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From an Iranian Childhood of More Work than Play, a Tycoon Rises Iranian American wins Entrepreneur of the Year award



Isaac Larian, president of MGA Entertainment, holds Jade and Cloe, two of the company's Bratz dolls. (Courtesy of MGA Entertainment)

By Elizabeth Kelleher
Staff Writer

Washington -- Were you to talk to Isaac Larian about his childhood in Iran, he would not wax nostalgic over childhood games or playthings. In fact, he would tell you that when his friends and cousins played or went on vacation, he did "constant, hard work" helping his father run a retail textile business.

Today, Larian is president and chief executive of the largest privately held toy company in the world, MGA Entertainment, based in Van Nuys, California. (The ranking is based on market share comparisons.)

On November 17, Larian was named national Entrepreneur of the Year at a ceremony in Palm Springs, California, for his "innovation, financial success and personal commitment" in building a world-class business,

according to Ernst & Young, the accounting firm that sponsors the annual award. Larian is the 21st winner and will represent the United States at the World Entrepreneur of the Year awards in Monte Carlo, Monaco, in 2008. Only one American has won the world award.

Born in Kashan, Iran, in 1954, Larian came to the United States when he was 17. He said that when he came he had two priorities: "to survive and to get an education." He graduated from California State University, Los Angeles, with an engineering degree in 1978. But he did not stick to the sciences. "It was no twist of fate" that led him to the toy business, he said. "I have always been interested in the exhilarating nature of selling a product."

He began importing textiles and brassware through his own mail-order company, ABC International Traders Inc., shortly after graduating.

In 1979, he founded a company called Surprise Gift Wagon, through which he imported and distributed brand-name consumer electronic products. By the late 1980s, he had become the first official distributor of Nintendo handheld games in the United States and had begun calling his company Micro Games of America. It acted as a licensee of other companies' products -- including Power Rangers and Hello Kitty.



Iranian American Isaac Larian on November 17 after accepting the Entrepreneur of the Year award. (Courtesy of Ernst & Young)

But as Larian manufactured or distributed toy brands owned by others, he realized that his business would grow faster if he developed his own brands.

In the 1990s, Larian changed the company name to MGA Entertainment and transformed it to develop its own licenses. Today,

it makes more than 20 product lines of toys, games, dolls, consumer electronics, home décor, stationery and sporting goods.

Among MGA Entertainment's hits are such household names in the toy business as Bratz, Yummi-Land, Storytime Collection, Rescue Pets, Miuchiz, West Coast Choppers, Market Racers and Marvel toys. "I have always had a penchant for creativity," he said. "I find myself constantly seeking out new ideas and concepts that I can transform into products that make a difference in the lives of children."

TAKING ON BARBIE AND WINNING

Mattel Inc.'s Barbie reigned as the best-selling doll for more than 40 years, until Larian's company unseated her with its Bratz dolls. These fashion-conscious dolls won *Family Fun* magazine's Toy of the Year Award four years in a row and spawned a feature film, fashion magazines, apparel collections, a Web site, online promotions and a host of related products. Today, MGA has more than 400 licensees worldwide creating Bratz-themed products.

According to Amy Opheim of Funosophy Inc., which surveys parents and children to track the popularity of toys in the United States, two Bratz dolls -- the BeBratz.com line and the Bratz Fashion Stylistz -- are among the top 100 toys for the 2007 holiday season. The brand itself is ranked third in popularity among girls ages 6-11, according to Funosophy's survey.

Judges for the Entrepreneur of the Year award cite Larian's open-door policy, whereby he welcomes ideas from all of his 500 employees, as one reason for his success. In 2002, an intern suggested an idea for an accessory, and it became the first Bratz playset and won a Toy Industry Association award.

Larian has three children, and while they have not had to help their father struggle to make ends meet in the same way Larian helped his father, they share an interest in business. Their interest comes "more from the observation and curiosity than from genes," Larian said. He named two of the Bratz dolls, Yasmin and Cameron, after his younger children.

As Larian thinks about how far he has come since moving to the United States with a goal of survival, he offers advice to other immigrants. "Don't forget your roots, always be humble and open to

taking a risk," he said. "Don't be afraid to fail, and when you do, learn from it, get up and try again."

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