

A FAMILY'S FORTUNES, PART II In The Blood

By Rob Johnson

It's fair to say that for most of us, a job is something we do, not who we are. However capably or passionately we may perform the jobs that earn us a living, when we're away from work, we're truly *away*. With the exception of those occasional troublesome days, our job has little carryover into our private life.

Then there are those whose jobs *do* define them—people who can't readily “switch off.” For instance, when a doctor is enjoying an evening at a nice restaurant and another diner suddenly begins choking, the doctor is still a doctor, and will put his training and experience to work. He is a doctor *all the time*, no matter where he is.

There are a couple of other jobs that fall squarely in the latter category: Parent and business owner. Both are unrelenting. Those who've had children know that they are parents all the time, everywhere, no matter how old their kids. The same goes for the business owner. The success or failure of his enterprise may depend on him and him alone, so rare is the day that it isn't on his mind morning, noon and night.

But what happens when you *combine* the jobs of parent and business owner? And not just a parent who happens to also own a business, but a parent whose family *is* the business? What would happen if family and work were virtually one and the same, the one so enmeshed in the other that they became indistinguishable?

It is precisely that kind of symbiosis that marked the era of Bashas' history that began in 1932 when brothers Ike and Eddie Basha opened the first Bashas' store. Though patriarch Najeeb Basha had passed away earlier in the year, his widow, Najeeby, would live for many more years, and would be a steady and constant force in her sons' new venture. Ike and Eddie's six sisters all played key roles, too. And through the ensuing years, no matter whatever other interests any of the siblings pursued, they were drawn together by the business as surely as they were drawn together by blood. Bashas', the grocery chain, was the living embodiment of the family's resourcefulness and drive, a manifestation of their philosophy about how to treat and serve others.

And there was never, ever, an off switch.

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At the end of Part I, Eddie and Ike Basha had just bought a post office/general merchandise store in the community of Goodyear (later known as Ocotillo), five miles south of Chandler. Although their father had opened a general merchandise store on Boston Street in Chandler in 1920, the Ocotillo location was the first store with the family name on it.

This first store, which was on the property of a large cotton and farming company, had a built-in customer base of farm workers and company directors, so it enjoyed some success right from the start. The family had incurred great debt due to Najeeb's protracted illness, his inability to work and subsequent funeral expenses, but the new business came to the rescue and began to turn things around.

The family's increasing financial stability made Eddie a very eligible bachelor, and before long he convinced the parents of a young woman named Esma Abraham that their daughter should be his wife. Though Eddie and Esma originally intended to live in a home they were building in Ocotillo, things changed. Eddie remained very drawn to his family, and for her part, Najeeby was perpetually concerned about her son's diet and health, as he had only one kidney. Those two facts, combined with the large size of the original Basha family home, resulted in Eddie scuttling plans for the Ocotillo house and instead taking his new bride to live with the rest of the family—a repeat of what his father had done decades earlier in New York when he'd married Najeeby.

The names of Najeeby's children, in order, were Edna, Mary, Ike, Laurice, Eddie, Camille, Connie and Zelma. To a greater or lesser extent, all played a role in the daily operation of Bashas' in those early years, and each brought something unique to the company. We'll speak more about how the duties broke down later, but it was Camille who, in 1936, made a key suggestion that permanently changed the direction of Bashas'.

As we've learned, the Ocotillo Bashas', like the older family store on Boston Street, was primarily a general merchandise store, not a grocery store. It was about two-thirds dry goods, with a little grocery mixed in. The final third of the store was partitioned off for furniture. Though it performed reasonably well, business could have been better. Camille, who played a major role at the Boston Street store, took a look at the situation and suggested to her brothers that they rent out the third devoted to furniture and turn the rest into grocery. They listened, and the company's course was set. The Boston Street store also converted to groceries, and adopted the Bashas' name. Suddenly, Bashas' was a two-store grocery chain.

And just as suddenly, Bashas' found itself in fierce competition for the first time in its history. A Chinese grocery store that was across the street from the Boston Street store had claimed most of the grocery trade in the area, but because Bashas' was already becoming known for its congeniality, this competitor began losing business. To counteract the lost sales, the Chinese grocery did what, at that time, was unthinkable: it opened on Sundays. Not to be one-upped, Ike began opening Bashas' on Sundays, too, forcing the family into working every day of the week. The Chandler City Council had a meeting, though, and decided that the Sabbath should be a day of rest, so the rival stores had to close on that day. The family actually was relieved, as they could go back to entertaining the many friends and relatives who'd come to their home (and stay for dinner) every Sunday.

On July 7, 1936, a new Bashas' store opened in Mesa, with Connie at the helm. It marked the business's first expansion, and the first foray into a different town. The downtown Mesa store, on Main Street, resembled many stores of that era in that it featured an open front, with the register (yes, just one) near the entrance. During winter there was no way to keep out the frigid breezes that could numb a cashier's fingers, and in summertime the only relief from the heat was to keep a cold drink nearby. Watermelon deliveries were particularly welcome during the hot months. The melons came right through the front door via a "watermelon brigade" in which they were tossed from person to person all the way from the truck to the vegetable counter. Not every watermelon survived the trip, and the store's staff would enjoy the casualties.

Najeeby continued to contribute in a big way. Three times a week, she and Eddie would get in a pickup truck before dawn and travel to the wholesale produce market in Phoenix. Najeeby—a woman who could neither read nor write—would walk from stall to stall and skillfully negotiate with the vendors until she obtained the best price for the highest-quality produce. It was a completely unscientific process, with Najeeby relying on nothing more than experience and instinct when it came to quantities and selection. She knew what would sell, she recognized quality, and she knew how much she needed to buy. As more markets opened, the pickup was replaced by a bigger truck, and then a bigger one. But Najeeby kept doing the produce ordering.

Once the Basha family decided to get into groceries, they committed themselves to doing it right. Each family member realized that holding customers in high regard wasn't just the right thing to do, it was also good for business. They were eager to please, they worked long hours, and they kept prices low and quality high. And it paid off. Business flourished, and before long, the stores sold groceries exclusively.

The eight Basha children—now all young adults—very much enjoyed having their mother play a major role in both their business and private lives. Though her watchfulness could chafe a bit sometimes, it only served to reinforce to them how much she loved them. She mixed discipline with fairness, caution with compassion.

But Najeeby had her limits.

Among the early customers of Bashas' was famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who had established a school a few miles east of Chandler. Students from all over the country flocked to the school, bringing with them their artistic demeanor, their big-city customs, their fashionable clothing . . . and their somewhat looser interpretation of morality. The Basha girls often were invited to join the students for sing-alongs and parties, which was a thrill for them—until Najeeby showed up one night and got an eyeful of Wright's students who, to her, looked like extras from a Hollywood movie. She snatched her daughters back home and the partying ended.

On August 24, 1937, Eddie and Esma had a baby—a boy with curly, honey-colored hair and brown eyes whom they named "Junior." He was a delight to his parents, grandmother, uncle and aunts, and all took turns caring for him.

As Najeeby aged, summers in the Valley became more and more unendurable to her. The family bought a summer place in Iron Springs, near Prescott, where they would spend many happy summers for years to come. Strangely enough, the family's misfortunes with fire (chronicled in Part I) continued, and in 1941 their cabin burned down when lightning struck a nearby tree. They rebuilt the place, though, using windows, doors, bathroom fixtures and other odds and ends from their Chandler home, which they were remodeling at the time. Naturally, that endeared the cabin to them all the more.

Business had been increasing steadily when World War II arrived. Ike was called to duty, but Eddie, who had just one kidney, was not. Najeeby was brokenhearted over Ike's absence. He was far away and she could do little for him, but she made up for it the best she could by inviting servicemen from the surrounding air bases to the house for dinner and chauffeuring them to various destinations when they lacked transportation.

On account of both his grocery industry experience and intelligence, Ike, who was in the Army's Engineering Corps, was selected for officer training school in the Quartermaster Division, where he would acquire supplies. He ended up in Brazil, where he earned a reputation for honesty and integrity, and was known for never accepting the numerous bribes suppliers offered him. On account of that reputation, even after the war ended, the Army constantly would ask Ike to return, promising him promotions. But Bashas' was too strong a draw, and he refused.

Eddie and Ike turned out to have two very different personalities, and they complemented each other wonderfully. Eddie was the explorer, a venturesome man who was intrigued by new ideas and possibilities. Ike was more conservative and valued stability. Eddie would start things; Ike would follow up. Eddie wanted expansion; Ike ensured that prudence accompanied growth. Their sisters did their share, too. Laurice became the grocery buyer, and did so well that trade magazines listed her as one of the nation's best. Camille was the bookkeeper and banker. Connie and Eddie's wife, Esma, used their winning personalities to work customer service wonders in the stores.

On February 23, 1945, little Eddie Jr., now seven, got a sister named Karen. Later that year, while Najeeby and some of her daughters were up at Iron Springs—with no phone or radio—they heard guns firing, horns honking and people screaming. When they ran outside, they learned that the war had ended. Najeeby was thrilled, because it meant Ike was coming home.

In 1946, Ike married an Irish girl, Mary O'Shea, whom he'd met in Chicago after he graduated from officer training school.

During this era, the big Chandler house was a Mecca for friends, family and business associates. Guests ran the gamut: company presidents, suppliers, servicemen, Native Americans from nearby reservations, customers. If there was a line between business and family, nobody in the Basha household knew about it.

Bashas' reputation for charity can be traced to this time, too, and it started with Najeeby. By the time of the Great Depression, the homeless already knew that they could get food at the Basha household. Najeeby also donated heavily to the Catholic Church, providing it with several statues and windows around Arizona. Nuns and priests who visited 332 North Washington Street never left hungry or empty-handed. The church always had poinsettias at Christmas and lilies at Easter.

In August of 1949, while at Iron Springs, Najeeby became seriously ill. Eddie had doctors visit her, and they decided she needed to be treated in Los Angeles. As it turned out, Najeeby had an enlarged heart—an almost poetic affliction for such a loving woman. Her ailment meant that she couldn't withstand the altitude at Irons Springs anymore, so that chapter came to a close. To keep Najeeby comfortable once she was back in Chandler, they finally installed air conditioning in the house.

But in spite of the air conditioning, Najeeby still didn't like the Arizona summers. In 1951, Eddie, who was familiar with California, found his mother a seaside home in the community of Emerald Bay, near Laguna Beach. She moved there, but ultimately decided to spend the winters back home in Chandler, allowing her youngest (and newly married) daughter, Zelma, to stay in the Emerald Bay house year-round.

It was now the mid-fifties, and Bashas' was growing. Hard work, quality merchandise and superior service were reaping dividends. More stores opened, and smaller stores were converting to the exciting new supermarket format. Trucks were added to the fleet, and more non-family members were put in charge of various functions. The stores adopted a uniform color (apple green) and gained new amenities: rotisseries, refrigerated produce cases, frozen food cases and others. Ike did the meat buying and Laurice continued in her role as grocery buyer, but others now were hired to acquire produce. Camille was still the bookkeeper.

During this time, Ike experienced some excruciating pain in his back, and Eddie rushed him to Los Angeles. Eddie evaded his family's direct questions about the diagnosis. After Ike recuperated, he returned to his family and the grocery chain. Unfortunately, in 1957, Ike's health again deteriorated, this time rapidly, and several trips to California ensued. Eddie was with him constantly, but the family remained in the dark as to the nature of his illness—or its gravity. Ike came home for the final time in early February of 1958, celebrated his 50th birthday on the ninth, then passed away on the 27th.

Everyone who knew Ike was grief-stricken. Indeed, even the Chandler priest who officiated at the funeral could not complete the service, and had to be replaced. The family, reeling from the loss, eventually learned that Eddie had been taking his brother to California for cancer treatments. Throughout the four years of Ike's treatments, Eddie had guarded the secret closely, hoping for the best and not wanting to worry his family.

Ike left behind his young wife, Mary, and five children, the youngest of whom, Johnny, was just four years old. The entire Basha family was devastated, and Najeeby's old worries about the health of her only remaining son were rekindled.

As the fifties came to an end, the world changed rapidly. The U.S.S.R. launched Sputnik—and the space race—in 1957. In the two years between 1955 and 1957, the record-buying public shoved aside tame tunes such as “The Yellow Rose of Texas” and “Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing” in favor of a new sound popularized by a kid named Elvis in songs like “Blue Suede Shoes” and “Hound Dog.” In 1958, the U.S. nuclear submarine *Nautilus* passed under the North Pole. NASA was established. 1960 witnessed the Francis Gary Powers U-2 spy plane incident.

With Ike's passing, it was inevitable that Eddie's enterprising spirit would emerge. He steered the grocery chain onto a more aggressive path, seemingly in keeping with the go-go spirit of the times. His aim was to make Bashas' more self-sufficient, relying less on outside suppliers. He had encouraged each of his sisters to buy acreage in Blythe, California, so that he could grow citrus for the stores. Eddie himself oversaw the purchase of a dairy farm in Corona so that Bashas' could supply its own milk.

The Corona farm contained four homes, as well as barns and office buildings. To keep an eye on dairy operations, Eddie moved into one of the homes.

As the weather got hot that year, Najeeby—who missed Eddie terribly—decided that instead of making the usual trip to Emerald Bay, she would move to one of the homes on the Corona property so that she could cook proper meals for her boy. That arrangement continued for a few years, until Najeeby moved to a home she'd bought in Scottsdale. The house was smaller, quieter and less frequented by the crush of guests who regularly appeared at the Chandler house.

A few more years elapsed. Najeeby began to miss the big Chandler house where so much of her family's history had transpired. She moved back. Now in her late seventies, her health was deteriorating. She sometimes was beset by the old twin worries for both her children and the company, whose founding and growth had claimed the best years of their lives. Fortunately, many of her daughters lived nearby, and all would take turns checking on Najeeby and spending time with her.

In 1966, Zelma, the daughter who lived in the Emerald Bay house, came to visit Najeeby. She didn't look well to Zelma, so she stayed several weeks before returning home—only to have Eddie Sr. call and say that Najeeby wanted her back again. Some of Zelma's sisters joined her in staying with Najeeby, who now was bedridden and being tended by a nurse.

The house was nearly silent, a shadow of the raucous, joyous place it once had been. One morning, an ambulance took Najeeby to the hospital, where, in the company of her children, she passed away on September 23, 1966.

Najeeby left behind six daughters, one son, 21 grandchildren and several great-grandchildren. She was matriarch and guiding light, inspiration and wellspring of love and wisdom. The little Lebanese girl who once had peddled bits of lace to wealthy New Yorkers boasted a family that owned a grocery chain with stores located throughout one of the most dynamic and rapidly growing metropolitan areas in the country. She had moved from the Old World to the New West, from horses and buggies to the Space Age. The resourcefulness, ingenuity and common sense that had served her so well on the streets of New York she passed along to her children, and these traits formed the foundation of their success.

To Najeeby, the grocery chain was a member of the family as surely as if it were one of her children, its successes making her nearly as proud as Ike's achievements in the Army or Eddie's savvy decision-making. Bashas' was in her blood, and the blood of her boys and girls—a natural outgrowth of who they were and what they believed. Because of that, there was an almost seamless entrepreneurial continuity between Najeeb and Najeeby's first business efforts in New York, their store in Ray, the store they opened on Boston Street and the emergence of Bashas' as a grocery retailing force in Arizona.

The constant, of course, was family. In Part III, we'll explore how one of Najeeby's grandchildren, Eddie Jr., carried on the tradition and how the grocery chain, to this day, remains very much in the Basha family's blood.