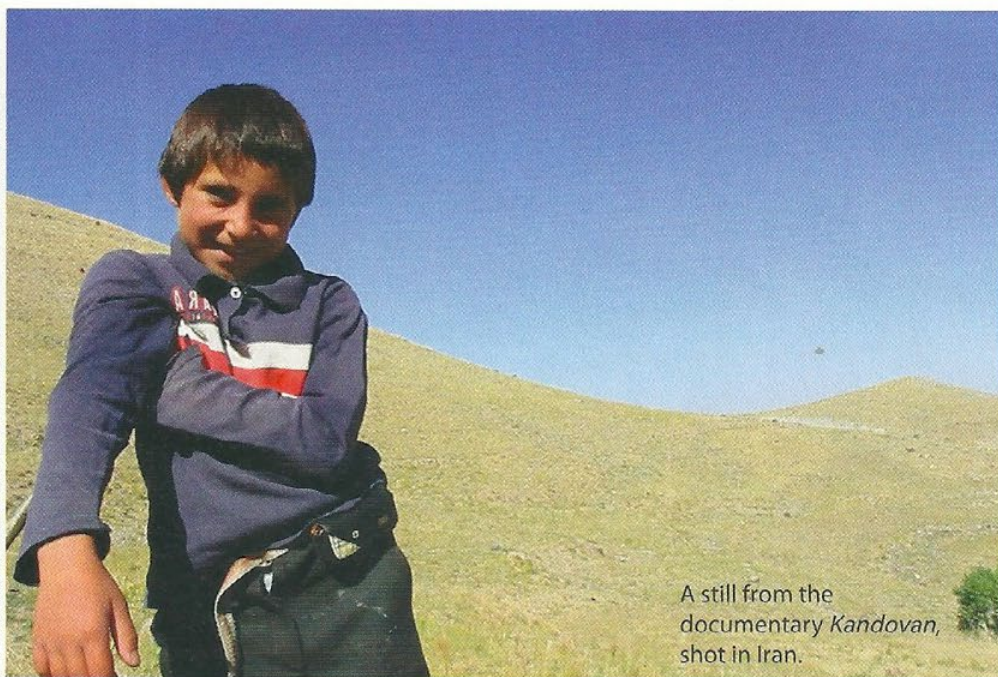
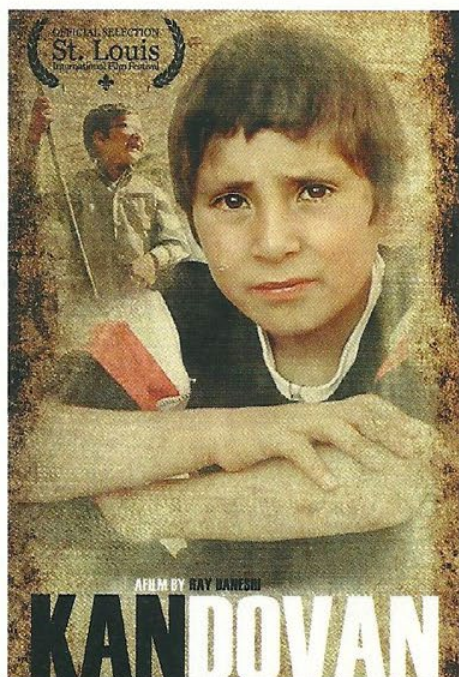
IS THAT WHAT HAPPENED WITH
YOUR DOCUMENTARY FILM
KANDOVAN?

Purely by coincidence, a good friend

of mine told me he was going to Iran to visit his brother, and immediately I started thinking about project ideas that he could shoot while he was there. I remembered a fascinating photo I had seen online of a town in Iran where people lived in caves they had carved out of rocks. I asked my friend if he would be up to shoot it, and he agreed.

I gave him several scenarios of story outlines to choose from when he got there, because I had no idea what he would be confronted with or even if he would have permission to shoot there. I started getting the gear ready for him and going over the plan and the shot list.

After he arrived safely, he sent me an email saying that he was headed for the caves. I told him to scout the area and then call me so that we could discuss the options. The next day I waited and waited for his email but heard nothing. I sent him a few messages but never heard back from him.



A still from the documentary *Kandovan*, shot in Iran.

Finally I got a text that read, “Kevin I’m sorry, but I did a horrible job,” with no further explanation.

Three weeks later he brought me the footage, which was only 20 minutes of an interview and a series of shots. There was nothing that I could do with it because it had no middle or end, so I sat on it for six months. But you see, I have an issue: I can never leave a project unfinished.

Finally, an idea came to me. Usually, a film takes up to a year to edit, but with Oscar’s help, I managed to create an eight-minute film from the footage in only two days!

Having no expectations, we decided to submit it to a festival just to see what would happen. A month later, we heard that that our film had been accepted to the 23rd Annual St. Louis International Film Festival! It will premiere at this Academy accredited festival next week!

WHAT STORY DO YOU HOPE TO TELL IN THE FUTURE?

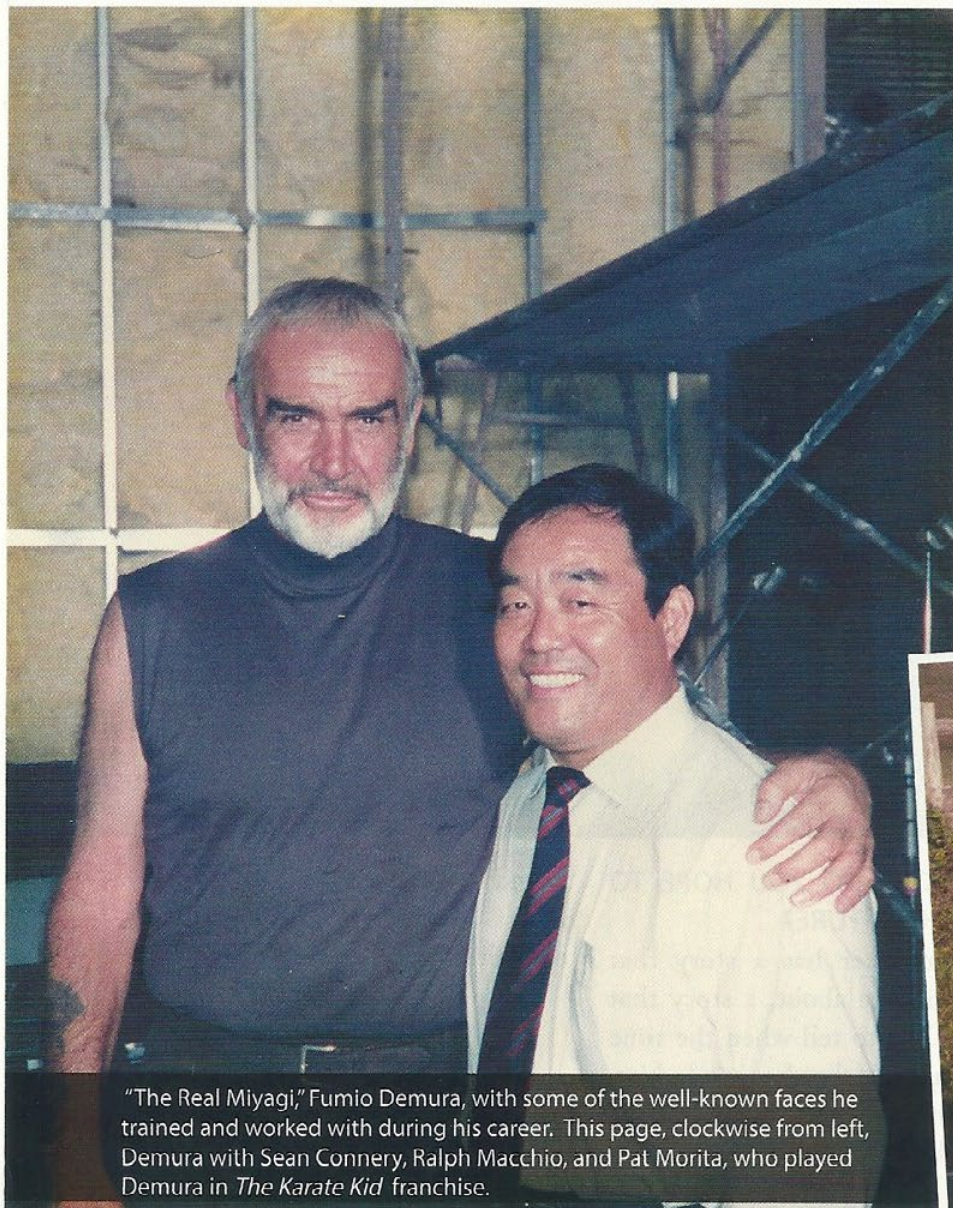
Every filmmaker has a story that he is passionate about, a story that he would like to tell when the time is right— a story that has made him who he is, and the reason he wants to be a filmmaker.

We came to Orange County from Shiraz when I was nine, one year before the revolution. Back then when you mentioned you were from Iran, people had nothing but good things to say. Maybe they had just come back from a vacation there, or perhaps they knew someone who worked there. It only took us a week to get our green card! Soon all the kids in our neighborhood wanted to be friends. Every day after school I would go over to a

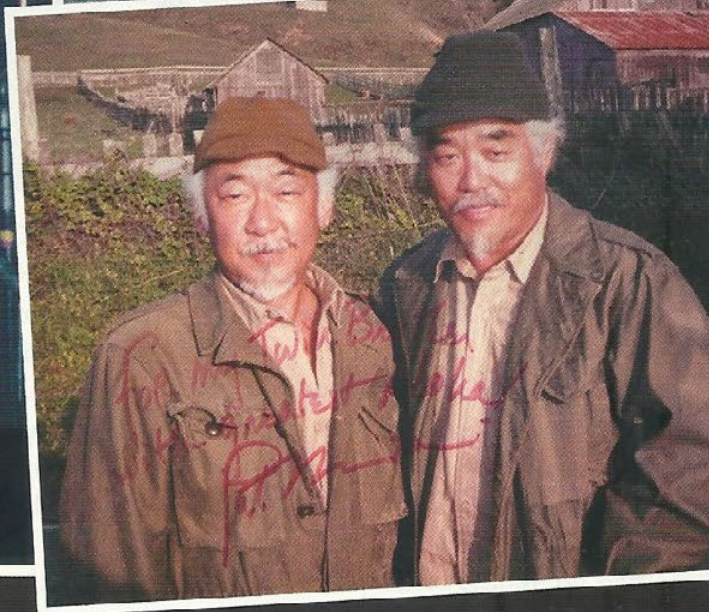
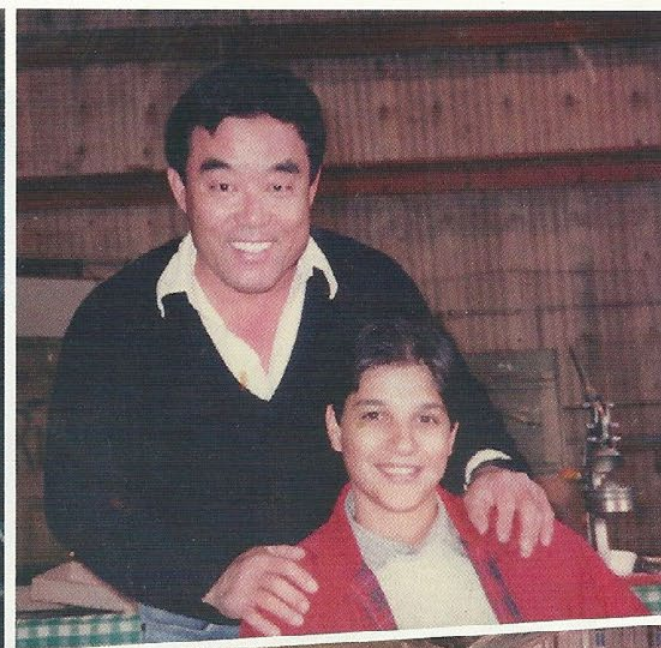
friend’s house, and even though I

“
Every filmmaker has a story that he is passionate about, a story that he would like to tell when the time is right— a story that has made him who he is, and the reason he wants to be a filmmaker.

couldn’t communicate, slowly the kids took it upon



"The Real Miyagi," Fumio Demura, with some of the well-known faces he trained and worked with during his career. This page, clockwise from left, Demura with Sean Connery, Ralph Macchio, and Pat Morita, who played Demura in *The Karate Kid* franchise.



themselves to teach me. Life was going well and it was everything I had hoped for. Then on November 3rd 1979, 52 American diplomats and citizens were held hostage by extremists in Iran, and suddenly our world took a different turn.

It is amazing to me that an action taken by an extremists group that you don't even know in another part of the world can forever shape your life.

Suddenly, kids who had been my friends for a year could no longer

come out and play. It wasn't because they didn't want to, but because their parents had suddenly decided that we were bad people. I was bullied in one form or another on a daily basis, and so was my brother, who would come home crying for being thrown in a trashcan or shoved in a locker. My dad would get picked up by the police simply because he was walking home with his brother.

One Jewish-Iranian family and another American-Armenian family that lived down the street from us were the only friends I had left. One

day I was walking home with Philip, the Armenian friend, when some older kids surrounded us and pulled out their switchblades. God knows what they had in store for us; luckily we were saved by a car driving by. When we passed by my Jewish friend's house, I saw his garage door was sprayed with red paint that said, "GO HOME." As a parent, how do you explain that to your 10-year-old son? No matter what you say it will skew his outlook.

To this day, those experiences have altered the way I look at life. Be-

*To Family,
From a friend
Chuck Norris*



Top: Demura with Chuck Norris;
Bottom: Steve McQueen, Bruce Lee, and Demura.

ing in a predominately white area, with the escalating violence in the Middle East, I still have this fear in the back of my mind of, "What if?"

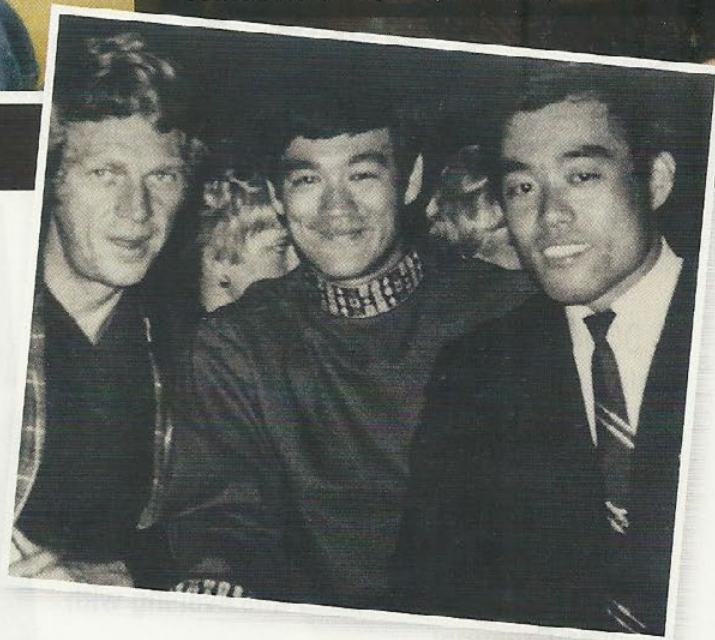
I believe this story will resonate with quite a lot of people because I'm sure I wasn't alone.

When the time is right and we can get funding, I'm certainly passionate about producing a project about that.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU, AND HOW CAN OUR READERS

LEARN MORE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR PROJECTS?

I've been bombarded by some great projects this year, specifically two big-budget features that I'll be producing. One of them of course will be an action martial arts film with A-list actors. The other is a very well written horror film that we hope will turn into a trilogy, which we are



currently seeking financing for. If anyone is interested they can learn about the projects at ScoplinPictures.com 