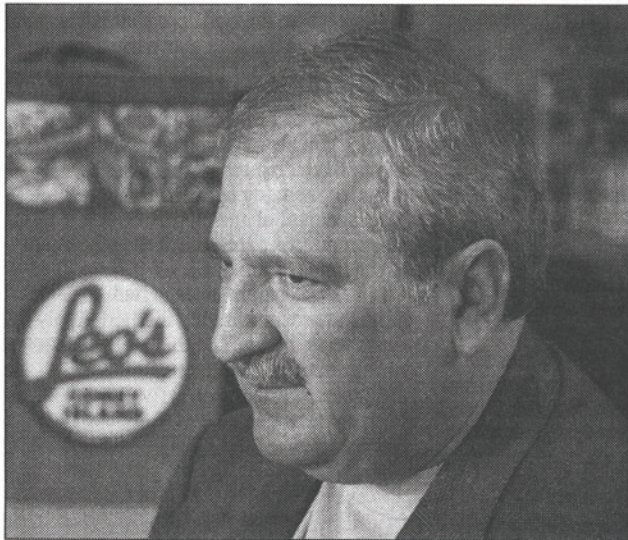


# FACES

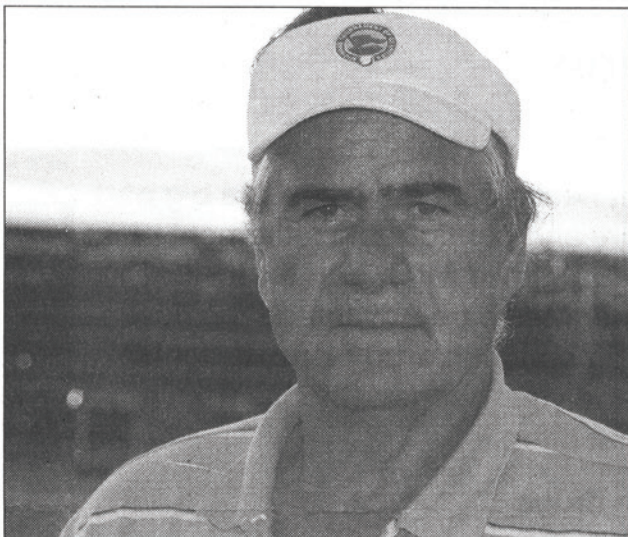


Greece native Leo Stassinopoulos of Farmington Hills owns 17 eateries and 13 franchises throughout metro Detroit.



Russell Ebeid of Bloomfield Hills is president of the glass group for Guardian Industries in Auburn Hills.

# OF SUCCESS



Bill Damas of Novi came to the United States from Crete in 1968. He now owns three companies in Wixom.



Rick Abdulla owns three metro Detroit gas stations, including two in Oakland County.

## Novi filmmaker focuses on metro Detroit's Greek-Americans and Arab-Americans

**L**ocal filmmaker Keith Famie is teaching metro Detroiters about the diversity of their communities.

The Novi resident and chef is set to release "Our Greek Story" and "Our Arab-American Story," two one-hour documentaries in a series about ethnic groups of metro Detroit. "Our Greek Story" will air 7 p.m. Saturday, and "Our Arab-American Story" will air 7 p.m. Dec. 15 on WXYZ-Channel 7.

"So many came without family, money or language, but they succeeded and became community leaders," Famie says about both sets of immigrants. "A lot of it is about perseverance. What can be learned from these elders?"

Metro Detroit has one of the largest populations of Arabs outside of the Middle East, the filmmaker adds. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, Dearborn is home to nearly 30,000 Arabs, making up 30 percent of the city's population.

The Arab community is diverse in itself, representing 22 countries which practice Islam and Christianity, Famie explains.

At a time of stereotyping and profiling, "Our Arab-American Story" helps dispel misunderstandings and gives Arab-Americans the chance to speak for themselves, Famie says.

Famie and his crew interviewed dozens of Greek and Arab-Americans in metro Detroit and filmed in Crete, Lebanon, Jordan and Dubai, visiting the native homes of several people featured in the films. The crew spent seven- to nine

months filming 65 to 80 hours for each one-hour show.

Novi resident Bill Damas' was born into a poor family in Crete. Nine people lived in a one-room hut without electricity or plumbing. Damas left school in sixth grade to work and help support his family. In 1968 at age 19, he came alone to the United States.

Starting as a construction worker, he soon became a subcontractor and later started his own construction company, Dial Construction in Wixom.

As he earned money, he sent financial assistance back home and helped his parents, two of his sisters and two brothers come to America. Today, his four college-educated children work with him at Dial; DS Properties LLC, a property management firm in Wixom; and Acropolis Restaurant in Wixom.

"I'm always telling people there is no greater place than the United States," says Damas, 59.

Leo's Coney Island founder

Leo Stassinopoulos has a similar story. He, too, left his native Greece with nothing at age 18. After working at meat factories in Windsor and Detroit, he began helping his older brother, Peter, in a Southfield Coney Island restaurant. He learned about the business and opened his

first restaurant in 1979. Today, he owns 17 eateries with his brother and another 13 franchises.

"To me, this is the land of opportunity," says the Farmington Hills resident. "But you have to work hard, be business-wise and get along with employees and the public. It's not easy."

Others profiled in the Famie's films were children when their parents came to America seeking a better life. The second generation often is even more successful than the first.

Among them is Rick Abdulla, 41, who owns three metro Detroit gas stations, including two in Oakland County. The Dearborn resident was born in Yemen in a rural home without electricity or plumbing. His father immigrated to Detroit in 1968 and sent for his family seven years later after finding work as a housekeeper in a Southfield hotel.

"We're not all ter-

rorists," Abdulla says. "We're here just like you — to have a better life, to go to school and to practice our religion."

Business executive Russell Ebeid, 67, of Bloomfield Hills is another example of a second-generation immigrant. President of the glass group for Guardian Industries, an Auburn Hills-based multinational group of companies, he is a lead sponsor for "Our Arab-American Story."

In the 1920s, his father left a job as a laborer in Lebanon to come to America. He learned the tool-and-dye trade and went to work for Ford Motor Co. He then returned to his native country to find a wife. When he came back to Detroit with his new wife, she was pregnant.

"Both of my parents didn't graduate from high school," says Ebeid, "but they were tough workers. She worked full-time to (age) 83. Both had strong work ethics. Neither spoke English when they came, but they were nuts on our educations. Dad would sit over my shoulder when I did advanced math. He couldn't understand it, but he was there making sure I did it."

These are the third and fourth installments in Famie's film series about ethnic groups in metro Detroit.

Previously, "Our Italian Story" and "Our Polish Story" aired in December 2006 and June 2007. The first won three Michigan Emmy Awards. In 2008, Famie plans to complete films about the Jewish, Japanese and Indian communities.

Ultimately, he would like to do shows about all of the more than 20 ethnic groups in metro Detroit.

### FYI

"Our Greek Story," an hour-long documentary about the Greek community in metro Detroit, will air commercial-free at 7 p.m. Saturday on WXYZ-Channel 7. "Our Arab-American Story" is slated for 7 p.m. Dec. 15. The films were produced and directed by Novi resident Keith Famie and his Visionalist Entertainment Productions. They are part of the "Our Story Of" documentary series. Learn more at [www.ourstoryof.com](http://www.ourstoryof.com). "Flavors of Greece," a premiere party celebrating the music, art, dance and food of metro Detroit's Greek-American community, was held last week at Rock Financial Showplace, Novi. Tonight "Flavors of the Arab World" will take place at 5 p.m. in the Diamond Room of Rock Financial. A limited number of tickets at \$125 each are available by calling (248) 318-2534.

By **ELIZABETH H. VOSS**  
Of The Oakland Press