



Afghani television director Isshan Momman finds refuge in Napa Valley restoration project.

Celebrated Afghani Singer Finds Asylum Restoring Native Plants at Stagecoach Vineyard

Some mornings, master gardener Isshan Momman sits above the Napa Valley fog line, beside the acacia trees and watches the golden eagles fly across Stagecoach Vineyards as he thinks about God, his music and his escape from Afghanistan. Momman is one of 60,000 Afghan refugees living in California.

Dr. Jan Krupp recruited Momman, the rebab-playing, songwriting godsend with the green thumb who is now replanting over 2,000 native holly-leaf ceanothus among a 1108 acres plot of vineyard land, dirt and rock known as Stagecoach Vineyard.

But once upon a time, Momman produced, composed and sang Pashto music for Afghanistan TV. An A-Class singer who performed in Dubai, the U.A.E. and across Euro-Asia, his music led him to Pakistan where he lived, sang in movies and taught music for nine years.

“I was a singer,” he says. “I had fame.”

What brought him here?

“War.” He says it simply, with no resentment.

Momman’s songs rang out against the retooling of religion for political and economic purposes, and as his celebrity grew, so did the number (and prestige) of his enemies. When the Taliban decided he should be killed, Momman sought asylum with the American Embassy and fled to the U.S. on July 26, 2000. He didn’t know a word of English.

“I was blind and mute,” he says. Momman learned English while attending Truman College and translating his songs for classmates, for teachers, at parties and in churches welcoming all religions. He played the rebab and sang with the Silk Road Orchestra; he used his music to calm patients at a psychiatric hospital in Cumberland, CA. He met a sweet Virginia girl who played the piano and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. They wed. And somewhere in between the music and the romance, he found the time to take a master gardening course in Maryland.

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The couple relocated to California, where Momman began studying landscape design at Sonoma State University. He was working at DJ's Growing Place in Napa when he first met Dr. Krupp. Momman offered to carry a load of plants for Krupp. And during the short trek to his car, the pair discovered a shared passion for music, gardens and solving a problem organically.

Today, Krupp and Momman are working by hand to restore to Stagecoach Vineyard many of the rare riparian plants and shrubs that once flourished in the eastern hills above Napa Valley. Like holly-leaf ceanothus, the evergreen California lilac that grows in the volcanic chaparral slopes of Napa County's interior coastal ranges, and whose fragrant purple blossoms are resplendent in March and April.

When he's working the hills of Stagecoach Vineyards, Momman says he feels like he is living once again in his home country. "The mountains, the climate, the beauty," he says, "are those of Afghanistan." And he feels very lucky, because here he is allowed to worship God among nature. He works and worships, and while he no longer plays in an official band, he occasionally finds an audience in the golden eagles, the blue jays, the ceanothus and the vines of Stagecoach Vineyards.

"Music is my life and my love," he says.

Momman graduated from Sonoma State College this February. He also studies classical music at a small school in Sandersville, and he continues to play and compose music from home.

Link to Momman's music: <http://is.gd/ss6H>

Note: Dr. Jan Krupp has farmed Stagecoach Vineyard since 1991 from which he makes Krupp Brothers wines with Nigel Kinsman and Aaron Pott. His labels include: Veraison, Black Bart, Krupp Brothers, The Doctor, and The Bride.