

CHERYL NAJAFI BUSINESS & ECONOMICS

In a relatively short period of time, Cheryl Najafi's Phoenix-Based company CherylStyle has captured much attention and admiration for the stay-at-home mother turned entrepreneur.

But ironically, the rural Missouri native who is on track to be Arizona's version of Martha Stewart – who Najafi had over for dinner in the fall of 2011 - credits her accomplishments to her husband Jahm, a native of Iran whose interpretation of at-home dinner parties introduced Najafi to a new method of hosting.

"I had to learn to entertain. Persians love to entertain in the home but there was a big difference from my experiences. They used their crystal every day and for us, grandmother's china was always in the cupboard except for Christmas and Thanksgiving. He threw me into the fire," she says, laughing. Her husband's high-profile status as one of the most influential and elite men in the business world catapulted the small town girl into the limelight and into the realm of bigtime entertaining. Through years of hosting many parties, Najafi honed her skills.

It started with learning the basics of how a formal table was set. Then Najafi became more creative and well versed in how to add some spark to what was becoming the repetitive function where people talked about the same topics and asked the same dull questions. She added visual twists to table settings so they could be conversation starters. If someone were from a foreign country, she would add a little favor at his or her place setting that would be indicative of their native land. She would print interesting questions or trivia on the backs of name cards to get beyond the basics and encourage interactions to go deeper more quickly. As guests continued to react with such positive reviews of her efforts to go the extra mile, Najafi did more. This led to her gaining the reputation of being the quintessential hostess. However, perfection is not the goal.

"My philosophy is, don't get wrapped up in being the perfect host. Something will always go wrong. But if you're having a good time, it doesn't matter. You win when guests walk away feeling special," Najafi says.

Launching CherylStyle in January 2011, was just the latest in a long list of accomplishments and projects that highlighted Najafi's life in Arizona. Since 1986, she has played a significant philanthropic role for several organizations, including the Arizona Heart Association, American Cancer Society, Make-A-Wish Foundation, Southwest Autism and Research Center, Phoenix Suns Charities, Fresh Start Women's Foundation, Phoenix Children's Hospital and many others. Najafi hails from the town of Web City, Missouri, population 7,000, where she lived a quaint, lower

middle class lifestyle. She describes a large storage room in the family home where various rescued and recycled items were kept for future uses. As a child, pieces found here as well as in nature would provide the inspiration for her table settings even though her family had little money for frills. "I would trim cherry branches when they were blooming and arrange them on the table. I used my grandmother's tea towels as placemats," she recalls. "There wasn't any excess and we never threw anything away. I grew up with so little, it's embedded in me to repurpose."

Pursuit of bachelor's and master's degrees in communications from Arizona State University brought her to Arizona. Like her mother, Najafi stayed home to raise her three children and being the CEO of her own business never crossed her mind. But when friends encouraged her to write a book so she could share her unique expertise on creative entertaining that came from the heart, it sparked the beginnings of CherylStyle. It began with her Web site and has developed into a book that is slated for release in May 2012. A television show is also in the works. Najafi hopes to start the CherylStyle Foundation, which would help support and advocate for up and coming women entrepreneurs.

Despite all of the material accoutrements that often cause inflated egos and elevated snobbery, Najafi stays true to her roots and maintains a humility that is just as refreshing as her bubbly personality and contagious smile.

As she was getting ready to start her business, a friend questioned whether she was making a wise decision. Why take on a workload and extra stress when she could continue living what many consider the ideal American Dream of luxury? "She said to me, 'Why are you going to ruin a perfectly good life?' That's the lens that Americans wear: If you have enough, why do anything to change it?," Najafi says. "But at the end of the day, we can't take any of that with us. None of that stuff matters. It's just stuff."

Whether it's the playful invitations, dazzling party favors or interactive centerpieces that encourage discussion and participation among guests, these little touches are physical manifestations of Najafi's belief that our lives should not revolve around the monumental milestones and grand celebrations, but the small ones in between.

And if she can help friends and strangers remember what's really important in life, then that's her reward "At the end of the day, we are summed up by the number of lives we've touched," she says. "I want to share with people that we've got to stop, take a breath and enjoy all of those little moments in between those mile markers."



Cheryl Najafi