

# 80 years old, by george!

*Celebrating Michael George*

BY VANESSA DENHA GARMO



**Mike and Najat George and been married for more than 50 years.**

Once in a while, someone comes along that defines a generation. Michael George is as close as you can get to that kind of person. That is how Mike Sarafa describes his uncle.

He is among the masses who share a similar sentiment and their own feelings about a community icon.

“Mike is one of the truly great leaders in our community,” said U.S. Senator Carl Levin. “His unchanging youthful spirit, his zest for life, and his unwavering good nature make him a joy to have as a friend.”

Around town he is known to many as Uncle Mike, Mr. George or just Mike; regardless, the expressions are uttered with the utmost respect because Mike George has earned it in business, in the community and among friends and family.

He has gained the reputation as a fair-minded and savvy businessman during the 53 years he owned Melody Farms and over the last several decades as a mentor in the community and as a mediator in business.

“We have heard the slogan, ‘when E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.’ That same slogan holds true for Michael George,” commented son Robert George, known to many as Bobby. “Working alongside my father has been the most educational and rewarding experience.”

A man with no plans to retire, Mike George recently celebrated his 80th birthday still focused on community projects and business ventures.

“I get asked the question all the time, ‘when will you retire, Mike?’ I say, ‘when I retire you are all invited. It will be my funeral.’”

The Chaldean News first sat down with George a couple of months before the publication was launched in 2004 to write an article about the history of his family’s business and his contribution to the community. Always humble, he asked us not to publish the article, instead encouraging the Chaldean News to focus on stories about other people in the community.

Nine years later, he accepted our request to

highlight his career with no knowledge it would be the cover story.

## **GOT MILK!**

When Mike George first graduated from high school, he had no interest in the grocery business. “My father said to me you have two choices — you can go into the bread business or the milk business because during the Depression people were poor and always needed milk and bread,” George

recalled during that first interview in December 2003.

His father had been in the milk business in the 1940s during the Depression. Mike George ran the company until he joined the army in 1953, where he served for two years. His brother Sharkey took over until Mike returned from the service.

"I enjoyed being in business with Mike," said Sharkey George. "We always got along with each other. We made a success of Melody Farms and it became a big name in the dairy business. I love my brother and I wish him a happy birthday on his 80th birthday."

"We were distributing milk through Wilson Dairy at the time," recalled Mike George. "It was homogenized milk. There was no 2 percent or low-fat at the time. We added vitamin D to the milk and as a result we had the highest butterfat milk of all the competitors. The more fat the smoother the product."

In 1962 the name changed to Mello-D to compliment the smooth texture and the vitamin D, but they eventually changed the spelling to Melody Farms.

"It was very marketable and we able to create an advertising tune from the name," said George. "Melody Licious, Melody Light, Melody Delectable, Melody Farms!"

George's youngest son and namesake Michael was featured in many of the Melody Farms ads. The commercial increased the business dramatically and Melody Farms went from \$10 million to \$30 million in sales.

During this time, the Georges acquired several companies and distributors, eventually buying nearly 20 dairy companies. In the late 1990s, the George family bought Stroh's.

Although George never anticipating selling his dairy empire, the sale eventually occurred in 2003.

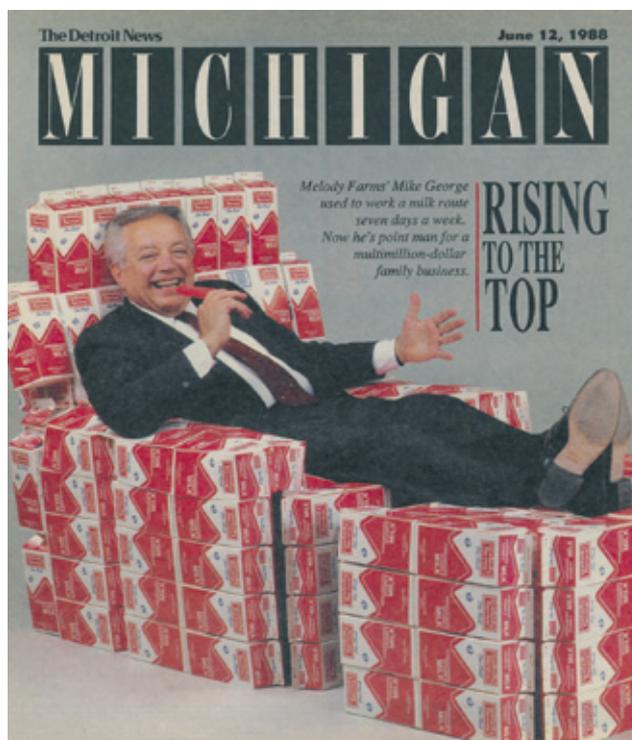
"We were always buyers," said George. "We were looking for additional production facilities because we needed more capacity to produce more products. We approached Dean's about buying their plant in Livonia and after several months of negotiating they decided not to sell. Several weeks later they came to us and wanted to buy our company. I was shocked."

#### ALL IN THE FAMILY

Selling the business was not something George anticipated. His sons and some nephews were active investors in the company. Mike and his wife Najat have six sons — Anthony, Bobby, Rodney, Lenne, Scott and Michael — and 10 grandchildren.

Bobby is the president of Pioneer Meats, Serv-Fresh Foods and Hot Pies and is also managing director of George Enterprises. He officially started working for the family after college but says the business lessons started young.

"From a very young age my father conditioned my brothers and I to be leaders," Bobby recalled. "He encouraged us to work at the retail level so we could better understand their operations. Then,



**"When I retire  
you are all  
invited. It will be  
my funeral."**

— MIKE GEORGE

when making the transition into manufacturing and distribution, it became easy to work with those retailers because we understood their business."

Son Rodney started working with his dad at age 9. "My brothers and I are very blessed to be working with my father and each other under my father's guidance," he said. "It doesn't get any better than that! My father has taught me to treat people

with respect, to be responsive and to take responsibility."

Scott's first position with the company was in 1988 working as a business developer for Melody Farms. "Working with my dad has helped me achieve my greatest accomplishments in my life," explained Scott. "He taught me the most important things in life such as hard work, discipline, respect, integrity and leadership. He taught me how to build relationships in the business world, so I can gain respect in the industry."

Each of his son shares the same sentiments of gratitude and admiration. "There are many traits that I have learned from my father," said Lenne. "One of the most valued is the importance of our family and the ways of the Chaldean culture as we knew it back then and today. All the years growing up with my dad I have noticed his honesty, which brings us to trust. I can go on and on about my dad."

Said Anthony, the eldest son, "When it came to my dreams he has never said no. He always told me to reach for my goals and pursue whatever I wanted in life. He has always backed me up in everything that I have done and has supported me as I worked my way up from the bottom."

When the family finally sold Melody Farms, the timing to sell was optimal. The sons were groomed to move onto the next level and the industry was on the cusp of change.

As a savvy businessman, George evaluated the marketplace and realized the big box stores were squeezing out some of the independents, who were his customer base.

"Our business was built on relationships," said George. "Our customers were re-inventing them-

## A Lasting Legacy

Mike George has made an impact on the lives of hundreds, if not thousands, of people over the years. A few share their memorable moments and birthday wishes.

I would like to wish Mike George all good things, health, holiness and peace. It is good to see him continue his dedication to the community even after his 80th birthday. He is a man of service to all without preference. We thank him profoundly for the many services he has offered to all of us.

— Bishop Ibrahim Ibrahim  
Chaldean Catholic Diocese

Mike George's many contributions to the Chaldean community, and to the state of Michigan, have had a great impact over the years. From Melody Farms to his numerous real estate investments and philanthropic work, he is helping revitalize Detroit, which is essential to the reinvention of Michigan. On behalf of all Michiganders, I wish Mike George a very happy 80th birthday, and many more.

— Rick Snyder  
Governor of Michigan

Mike George's story is a quintessential American story — he is a treasure of our community. He has long been an important mentor to many men and women in our great community, and his leadership, wisdom and generous heart have endeared him to people of all faiths and backgrounds. We all wish him a happy and healthy 80th birthday.

— Gerald E. Rosen  
Chief Judge, U.S. District Court

Mr. George has been a trailblazer in the food industry and the Chaldean community. From his service in the United States military to ownership of Melody Farms to his willingness to help get people into business, he has been a great example and role model for people to follow, look up to and emulate.

— Auday Arabo  
President and CEO, AFPD

I heard about Mike George before I had the privilege of meeting him. His reputation within the entire community was a person who was very innovative, had high integrity and character, and was an outstanding businessman who cared deeply about his community. Years before I ran for public office, I had the chance to meet and watch him. I learned how he was instrumental in causing so many young businesspeople within his community get a start. Because of his capacity of wanting to help others more than himself he singlehandedly, in my view, helped create the small businesses that lead to larger businesses. He created a culture of encouraging those who began their businesses working long hours in their stores or gas stations to work with and use suppliers of businesses from within their community. He encouraged those businesses to hire outside their own ethnic affiliation and thus, in my view, helped establish a good overall community relationship. As mayor, I had privilege of working with him, seeking his advice when issues came up and needing a resolution that would be fair and just. My only surprise is that Mike is celebrat-

MR. GEORGE continued on page 22

LEGACY continued on page 23



As a soldier in the Korean War



The Way They Were: Najat and Mike in the beginning and decades later.

## Uncle Mike goes Ivy League

BY MICHAEL SARAFI

It was winter of 1992. The note said, “Call Bernie. Your Uncle Mike is coming to Philadelphia and wants to take you to dinner. Mom.”

I was in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania and this message was left for me at the college building where I both worked and studied. It was the only way my mom could get a hold of me.

So I did as she said and was thrilled for the chance to see my uncle on his business trip to Philly. He would arrive on a Monday afternoon for a Tuesday morning meeting and could have dinner with me on Monday night.

But there was a problem. Monday evening was our seminar night where we had guest speakers in the areas of finance, policy, government and business. Speakers at the time included people like the incoming Mayor of Philadelphia Ed Rendell and U.S. Senator Arlen Specter. For each session, a one-page paper was required. Not only did I have to attend as a student but I was also in charge of arranging the pizza and soda (no one called it pop in Pennsylvania).

I explained the dilemma to my director, which led to a long conversation about my Uncle Mike, Melody Farms and Chaldeans. My program

director was fascinated and wanted to know more. So I called Bernie again and she faxed over some biographical information and old newspaper articles. (This was well before email and Google.)

My director emerged from his office that afternoon with an idea. The session scheduled for later in the semester on “the Entrepreneur as Leader” would be moved up to that Monday. The guest speaker would be Mike George.

“That’s crazy,” I said. “He never went to college and he won’t do it anyway.”

After a flurry of phone calls back and forth, it was settled. The invitation from my uncle to join him for dinner turned into an invitation for him to address the Monday evening seminar at the Fels Center of Government on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania.

By that Monday afternoon, my initial excitement was overtaken by overwhelming nervousness. What if he wasn’t prepared? What if he told an off-color joke? What if the idea was a flop? “Relax,” one of my co-students said. “It will be fine.”

And it was. He showed up in a perfectly tailored suit with a fresh white shirt and cufflinks. Like always, his nails were manicured and shoes were polished.

While he did start with an off-color joke, it was only a matter of time before he had them eating from his hands. Men and women between the ages of 22 and 35 from among the best colleges in the country were regaled with his story of life on a milk truck, selling moonshine, military service in Korea and the importance of humility. His massive presence, genuine humility and gushing charisma were on full display.

Of course, all the ladies loved him. “He’s so cute,” one said. “Now I know where you get the long eyelashes from.” (I tried to leverage this later in the evening to no avail. Back then I still had a full head of hair and a mustache. I looked more like a member of Al-Qaeda than his nephew.)

The one-page papers the next day were a pleasure to read. Most, but not all, were extremely positive about his remarks and the lessons he tried to convey. I mailed the entire set to his office. Much later when I had returned home, my Aunt Najat told me that she thought that the papers that were a little critical of Mike were funny. She told me those were the ones Uncle Mike was most interested in reading.

“That’s,” she said, “how he learns.”

MR. GEORGE *continued from page 21*

selves and going into different businesses.”

Dean Food, based in Texas, eventually purchased Melody Farms from the George family. Mike George sold the business much like he had done business over the previous five decades, with a handshake.

“We went to the closing without a purchasing agreement,” said George. “They wanted to write a purchase agreement and we told them, ‘go ahead but we did not need it.’ A contract can be broken but you can’t break your word.”

### DAIRY FREE

George not only made the decision to sell based on the economic climate but he was concerned about the community. “Most of our people didn’t choose their profession at the time we were building our business,” he said. “They did not have a choice to go into the grocery business. Our people are true entrepreneurs. They know how to re-invent themselves. They take risks.”

True to his words, George has not retired. He has been running his many other ventures with the family. They have many entities including food, manufacturing, technology, health and fitness, real estate, warehousing, entertainment and philanthropy.

The most active companies are Champion Wholesale (warehouse fresh meat, deli and flowers); ServFresh Foods (processor of deli trays); Pioneer Meats (ready-to-eat meat and deli products), UrthTech (natural disinfectants) and Port Atwater Parking (a commercial parking deck).

George has also dedicated countless hours to helping other entrepreneurs, charitable organizations and community projects. Never asking for recognition or even a thank you, others have realized the impact he has had on the community. He is not only been a business leader, but an advocate for the community. He has been involved with community and charitable affairs for decades, “which have been very gratifying,” he noted.

“My dad was instrumental in establishing the Bank of Michigan and Shenandoah Country Club as well as uniting all the charitable organizations within the community with the intent to ensure that the Chaldean community has a strong identity and voice among the masses,” said Michael George



**Mike and Najat surrounded by their sons: Bobby, Anthony, Michael, Scott, Lenne and Rodney**



**Mike George strikes a familiar pose**

II. “When I was young, I didn’t always understand why my dad spent so much time on community projects. His efforts and beliefs have paid off; they have taught me the importance of helping our community prosper and succeed.”

A man with a true sense of pride and humility, Mike George said, “Business is simple, we make it complicated.”

He credits his success of being able to build a multimillion-dollar company from a truck and a route to three simple rules: always tell the truth, treat people with respect and be responsive. “In the end, it is not about price. It is about the relationships you build over the years.”

#### KEEPING UP WITH THE TIMES

Born in a time where getting mail meant walking to a mailbox and cell phones seemed as unimaginable as flying to the moon, Mike George is quite tech savvy today. “You can’t do business with the technology,” he said. “I have a Smart Phone, I-Pad, an administrative assistant equipped with technology and a group of professional instructors always willing to assist.”

Over the years, generations of businessmen and

women have sought his advice. “Life is simple if you just remember to always be truthful and responsive,” he said. “Exaggeration and unfounded perception turn to rumors that can literally destroy people. Follow through timely on your commitments. Do not procrastinate. The success of our companies has been and still is one word: responsiveness. When you respond timely and truthfully, you inherit creditability.”

He has made lasting impressions on all who have known him because as he has shown and explained, he always has good intentions.

“My husband Michael has been a blessing to me,” said Najat. “When I count my blessings, I always thank the Lord for him. He is the most important part of my warm and treasured memories. I hold him in my heart because he has always made me feel on top of the world. I love him dearly and I am proud of him. I am grateful to be able to celebrate his 80th birthday with him.”

“It is more important to my family and to me that we leave an everlasting impression,” said George, “an impression as having conducted our lives with honesty and integrity and doing works that have benefited our community.” 🐾

## THE WOMAN BEHIND THE BUSINESSMAN

Bernie Garmo went to work for Michael George as a temp, filling in for a secretary who was on vacation. Forty-two years later, she’s still there.

“I was afraid of him,” Garmo admitted. “He was so inspirational and so nice and down-to-earth, but he is so magnificent that I thought, how will I ever last? He was so meticulous and well educated and all that stuff and I felt like a little peon – but he never treated me that way.”

Despite their four decades together, Garmo has never stopped calling her boss Mr. George. “Sometimes people call and ask for Mike and I said, ‘oh, you mean Mr. George,’” she said. “When he and his wife celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary, I had a plaque made that said, Happy Anniversary Najat and Mr. George. The lady I ordered it from said, ‘what!’”

In addition to her secretarial duties, Garmo spent a lot of time babysitting the George children. “I used to be the kids’ sub-mother,” she laughed. “Now I work for them — but don’t think I’m going to call THEM Mr. George.”

Garmo, who turns 69 this month, has no plans to slow down. “If he’s still here or the family is here and they allow me to work I’ll be here,” she said. “I don’t mind coming into work every day. I’ve never had a bad time. It’s an experience and honor to work for Mr. George.”

– Joyce Wiswell



## LEGACY *continued from page 21*

ing his 80th birthday — his personal activity and staying involved within the total community would cause most to think he is considerably younger.

– Dennis W. Archer

*Former Mayor of Detroit*

*Chairman Emeritus, Dickinson Wright PLLC*

He is an altruistic role model emphasizing humility and ethics in both business and his personal life. I have had the privilege of attending business meetings as well as social and political gatherings with my father and am perpetually astonished by the respect he both offers and receives; he has a truly remarkable gift of eloquence which lends itself to his continual success. I always loved and admired his entrepreneurial spirit and ingenuity and I believe he has given me the foundation and insight which compels me to get up every morning motivated and ready to take on life’s daily challenges. I still look forward to working with my father every day and it continues to be a very gratifying experience. If I could put what it was like working with my father in one word, it would have to be .... motivating!

– Son Bobby George

Mike George was quite instrumental in my career path decision in 1976 to become a lender and very influential when I was making a decision to come to the Bank of Michigan in 2005. Over the last 35 years, we ultimately worked closely on hundreds of loans that were referred to the bank. Many of the earlier loans were to new entrepreneurs purchasing their very first stores, approved only because Mike George was willing to guarantee them. Integrity was and is so important to Mr. George; his guaranty was oftentimes pledged on just a handshake. He is a true gentleman, a man of honor and my own life has been enhanced by knowing him.

– Cindy Jensen

*Loan Officer, Bank of Michigan*

Mike George has been a trusted friend and great neighbor. He has been a mentor not only to us but to the entire Chaldean community. We wish a very Happy 80th Birthday and we know his legacy will carry on forever.

– Tom, Jean, Terry, Ronnie,

*Larry and John Farida*

*Independent Retailers;*

*Longtime Friends and Neighbors*

Our community is blessed to have Mike George. Never have I met a man so caring and passionate about helping others. He has taught us the importance of serving and continues to lead by example, always in a humble way.

– Martin Manna

*President, Chaldean American*

*Chamber of Commerce*

The past 34 years of my relationship with Mike have had a most positive and impactful influence on my life. Never once have I ever regretted joining the Melody Farms team. He has been a wonderful teacher by both words and most importantly by his actions. No matter how difficult the situation he would say, “always tell the truth, it works every time.” I have always tried to maintain this approach. His unselfish commitment to the Chaldean community is admired by all. He certainly has a remarkable legacy and his family and I could not be more proud.

– Bill Fowler

*Former Associate*