

Middle East CONNECTION



*The **Pittsburgh Middle East Institute** is building bridges and boosting regional businesses*

FOR 18 YEARS, the Columbia, Md.-based engineering and construction firm Allen & Shariff grew quickly in the mid-Atlantic area, opening its Pittsburgh office in 2000, and looking to expand internationally. It had enough success with projects in the United Arab Emirates that it opened an international office in 2008. But it couldn't break into another country where it envisioned success—Oman.

Then a year ago, the head of Allen & Shariff's Pittsburgh office, Tony Molinaro, heard about the Pittsburgh Middle East Institute (PMEI) and decided to attend its annual conference. He saw there that the institute seemed to have a relationship with some high level Omani officials. He was impressed, but his boss, Zack Shariff, was skeptical about whether the institute held much benefit for the company, let alone that it existed at all.

"I said, 'What? A Middle East Institute in Pittsburgh?'" Shariff recalled. Then earlier this year he decided to ask PMEI's founder and president, Simin Yazdgerdi Curtis, if she might be able to help with some Omani contacts, so that Allen & Shariff could get its foot in the door. A few phone calls later, company officials were meeting with the Omani ambassador to the U.S. in Washington, D.C., and he quickly lined up meetings in Oman with several Omani ministers.

"And it wasn't just a chicken dinner," said Allen & Shariff Vice President Dave Jackson. "It was key leaders of that country, six of us sitting around a table having interchanges we wouldn't have been allowed to do without PMEI. We don't know how she does it, but, for whatever reason, for however it happens, Simin is able to do a better job at getting things like this happening than others."

The company is now working toward developing some projects in Oman in the next few years. Other companies have similar stories.

Universal Well Services, a Meadville natural gas service company, said working with PMEI got it into a relationship with the Omani Oil Co., which is hoping to hire, or at least shadow, company workers to learn how to start their own shale gas company. And when UPMC needed access to Egyptian officials to look into projects there, it used PMEI as a reference. In May, Aquatech, an international water service company based in Canonsburg, needed to show a client a state-owned water project it had completed in Oman. But it couldn't get clearance until PMEI's contacts got approval through the country's interior minister.

How the three-year-old PMEI developed such influence in such a short time is a story unto itself. That story will be on display Oct. 26, when PMEI holds its annual conference, focusing this year on Saudi Arabia and Oman, and featuring "history's indispensable man," Henry Kissinger, as its keynote speaker. It will be PMEI's fourth annual conference, which, despite its growing reputation and considerable accomplishments, might come as a surprise to many Pittsburghers who, after reading that paragraph are still wondering, "We have a Middle East Institute? What does it do? Do we even have a Middle Eastern community?"

While the Middle Eastern community here is less than 1 percent of regional population, PMEI's board of directors comprise some of the region's largest and most prominent companies. And many board members reacted the same way when they first found out about PMEI.

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BEYOND BUSINESS PMEI offers a four-week Arabic Immersion course in which participants receive accelerated Arabic language instruction, live with native speakers on the Washington & Jefferson College campus, and pledge to speak only Arabic. Pittsburgh's Middle Eastern cuisine and culture are highlighted, including a mosque visit (above) to observe the community at prayer and meet with the imam.

Middle East

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"I was a little shocked," said PMEI board member Jerry Whitaker, who retired earlier this year from his post as president of Eaton Corp.'s Moon Township-based electrical sector for the Americas.

Given little chance for success when it was founded with money borrowed and cobbled together from various local organizations, PMEI has grown each of the last three years.

"They're getting noticed," said Steve Sokol, president of the World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh, which helped PMEI with some start-up funds in 2008. "They've been showcasing some great things in Pittsburgh to the Middle East. And I think the work PMEI set out to do is important, educating the public and the business community. In the post 9/11 world we live in, anything we can do to build understanding with the Muslim world is extremely important."

Operating with the three-pronged mission of "forging lasting ties between the United States and the Middle East through business, education and culture," the institute is a surprise to some.

"People are surprised because of the business connection," Whitaker said. There are other organizations trying to foster relationships between the Middle East and the United States, Whitaker noted, "but most of them come down to an educational or cultural exchange and can be esoteric, and don't come down

on the business end of it."

Nadia Tordova, director of the National Network for Arab American Communities, based in Dearborn, Mich., agreed. "I don't know of anyone else doing [what PMEI is doing]. But it's a really great idea." And at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C., a think tank and policy center, spokeswoman Kate Seelye said, "I wish there were more Pittsburgh Middle East Institutes. I think there's an incredible openness to that idea now. The Arab Spring helped Americans see that Arabs want freedom and want more prosperous societies."

PMEI works in education; this summer it ran its second Arabic language immersion program. And it works in culture; this summer it co-sponsored a contemporary Islamic art exhibit on the South Side. But business networking is the heart of its operation.

It uses its annual fall conference, in particular, to fuel its growth; attracting prominent keynote speakers Thomas Friedman of The New York Times, Fareed Zakaria of CNN and Newsweek, and former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, to bolster attendance with the region's top executives at its business roundtables. That makes it easier to attract more important Middle Eastern dignitaries and executives, who, in turn, want to meet those Pittsburgh executives.

The visits to the conference by officials and executives from Qatar, Egypt, Oman, and other Middle Eastern countries have

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spurred returned visits by officials from those countries. That, in turn, has resulted in Pittsburgh delegations being welcomed abroad.

From the beginning, PMEI's leaders knew they had to have an attention-getting speaker to draw a crowd that could then be wooed. None of the speakers has been cheap, but, "I've always believed you have to spend money to make money," said Curtis, the institute's half-Iranian founder and president, and, by all accounts, the engine behind its progress.

"Simin has real drive and passion to make this work," said Devesh Sharma, managing director of Aquatech. "When she puts on an event, it's top notch; corners aren't cut."

The daughter of an American mother and Iranian father, Curtis lived for several years in Iran as a child, and it was her own heritage—and admitted cultural failure—that led to the creation of PMEI.

"I was always embarrassed that I had never learned Farsi," she said; a fact she was discussing one day in early 2007 with a friend, Janne Nolan, a former University of Pittsburgh professor of international affairs now working in Washington, D.C. The conversation led to a broader discussion about why there wasn't any group in town working to foster better ties with Iran, specifically, which had a worsening relationship with the U.S. then and now.

But a serendipitous meeting in April 2007 between Curtis, another co-founder, Massy Paul, and Donald Bonk, then an administrator at Carnegie Mellon University who was trying to organize the school's international alumni, led her to think about her idea in a different way.

"It wasn't well thought through across the board yet," said Bonk, recalling the meeting. "But, at the core, I told them I thought we have companies and institutions in Pittsburgh that might have an interest in the Middle East and that they might act as a broker to help connect them there and to each other."

It was an "Aha!" moment for Curtis, Paul and another co-founder, Anahita Firouz Radjy.

"We thought it was going to be a personal and cultural exchange," Curtis said. "But we didn't think about how powerful the business connections and exchanges could be."

More discussions followed, and before long, Curtis was planning for the first conference in the fall of 2008.

Curtis has won the trust of once-skeptical business leaders for one basic reason, said Chuck Bogosta, president of UPMC's international and commercial services division and a PMEI board member: "It's her ability to make connections."

With other organizations, "people talk a lot, but when it comes to delivering on promises, it's a different story," said Shariff. "As far as Allen & Shariff is concerned, PMEI is delivering."



LOCAL LINK Simin Curtis, president and co-founder of PMEI, at home.

It has delivered so well that board members are pushing the idea that it may already be ripe for expansion, including, possibly, creating similar institutes in other U.S. regions. The idea has traction with most board members. But exactly how to do it is not clear. One PMEI member has an idea of what not to do.

"The uniqueness of PMEI is that it's a homegrown organization," said Salman Al Shidi, a manager for the Omani Oil Co., which has participated in PMEI conferences. "If you look at its success, it's because it's local. I'd say, don't move national. Find another city or another state to bring along. National organizations have limited success because they don't connect people."

Curtis isn't sure what direction the idea will take. But she knows the ideas will keep coming, and they'll surprise people again. "In truth, when we started, there wasn't a whole lot of interest in Pittsburgh in the Middle East," she said. "But I decided we were going to change that—and we will." **PQ**

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