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EXTREME

Afghanistan-born Mezhgan lives the American



MAKEOVER

dream as makeup artist on *American Idol*. By Carrie Borzillo-Vrenna • Photographs by Brian Winckler



GROWING UP IN KABUL, AFGHANISTAN, Mezhgan Hussainy would escape the watchful eye of her nanny, sneak into her parents' bedroom and play with makeup at her mother's vanity table. It's a familiar childhood memory for many American girls, but certainly not for those raised in Afghanistan, where until recently it was illegal for women to show their faces, let alone own or wear lipstick, mascara and blush.

For Mezhgan (who, Madonna-like, uses professionally only her first name, pronounced *Mish-gahn*), the road from her mother's boudoir to her current status as a top Hollywood makeup artist was paved with peril. Long before she was hired to work her magic on the Fox phenom *American Idol* and its new spinoff, *So You Think You Can Dance*, she endured such harrowing events as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the routine practice of Afghan soldiers stealing boys from their homes to make them military conscripts. These and other incidents drove Mezhgan's parents to leave their relatives, friends and lavish home — complete with driver, cook, nanny and housekeeper — in the middle of the night in hope of making a better life in America.

"Life in Afghanistan was normal for a while," says the thirty-two-year-old Mezhgan, who was eight when her family fled Kabul in 1981. "My mother was a respected teacher and my dad a computer programmer with forty employees. You'd see the elders wearing chiffon scarves around their heads, but women didn't have to hide their heads or faces when I was a little girl. My mom could wear makeup and dresses. Then,

everywhere," she says. "My brother saw a hand stuck in a tree. The scary part, though, was that no one did anything. No one asked questions. Another time, our next-door neighbors got a knock on their door in the middle of the night. It was the army coming to take the husband and sons for questioning. They were never seen again. They take them into the army against their will when they need more men. I have three brothers, and having boys at that time was the most terrifying because at any point they could be taken away from you."

So Mezhgan's parents quietly put their escape plan in motion by paying smugglers tens of thousands of dollars to move their family of six out of the country. They couldn't tell their children, nor could they sell their house or even pack their belongings. The family eventually made it to Pakistan, where they stayed for nine months before receiving permission to move to the U.S., where they had family in New York and California.

"I'll never forget that trip," Mezhgan says. "You have to leave in secret — if you're found out, you'll be killed. It took us ten days on foot through the mountains and the Khyber Pass. We were so hungry and tired. We were allowed to take only hard-boiled eggs and water with us. We got shot at once, and that's when the smugglers asked for more money. Smugglers could name their price because people were so desperate to escape. My mother had sewn money into her dress, so we were able to pay. By the time we got to Peshawar, Pakistan, I had blisters around my lips from being so dehydrated."

Once in the U.S., Mezhgan quickly learned to speak English, getting hooked on shows like *Growing Pains*, *Silver Spoons* and *Kids Incorporated*. She became enamored with



THE EYES HAVE IT:
Mezhgan makes up *American Idol*'s Kimberley Locke.

Hollywood glamour, and by age twelve was proudly giving manicures to the women in the Hollywood apartment building where her family was living. "Makeup just came naturally to me," she says. "By the time I was fifteen, I was doing everyone's hair and makeup whenever anyone would go out."

When Mezhgan was a teen, her striking looks led to modeling (M•A•C cosmetics) and acting (*Sunset Beach*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*) opportunities. But makeup was her true calling. "My first big job in cosmetics was at the Lancôme counter in Robinsons-May," she says. "Lancôme gave me a goal to sell three gifts-with-purchase and I sold twelve. I guess it was just easy for me, and I loved it. I saw myself doing this and nothing else."

Mezhgan's show-biz break came when the manager of actor John O'Hurley (seen most recently as a celebrity hooper on ABC's *Dancing with the Stars*) hired her to do his client's makeup for an updated version of *To Tell the Truth* — despite a total lack of TV experience or even a cosmetology degree to her name. "I was terrified," she says. "I'd done photo shoots and freelanced, but never a TV show. I thought I was going to die. But his makeup came out good. For me, it's just common sense. I have no formal training, but I haven't been stuck yet."

One would think true terror struck when Mezhgan learned she'd be working with acid-tongued *American Idol* judge Simon Cowell, but this tough cookie says working with the blistering Brit "is a piece of cake. His bark is much bigger than his bite."

Idol's producers tried to hire Mezhgan as the show's makeup artist for its first season, but she passed in favor of *Family Feud*. "When I first saw *American Idol* on air, I thought, 'Oh my God! Are you kidding me? I turned down *this* for *Family Feud*!'"

When Fox came a-knocking for season two, Mezhgan leapt at the offer. Since then, she's been helping to transform the likes of Kimberley Locke, Fantasia Barrino and new champion Carrie Underwood from unpolished hopefuls to bona fide stars.

Meanwhile, she is readying her own cosmetics line, M by Mezhgan, due to launch later this year, possibly on QVC. She's also shopping her autobiography and a feature-length documentary, tentatively titled *From Afghanistan to American Idol*.

Away from work, Mezhgan hopes to inspire people in her homeland to transform their lives through her FARAWAY foundation, which she established to aid Afghan women and children.

"Every day I thank my parents for making the decision to leave Afghanistan when they did," she says. "If we hadn't left, would I be alive? Would I be able to speak? Forget about makeup! That would be one of those dreams you couldn't think about, because all you think about is surviving. And here I am doing makeup for *American Idol*, while girls in Afghanistan haven't been able to even put on makeup for so long, or are too afraid to do it."

"I want to help them get back on their feet. My hope is one day girls will rule again!" ☐

Face Forward

MEZHGAN'S ROAD TO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN TV MAKEUP MIGHT NOT BE TYPICAL, BUT SHE HAS ONE THING IN COMMON WITH MANY ARTISTS WORKING ON SHOWS TODAY. "You don't need formal training to be a makeup artist for film or TV," says Susan Cabral-Ebert, president of the Makeup Artists and Hairstylists Guild Local 706. "There are as many people who have gone to a makeup school as there are those who learn through others or on their own."

No matter their path to the industry, mastering the complexities of makeup is a must for newcomers, Cabral-Ebert says. "You have to be able to do beauty makeup, appliances and prosthetics and be able to put on beards and mustaches so well that when an HD television camera comes in close, you can't see that it's makeup. The enormity of the craft is so much more than what one can learn doing weddings."

Nonunion artists should consider breaking in with nonunion commercials, says Patricia Messina, a veteran makeup pro and a governor of the Television Academy's makeup artists and hairstylists peer group. "It's great for sharpening your skills," she says. "Often you may have to improvise on the spot, and it will teach you to be prepared for the unexpected." Such as? "Your child star just showed up for the job, and his chicken pox haven't quite disappeared. Or it's time for a closeup on his hands, and his mother let him play with indelible ink pens!"

With new techniques constantly emerging — such as airbrushed makeup and the move from latex applied prosthetics to gelatin and silicon appliances — the union offers a variety of classes through its educational program. "Sometimes you just need to reiterate the basics," Cabral-Ebert says. "You know, beauty makeup you did in the '80s isn't going to work today. We also have classes in old age, facial hair and character makeup. There is always something new to learn."

Messina agrees. "The best artists I know, at any point in their career, are advancing their knowledge and their craft," she says. A recent Local 706 seminar on M•A•C Cosmetics, she notes, "revealed all the latest runway trends from Milan to New York." Messina also attended the International Makeup Artists Trade Show in June, which offered two days of continuous demonstrations and lectures.

Attendance at such events and classes leads to networking, which leads to jobs. "An airbrush makeup class I took in 1985 led to my first department head position on a sitcom," Messina says. "This was due to a contact made with another artist while taking the course."

"Even if you are a student, or just leaving makeup school, stay in contact with those artists you connected with or whose work you admired," she counsels. "I'm still friends with an artist I met at makeup school who hired me on *Family Ties*. I hired her on *Seinfeld*, and we continued to take turns hiring each other throughout our careers."

And when you're not brushing up on your makeup skills, brush up on the TV schedule. "If it's television you want to work in, it's not a good idea to say you don't watch it," Messina says. "It should be considered part of your homework. Familiarize yourself with the new shows each season and try to catch at least one episode to keep current. Now that we have TiVo, there is no excuse." —C. B.-V.