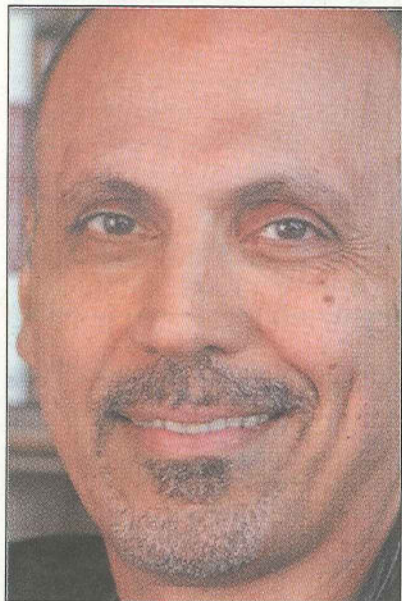


IMMIGRATION: Working in America



Andy Shallal

Andy Shallal: Immigrant, Restaurateur, Artist, Political Activist

by **Becki Young**

Did you know that the restaurateur behind Busboys and Poets also created Washington DC favorites Luna Grill and Diner, Café Luna, Skewers, and Mimi's? Although I have patronized all of these eateries over the years, I had no idea that they were all connected to Andy Shallal, until I sat down with him recently to discuss his experiences as an immigrant restaurateur in DC.

The thriving flagship location of Shallal's Busboys and Poets opened in the historic U Street corridor in 2005. As a restaurant with a political conscience, its establishment was well timed to coincide with the series of anti-war protests that were occurring in DC at that time, and it has been embraced by both the neighborhood and the progressive community. From the get go, Busboys and Poets was much more than a restaurant. It has hosted notable speakers including Cindy Sheehan, Amy Goodman, Ralph Nader, Howard Zinn, Cornel West, Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, and Howard Dean. The restaurant features a bookstore, performance space and a mural painted by Shallal.

To understand what led Andy Shallal to create this restaurant, bookstore, fair trade market and gathering place, we must start at the beginning. Shallal immigrated to the DC area with his family from Iraq in 1966, when he was 10-years-old. It was a tumultuous time for the country, and especially for the nation's capital. Shallal remembers watching from his family's home in Arlington as the smoke rose from burning buildings in DC's U Street corridor, during the riots that erupted after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

As a student in the Arlington public schools, Shallal learned about the Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes. As an immigrant, he inhabited a sometimes ambiguous place in between "black" and "white" which shaped his consciousness of race in America, as well as his eventual vocation as an artist. Shallal found his haven in the art room, gaining the skills to become the painter and muralist that he is today.

Shallal's father took over Pizza Kaetano, a small Italian restaurant in



Becki L. Young


Annandale, where Shallal and his siblings would help out after school and on weekends. Shallal's father ran the restaurant as a way to support his family, but he had no particular affinity for the hospitality business. According to Shallal, in the Middle East restaurant work is considered lower class, and Shallal's

father, who has a PhD in literature, saw the restaurant only as way to make a living. Shallal saw it as a way to provide sustenance to the patrons, and to make people happy.

He worked as a waiter while in undergraduate school (Catholic and Howard universities), and then took a full-time position at 209 1/2, a Capitol Hill restaurant under the same ownership as Mrs. Simpson's (Woodley Park) and the Foggy Bottom Café. He quickly became a manager at 209 1/2, and was then rotated through the group's different restaurants.

In the early 80s, he convinced his father to remodel the Annandale restaurant into a hip, trendy eatery serving hip, trendy food; unfortunately the local customers did not accept the changes. The family restaurant underwent a second renovation, this time into a more basic concept, "Little Italy," which served two types of pasta (fettuccine and linguine) with a variety of sauces. Shallal was in the kitchen, and the restaurant was a hit!

His next vision was a Middle Eastern fine dining spot in Dupont Circle, and in 1987 Skewers Restaurant was born on the corner of 17th and P Streets NW. The concept got off to a slow start, until Phyllis Richman, the former Washington Post food critic and "Queen of the Washington Restaurant Scene" issued a rave review. Then the customers began coming in droves, and Skewers' downstairs sister restaurant, Café Luna, now a Dupont classic, was born.




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The biggest lesson Shallal had learned from his early experiences in the restaurant industry was the importance of being connected to the community. Already politically active, Shallal and his restaurants became involved in various community building activities. It was the height of the AIDS crisis, so the restaurants held fundraisers and events to support the AIDSWalk and other similar causes; they also become involved in various political campaigns. Consumer advocate (and later politician) Ralph Nader had an office nearby. Documentary filmmaker Michael Moore (who worked for Nader at the time) was also a regular patron.

In this climate, Luna Books (on the third floor of the building shared by Skewers and Café Luna) was born. The idea was that Luna Books would host a series of receptions and events with prominent speakers to get the community more involved, and more informed, on issues of politics and peace. Shallal and his older brother Tony, who were business partners in the Skewers/ Luna enterprise, had been planning a new restaurant south of Dupont Circle, and in 1996 Luna Grill and Diner, still a Dupont favorite, opened on Connecticut Avenue south of the Circle.

In 2000, Shallal opened Mimi's, a "slice of the Left Bank" in Dupont West, featuring servers who sang, danced and played the piano between serving diners. It was there that the concept of the Peace Café, a series of dialogues/events about Arab-Israeli relations, was born.

Shallal was already conceiving his next project, which would be a synthesis of all the restaurants that had come before. He knew that he wanted to be in the U Street neighborhood, and he knew that he wanted to serve up both food and politics. Thus emerged Busboys and Poets.

The restaurant has since expanded to a second DC location, as well as one in Shirlington, with plans to open a fourth Busboys in Hyattsville in 2011.

In 2009 Shallal created Eatonville, a Southern-inspired restaurant across the street from the U Street Busboys and Poets. The restaurant is named after and takes its concept from Eatonville, the hometown of American author Zora Neale Hurston.

Shallal has also kept busy on the political front. He is a board member of the Institute for Policy Studies, the Social Venture Network, and the Anacostia Community Museum, as well as a former spokesperson for the

Education for Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC). He appears regularly on local and national radio and television programs and in national newspapers.

In addition to The Peace Café, Shallal founded Iraqi Americans for Peaceful Alternatives, an ad hoc group formed prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The group has been instrumental in speaking out about the detrimental impact of war on ordinary Iraqis and continues to seek peaceful alternatives to change Iraq's regime.

He was a Peace Fellow with the Seeds of Peace program, which brings together Middle Eastern Arab and Israeli youth to the United States for the summer in order to learn how to co exist. He has worked with several Israeli and Palestinian peace groups in the United States and the Middle East. He is a recipient of the Fairfax County Human Rights Award, the Jefferson Medal (the US' highest honor for volunteerism) and the United Nations Human Rights Community Award. Recently he was given the Ambassador of Peace Award by the Washington Peace Center.

Each restaurant has been, in some way, imbued with an aspect of his unique personality. When I asked him what advice he would give to other immigrants in this country, he opined on the infusion of new cultures, cuisines, and ideas that immigrants bring to the US. Shallal said that immigrants should not be afraid to showcase their differences, and above all, they should be authentic.

Undoubtedly, this philosophy has been the crux of Shallal's own success as an immigrant, restaurateur, artist and political activist.

Becki L. Young has been working in the field of immigration law since 1995. Ms. Young's practice focuses on employment-based immigration law. She has represented employers in a variety of industries, including investment banking and securities, information technology, health care, and hospitality, providing advice on work permits and related immigration issues, and is the co-editor of *Immigration Options for Essential Workers* published by the American Immigration Lawyers Association. To learn more or to schedule a personal consultation, call 202-232-0983 or e-mail becki.young@blylaw.com.

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