

S.L. Teacher of the Year Does More Than Educate Students

By Geoffrey Fattah
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Payman Jahanbin teaches English as a second language, but his students see him as much more — a friend and helper, mentor and guide.

For that reason, Jahanbin has been named 1995 Teacher of the Year in the Salt Lake City School District.

Jahanbin works at the Salt Lake Community High School, which is dedicated to providing education to hundreds of students from other countries. He starts his day with the school's "Early Birds" at 7:30 a.m.; six other classes follow.

And with students from 25 different countries representing 15 different languages and all levels of education, his task takes on a whole new dimension.

Yet the common thread that binds students to Jahanbin's class is the desire to learn all the intricacies of American society.

Jahanbin realizes the importance of being able to open one's own bank account, buy a car and get insurance, pay bills and even to learn U.S. currency. He is an immigrant himself.

"I know how the system works better than an American, because Americans don't need it," Jahanbin says. "I need it to go to the immigration office and get my citizenship. I need it to go and open a checking account with my language problem."

Jahanbin was born in Iran and in his teens traveled around the Middle East teaching English to children. When he was older, he went to school in Europe to study theater and drama, attending a class in Paris taught by the world-famous mime, Marcel Marceau.

Irna Klishko, a student from Russia, laughs nervously as she struggles with a limited English vocabulary to best describe her teacher.

"I love him, he's a very good teacher. I love Payman because of



Payman Jahanbin

his sense of humor," she says.

When Jahanbin came to the United States, he knew he wanted to teach English and help other immigrants who sometimes can be thrust into frightening situations far from the security of home and family.

"When they come to my class, first I say, 'Let's get to know each other, tell me about yourself, tell me about your past.' They then realize you are watching them, talking to them," Jahanbin says. "They realize they have to do better because now we are friends; we are not just student and teacher."

He acknowledges there are limits to his teaching. Because he does not want his students speaking English with an Iranian accent, he asks teachers who are native English speakers to teach pronunciation.

"But merely teaching them English is not going to be enough for them. I cannot ask my students to come and sit there and listen to me teach them the alphabet and send them home," he says.

Many of his students not only

are learning a new language, but perhaps are working several jobs, taking care of children and looking for places to live.

James Anderson, principal of Salt Lake Community High School, says he knows that Jahanbin has driven a student to the dentist and co-signed loans for others to buy homes or cars.

Jahanbin has taken students shopping for the right clothes to wear to a job interview and even helped them make funeral arrangements for deaths in the family — all on his own time, Anderson says.

Jahanbin explains, "My wife and I pick a couple of families and we help them any way we can. We're just like sponsors, and then we train them to go and do it for other people."

There's no argument from student Lourdes Ambriz, from Mexico, who considers Payman to be the best teacher in the school. "If I have a problem I can go to him. He's a good friend," she says.

While Jahanbin likes Salt Lake City and feels welcome, there have been times when things were tense for Iranians in the United States, particularly when Americans were taken hostage by extremists in the late 1970s.

"I was at East High School. I was attacked several times in the parking lot," he says. "They scratched my car, called me names. It was so painful, I cried every night because of my family in Iran. My father had been working for the old regime and I was worried about by family, and here I was getting all this nonsense."

But Jahanbin also recalls walking down the stairs at his school recently when two other teachers passed him. He says one pointed him out and said, "That's Payman, he's Teacher of the Year."

"Thank you, America, I don't know who, for giving me a chance to prove myself," Jahanbin says. "If I can do it, everyone can."