



Small-Business Person of The Year 2005 Finalist

Andalib Dedicated to Serving Others First

Allison Shirreffe, Contributing Writer

He wasn't even a full-time dishwasher. He worked part time because he needed time to take his English classes. He had just arrived in the United States from Iran and spoke only Persian. He was 17.

The former dishwasher, A. Hamid Andalib, is now 45, fluent in English and well on his way to becoming a very wealthy man. If only Andalib, the founder and CEO of VIP LLC (dba VIPGift), a global incentive business that expects to sell more than 1.5 million gift cards and hit \$30 million in sales this year, cared about personal wealth. His motto -- and his secret to success -- is all about serving others: customers, vendors, employees, family, friends.



When Andalib gives talks, he carries a four-foot spoon to illustrate his point. When he tries to put the spoon in his own mouth, it's too long. "It does not feed our own mouth. We've got to feed others," said Andalib, a finalist for the Small-Business Person of the Year award given by the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. "If you get zealous about a boat or a big house and forget about what your purpose is -- to help customers, to help your employees -- if it's just 'give me, give me, give me,' then everybody runs away from you. Nobody likes a pig."

Andalib was fortunate to become a dishwasher. During the Iranian Revolution in 1978, he was one of tens of thousands of people hoping to receive one of a mere 100 U.S. visas left to be issued. Each time the American Embassy in Shiraz opened its doors, people rushed the entrance. In the chaos, the doors were closed. Andalib climbed the Embassy wall and yelled at those gathered. His proposition? A lottery. The crowd acquiesced.

Fate was on Andalib's side. He picked "89." "My lucky number," Andalib said.

The dishwashing job, his first in this country, introduced him to Pano Karatassos, founder and president of [Buckhead Life Restaurant Group](#) and the owner of Pano's & Paul's.

"He's intelligent. He's smart. He's got good business sense -- he's the complete package. If he believes in it, he'll get it done," said Karatassos, who calls Andalib "my Iranian son."

After two years, Andalib left his dishwashing job, enrolled at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and took a job at The Loft Restaurant in downtown Chattanooga. Five years later, Andalib bought the restaurant. As he ran The Loft, he honed his financial background at Vanderbilt University and entered the credit-card business; specifically, the branding and co-branding of credit cards. From there, he jumped to the incentive business and founded VIPGift in 1999.

VIP is an issuer -- a licensed reseller -- of Visa debit cards and is authorized to co-brand the card. In other words, if a company rewards its employees or customers with gift cards, the name of that particular company can be printed on the card (thereby establishing brand loyalty) and can be used to purchase items at any of the 26 million merchants that accept Visa or MasterCard, to donate funds to charity, redeem BellSouth phone cards, or purchase merchandise from online catalogs that accept Visa or MasterCard.

VIP delivers gift cards across the globe instantly. The company even delivers gift cards through cell phones. The recipient receives a text message with a gift card number redeemable online.

This year, VIP anticipates growing from 35 employees to 50 and Andalib expects sales to near \$100 million by the end of 2006. That's up from \$3.7 million in sales in 2003. In five years, Andalib expects VIP to be a billion-dollar company.

"I want to create the most global and most respected company in the incentive and loyalty business," Andalib said.

The husband and father of three teenagers works to maintain balance. "I don't want to build a great company and not know my children," he explained.

Andalib recently moved back to Atlanta from Tennessee. He loves living and doing business here, especially because he's found big companies, such as United Parcel Service Inc., The Home Depot Inc. and BellSouth Corp., have been quick to help "little" companies like his.

"He's earned his business with BellSouth," said John Irwin, general manager of BellSouth Business. "At first, his company was so new that we gave him just a small amount of business, but the feedback was so good and so positive, he earned more business."

Andalib considers himself "a whole-hearted American." He has yet to return to Iran. "I truly believe I symbolize how great this country is," Andalib said. "It's not just about hard work or intelligence. That doesn't have that much to do with it. It's about persistence and the belief that you can do anything."