

Santa Anita, we went to rural Arkansas; there were at least two camps in Arkansas. I’m sure if I looked into the history, I’d find out that the senator from Arkansas had some political pull. There were only ten camps in total: two in California, one in Idaho, one in Wyoming, one in Colorado, two in Arizona, and the two in Arkansas. Obviously, if you build a camp for some twelve thousand people, that’s a lot of money. Somebody has to build it, somebody has to guard it, somebody has to service it with food and God only knows what, to keep twelve thousand people going. I think it must have been good business, running those camps.

After the war, we ended up back in California. The biggest problem for the Japanese, coming back from the camps, was finding work. There were still a lot of hard feelings toward us. The one job that a lot of people gravitated toward was landscape gardening. It was a very good business, because you could be your own boss.

My uncle was lucky. In 1942, when we were detained, an American friend of his had assumed power of attorney and watched the property. A lot of people got screwed that way; their representatives would sell their property and take the money. But in this case, the guy was honest, so when my uncle got out of the camp, everything went back to normal.

My parents took over my uncle’s store in 1956 and turned the whole thing into a gift shop. Their customers were other Japanese-Americans. Back then, this neighborhood was totally different. It was a self-contained Japanese community: there was a drugstore, a beauty shop, a barbershop, and one or two little Japanese restaurants. There were a lot of boarding houses, too. Right after the war, when people got out of the camps, they would go to the boarding houses or to the church or the Japanese school down here. They would just live there until they could reestablish themselves. We kept to ourselves, in part due to prejudice. My family used to drive to San Diego or San Francisco, and they wouldn’t even rent a hotel room to us because we were Japanese. It wasn’t like the 1960s — I always gave a lot of credit to the blacks, going to Selma, Alabama, being shot up with a fire hose and the mad dogs and all that — I don’t think I could do that. The Japanese were submissive in the sense that they felt, What good was it going to do trying to turn the rock over if there were just going to be worms there? So they tended to keep to themselves.

At the very beginning, there weren’t a lot of Japanese importers around, so my parents had to travel all the way to Japan to buy the little things we needed for the gift shop. Later on, importers would come to us. This shop has been in our family for over fifty years.

Our little shop was one of the first Shiseido Cosmetics dealers in America. In 1960, my father got a letter from Japan. Someone, a relative or a friend, was on the Japanese ice skating team going to Europe for the Olympics. This person asked if he could meet my father at the airport, just to say hi. So my parents went to the airport and one of the girls on the ice skating team was the granddaughter of the founder of Shiseido. There were a couple of Shiseido salesman along with them, and when they found out that my parents had a gift shop, they wanted to work with them. This was before any department store ever carried it. Americans didn’t even know what it was! But since our customers were mostly Japanese, there were people who recognized the brand from Japan. Shiseido was an old company, around since the 1800s. It had started out as a pharmaceutical company and evolved into skin care and beauty aids.

I started working in the store in 1992 or 1993, when my parents started getting too old to manage things. When I was younger I had been in the Marines, and then had joined the US Army during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I went into a division of the Army called the Army Security Agency, where they taught me Russian and Russian communication. Then, funnily enough, I went to Northern Japan for two years to monitor Russian communications from there. Of course, I knew no Japanese. Then, after seven years in the service, the GI Bill

was launched, so when I came back, I went to college. Later I worked for Playtex — that’s a multibillion dollar corporation, you know — and after that worked with American Home Products, where I was the only Asian. When I left, my boss told me they’d taken a chance on me because they’d never hired an Asian before.

Today, the Shiseido still does well for us, as do the vintage clothing and kimonos and these flower vases. Beyond that, we sell a mixture of things, tea sets and sake sets, all made in Japan. We have to carry some stuff from China because of the price, but not too much. Normally Saturday is our best day, sales-wise. Thursday is the worst day because the two restaurants next door are closed. We’ve had famous customers, too. Dustin Hoffman came in, maybe because he was going to the SAG health clinic nearby. He came in twice. He was probably the nicest one we’ve had here, you know, for someone at that level.

We run this place pretty simply. My wife and I are the only employees. We take care of our granddaughter in the back, right there. I don’t need to pay rent; we have no employees. Basically the economy is soft right now, but we’ve seen soft times before and we’ll survive and come back again. This is definitely the worst. When the real estate market was really going hot and heavy, we used to get a call once a week, someone trying to buy the property. But I won’t sell. I tell my two daughters — they don’t want anything to do with the business — when we’re gone, please don’t sell it.

When I started working here full time around 1992, there were three stores in the neighborhood similar to ours. Yamaguchi’s on the corner here, Kabuki on Santa Monica, and Hakata on Washington. Now we’re the last of our kind. Our commitment to the neighborhood goes beyond our little store — it’s also to the Buddhist church, the Methodist church, the older Japanese people who still live in the neighborhood. We definitely fill a niche, so theoretically we shouldn’t be struggling. When you’re still having problems, you know it must be the economy. It’s just one of those things. A lull. It will come back, and we’ll be right there again.

— As told to Kate Wolf

George Russell is a vocal opponent of the death penalty, and owner of three green cemeteries: burial grounds with “no chemicals, no embalming, and no big bronze caskets.”

George Russell Green cemetery owner/operator Huntsville, Texas

George Russell lives in Huntsville, Texas, otherwise known as the “City of Death,” the execution capital of the US. Russell is a vocal opponent of the death penalty, and owner of three green cemeteries: burial grounds with “no chemicals, no embalming, and no big bronze caskets.”

When I first called him, the sixty-five-year-old entrepreneur and cultural ecologist yelled back in a heavy Texan accent, asking if he could call me back — he was out riding on his tractor and could barely hear me. Tall and distinguished-looking, with sparse silver locks, Russell is the founder the Universal Ethician Church, which practices a new religion devoted to defending “God’s biosphere” from human greed and ignorance. The first of his green burial grounds, the Ethician Church Cemetery, was opened in 2003.

Russell is also the webmaster of www.slumberpartytheater.com and the founder of both the Educational Video Network, which creates instructional media for teachers and schools, and Gothic Films, a production company that makes horror movies, including Long Pig (2008) and Naked Horror (2010). He appears in both films as the nefarious church leader Preacher Man. Russell says these films contain

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Photograph courtesy George Russellv

deep philosophical undertones, which he fears audiences might not always understand amid the gore and the nudity.

In 1968, I was 175 miles from the nearest telephone, in Toledo District, British Honduras — now Belize — working on a PhD in cultural ecology. We had a 1968 Ford Bronco, one of the very few internal-combustion vehicles in that whole area. Fuel had to be hauled to the village in fifty-five-gallon drums. The local people were a mix of cultures: East Indian; old Southerners who’d escaped from the post-Civil War South; and the Garifuna, black Caribs descended from slaves whose ship ran aground there in the 1700s. But they were all British-educated, and although they lived in grass shacks with dirt floors, they thought it would be really impressive — first class — to have their loved ones hauled to the cemetery in a brand new Ford Bronco instead of on the backs of relatives.

The cemetery happened to be in a rain forest: magnificent trees dripping with orchids, howler monkeys squealing, parrots flying — an absolute paradise. Normally, they would just dig a hole in the ground. Within a matter of hours, the bodies begin to be recycled back into nature, as microorganisms consume and reconstitute them. The loved one becomes part of a bird or a butterfly or a monkey or a tree. Our bodies are nothing more than recycled material, the things we’ve consumed, the container that transports our minds. I found this wonderful. I wished we could do it this way back home.

When I got back to Texas, I was busy with my family, raising four children and running my business, the Educational Video Network, which develops educational materials for schools. I bought a beautiful house near a place called Pool Creek, which is full of alligators and egrets. One day I was peeing off the balcony — which every American

should have the freedom to do — killing the azaleas and looking at all that open space behind my house. I realized that eventually it would all be developed. Someday, there’d be a bunch of houses back there; I’d take a pee and, twenty minutes later, there’d be a knock on my door. And it’d either be some poor old crone who hadn’t had any loving in about forty years, trying to hop in the sack with me, or it’d be a fourteen-year-old girl with two big, burly cops who’d put me in cuffs and haul me away to the hoosegow. So I called up the realtor and said, I need to buy 10 acres over there so I can piss in peace for the rest of my life.

I found out that the owner of the land was Charles Hurwitz, an investment titan. He was willing to sell, but those 10 acres were connected to another 990 acres. I wrote a check and bought the whole thing for \$2.2 million. Then, in 2000, I bought another thousand acres. I realized that this could be the green cemetery I’d always imagined. It took three years to cut through all the red tape, but we started burying people there in 2003. It was the first green cemetery in Texas, and only the third in the country.

Today I have three cemeteries spread across two thousand acres. One is habitat for the red-cockaded woodpecker, an endangered species. Another is a rock peninsula in Lake Livingston, where pelicans live. It has Catahoula boulders that are thirty million years old. The land was inhabited by Native Americans for twelve thousand years, until they were extirpated by Mr. White Man. The third cemetery is savannah.

I buried my mother in the second one. She chose the spot and watched her grave being dug, which she found to be exciting. We put a temporary wooden box down there so that, when the time came, we could just lift the lid and slide her in. When she finally

died, we wrapped her in a blanket and loaded her into the back of my pickup truck. We let the dogs jump in and say goodbye to her. Then we wrapped her in a quilt and covered her with Spanish moss, as she had wanted. And then everyone grabbed a shovel. It was a really simple, sweet ceremony. But so many people around here in the Below-the-Bible Belt are filled with hate, and they were saying, “Why would you treat your mama like that?” They don’t get it. “Shouldn’t you have had the \$25,000 bronze coffin?” No! I did what my mama wanted, and that \$25,000 can send a grandkid to college.

I have capacity here for twenty to thirty thousand people, but I don’t do any advertising; people find me on the internet. I can’t say the economy is affecting me — there was never much money in the first place. But more people should be thinking about going green in death. The average cost of a burial in America is close to \$7,000. It costs us about a third of that. Since we’re a nonprofit, we just ask for a donation. I’ve got gravediggers who will prepare the site, and a hearse to carry the body if you don’t want to do it yourself. I’ll officiate for free. And we take anybody here: Christians, Muslims, atheists, Wiccans, Jews — anybody.

I don’t support cremation. It wastes fossil fuel, and releases toxins into the air. And I definitely don’t support traditional burials, with all their embalming chemicals and concrete vaults. Green burial is what we do here, but, really, the best option is the sky burial, where you just leave a body out and let nature take care of it, as the Zoroastrians in India have done for thousands of years. I’ve been working with the Zoroastrians here — a fellow from Houston — to design a Tower of Silence where we can lay out the bodies, but that might cost upwards of \$100,000.

If you read Matthew 23, you’ll see that Jesus despised hypocrisy, organized religion, public prayer, and all other kinds of stuff. So if you can get past that goofy psychosexual pervert Paul and the others who in my opinion destroyed Christianity, you’ll see a simple guy who was very sophisticated intellectually, who traveled the world and brought back revolutionary ideas to Old Testament Judaism, which was really filled with hate — characters like Moses, who was a genocidal pedophile. I too always wanted to be a revolutionary who says, “Look, let’s simplify this.” The Universal Ethician Church only has one rule, which is the opposite of the Golden Rule. I personally know some high-level politicians who like to have their asses slapped. So, say I like my ass slapped — am I going to do unto you and slap you on the butt? No. The Ethician Rule, instead, is, Do unto others as others would hope that you would do unto them.

— As told to Meera Subramanian

Adham Alshorafa

Owner, Las Vegas clothing store, Dubai, UAE

In Dubai, land of improbable architecture, many of the most remarkable buildings are shopping malls. There is the Ibn Battuta Mall, with its themed pavilions, all the glories of the Silk Road under one colossal roof. There is a gold souk, a spice souk, a fish souk. There is the Mall of the Emirates, with the gigantic silver refrigerator that shoots out of it like a surfboard, home of the Dubai ski lodge.

And then there is the Indian mall in Karama, a sprawling, semi-enclosed cavalcade of trinkets, gewgaws, and clothes, many of them made in China to approximate the latest styles in New York. Most of the merchants here are South Asian.

The choicest real estate at the Indian mall is held by a hip-hop clothing

store called Las Vegas. Which, after you’ve spent any time in Dubai, seems to make perfect sense. Adham Alshorafa is the lord of Las Vegas.



Photograph by Natasha Carella

I started in 1992 as a wholesaler. Back then, we were buying from factories in the United Arab Emirates. Eventually we opened the shop. By now we have six, five here in Karama and one over in Oud Metha — though that location only sells slippers to locals. Every two years we open a new branch. We were the first people to sell hip-hop clothing in the Emirates. Here in Dubai, we have more links to America, whereas places like Lebanon and Turkey link more to Europe.

All kinds of people shop at our stores. All nationalities. But mostly young people. We are working with the sixteen to twenty-five group, men and women. We have Americans, Europeans, Kuwaitis, Egyptians. Mostly they are huge people who are looking for this kind of clothing. We carry up to size 6XLarge. You know, normally fat people would not wear something really tight. They would always wear something big — dark colored, not light colored. So for example, even though I am 2XLarge, I would wear 3 or 4XLarge, to show that. That’s the style. I used to wear my own stuff when I was younger, but not anymore. I wear dishdasha to work, jeans and t-shirt on the weekends.

I do love hip-hop. Jay-Z is my favorite artist. You know, we are the exclusive agent for his brand Rocawear in the UAE. If I ever open a store at the Dubai mall, they say he will come and open it himself.

Why Las Vegas? Actually, I was on a visit to Las Vegas, in America, and I just loved the life and the crowd, the atmosphere, the people who aren’t sleeping. I woke up at 6, 7 o’clock at night. I loved the colors, the lights. And then I thought, we should have the same crowd back in Dubai. And that’s Las Vegas.

Business is good. The recession hasn’t hurt us at all. Zero. Because the age I’m dealing with? They are really used to getting money from their parents. So they don’t care about how much they’re spending, they don’t care if there’s a recession. On the weekend, a guy wants to wear his outfit to show his girlfriend that he’s got money, that he’s wearing new stuff. We just keep going. I still have a good name on the market.

We do have competition. There is a shop called New York that is similar. It’s run by my cousin. He worked for me for three years and then opened New York. If it was someone else I’d shut them down — just cut prices at all of my stores until he had to close his business. But, he is my cousin and my sister’s cousin as well. At the end of the day, my brother is there, my father is there, my sister is there. Everybody is watching what’s going on. But still my name is number one. I’m very old in this business. I have my own contacts, suppliers. We have our own style.

These days most of our product comes from China... Thailand... Cyprus... Hong Kong... Turkey. We do our own designs. I’m a designer. So I can do our own designs for hip-hop wear, and they’ll make it to

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order for us in China. It’s not so hard to figure out what people want to wear. If you pay attention to people in this age-range — they are going to the beach, to house parties, to clubs. We watch what is happening in the States, and then we copy it and paste it over. It’s very easy for people in that age group to spend money. Very easy. People come by every few days asking what is new, what’s the latest. Boys and girls.

The clothing is a little less hip-hop now than it used to be. More street wear. Hip-hop itself is a bit slower than before. And our demographic is heading upward. I don’t think you’re going to see someone over twenty-five wearing a hip-hop t-shirt. Unless you’re Jay-Z.

— As told to Tima Ouzden

Naguib

Police officer turned hash dealer, Cairo

In March of 2010, Egyptian newspapers began to report on what has come to be known as “the hash crisis” (azmat el-hasheesh). According to these accounts, supplies of the extremely popular marijuana derivative had dried



Photograph by Babak Radboy

up. The reports speculated as to the possible causes of the hash crisis, with the state press claiming that a major drug bust had unraveled a criminal network and the opposition press linking the crisis to President Hosni Mubarak’s health, internecine rivalries within the Ministry of Interior, or a strategy to introduce a price hike.

Naguib, a former police officer turned drug dealer, met with Bidoun at the height of the controversy. Naguib (not his real name) is a slim and affable man in his mid-thirties from a middle-class background. He lives in a Cairo suburb with his wife and children. He spends his leisure time exploring Egypt’s deserts and experimenting with hydroponics, a technique to grow cannabis indoors.

This is very strange for Egypt. I’ve never seen anything like this. My uncle, an old-school *hashash* (hash smoker) who favored the *goza* (the traditional hash waterpipe), says it reminds him of the late 1980s, when the police raided Battaniya. Back then, there was an alley where you went and tables were set up with different size and grade hash and *bango* (low quality cannabis), and you would just buy openly on the street. One story at the time was that the decision to shut down Battaniya came about after Suzanne Mubarak met with Nancy Reagan, who told her about America’s war on drugs.

This is the country of hashish. It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor, you can buy enough for a couple of joints for ten pounds in Sayyeda — or enough for a whole wedding, if you want. There’s something for