

BUSINESS

Jasmine Azima is engineering a successful business expansion

By CONSTANCE LEWIS

While the downturn in the Texas economy and the overbuilt real estate market have wilted San Antonio's construction industry, Jasmine Engineering Co. has blossomed.

Within the last year, the nearly 3-year-old company has added 12 employees — including seven engineers — to its original staff, opened up a two-person office in Austin and landed projects that will keep it busy through 1990.

The firm's expansion happened at a time when other engineering companies were laying off personnel in record numbers, and what makes that achievement more remarkable is that the firm is run by an immigrant female in a profession which in the United States is nearly 98 percent male.

"To be quite frank, one of my primary motivations for being in business for myself is that I enjoy beating

a man at a man's game," said Jasmine Azima, a 29-year-old immigrant from Teheran who founded Jasmine Engineering in January 1985 with a \$40,000 bank loan.

Describing herself as a "daddy's girl" with a natural

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IN CHARGE: Jasmine Azima is owner of Jasmine Engineering at 8961 Tesoro.

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bent for mechanics, Azima said she used to assist her father in his favorite hobby — tinkering with the family automobile.

"When I started college (in 1976 at the University of Texas at Austin), there were several women enrolled in my major block (energy and fluids), but I was the only one who graduated, who did not transfer or drop out," she said. "Women, particularly in mechanical engineering, are discriminated against, both by their professors and fellow students who don't take them seriously."

Azima attended high school in Teheran during the late Shah of Iran's regime and was awarded a four-year full-tuition scholarship to study at UT-Austin on the basis of a rigid competency test given qualifying students.

"The shah, who had sent his two children to Texas A&M, favored Texas schools and contributed heavy endowments to them; thus many Iranian students were able to study here," she revealed.

In 1979, the year before she graduated from UT, Azima's parents, who were strong supporters of the shah, managed to flee the country when he was deposed.

"My parents went to London because they feared my 12-year-old brother would be drafted into the army. I realized then that I would never go back to the Middle East," said Azima, explaining that she then applied for and was granted U.S. citizenship.

Azima's father, a former English professor at the University of Tehe-

ran, and her mother, a registered nurse, plan to immigrate to the United States with their son next year, while other relatives have already done so.

Shortly after college, she passed her professional engineering examination, enabling her to tack the letters "P.E." after her name. "The test, a difficult one, is easier if you're fresh out of school, and many engineers don't bother with it for that reason," she said, explaining that the designation enables her to transfer her credentials to other states.

Working first at EN Inc. in Austin, Azima saw what she perceived as a fallacy — the concept of bidding projects on the basis of "man-hours," or the value of an engineer's time calculated to finish a job.

She bids on the job, and puts in however many hours it takes to get it done. Her staff works on salary, and are all dedicated to bringing in projects "on-time and under budget," she said.

"I baby my projects. You can't always tell how much time a job will take, or what obstacles may arise," she said. "I believe in going to a construction site every day and checking and rechecking the progress the crew is making. If something goes wrong, I am the engineer. I can be faulted."

"Well, some people may say I spend too much time on jobs and therefore lose money. On the contrary, I am a perfectionist and it has paid off," she said.

Admittedly, the contracts Jasmine Engineering was able to snare



JASMINE AZIMA
Engineer

initially were jobs that the larger firms didn't want. But Azima banked on those smaller tasks — designing heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) units for one-story restaurants, strip centers and single-unit office buildings — expecting them to bring her bigger projects, and they did:

Among the 30-plus projects currently on the drawing boards are renovating existing systems for the San Antonio River Authority building in the King William district, designing HVAC units for the city's new policy academy and a 120-bed nursing home in Brownsville.

"Whenever we've finished jobs, I have requested letters of reference from my clients, and this has also paved the way to getting more work," she said.

Her firm averages about 80 projects and billings of about \$1 million a year.

Aside from aggressively marketing her firm, Azima believes in frank, open lines of communication between her staff and clients.

"I'm selling a service, and I may know what I think is best for a project, considering the use of a structure," she said. "Or, I may have my own preference in systems, but I don't say to a client, 'I'm the engineer and I know it all.' I try to explain the logic behind my premise. Architects are usually open minded: proving the logic behind your design is the key."

She prefers to take her engineers to meet with clients rather than consolidating plans and issuing directions to the staff.

"I'm a team player. I don't believe in hogging all the glory. I listen to my staff. They have valuable information and input to share, or I wouldn't have hired them," she continued.

Cramped for space, Jasmine Engineering, now a full-fledged firm that specializes in mechanical, electrical, plumbing, lighting and energy conservation engineering, will be moving in January to the One Ten Broadway building downtown.

"Eighty percent of my clients are downtown; it only makes sense that I relocate there," she remarked.

The economy does not scare Azima.

"I've read projections that show the San Antonio economy hasn't bottomed out yet, but there is plenty of renovational work available in older historic buildings, institutional buildings, and schools," she said.