

THE SOLAR SYSTEM OF RAFFI AGOPIAN

George Harrison of the Beatles summed it up pretty well: "Here comes the sun, here comes the sun, and I say it's all right." The sun is the symbol of hope, of new beginnings, of warmth and comfort. It represents strength and magnificence. The sun is also the best source of pure energy. Raffi Agopian, CEO of Martifer Solar USA Inc., is taking the concept of pure energy to another level. Solar has been redefined.

Text Vart Boyam | Photo Tigran Tovmasyan

Raffi Agopian is on the list of successful businesspeople who decided not to go down the college road. His life has been far from smooth but his present future has been full of dreams conquered. Raffi was born in Egypt but was raised in New York. His mother raised him on her own. He bounced around eight different schools which wasn't easy but Raffi said, "the experience helped me develop the ability and skill to make friends in any situation." One of the major differences between CEOs who succeed and those who don't is the ability to communicate with their staff, clients and vendors.



↑ Intricately designed panels in Descanso Gardens, California.

He had to be resourceful and independent from a very young age. Without the economic support of his father, Raffi's mother made the decision to place him in a Catholic boarding school while she worked tirelessly to make a good home for her family in America. "She would drop me off on Monday mornings and pick me up on Fridays," said Raffi. "I remember running to the swings, standing on them and swinging as high as I could so that I could see my mother over the fence as she walked away." He later attended an elite private school. In his early teens, Raffi moved to California to live closer to his father who he had not seen since he was six. He recalled, "When I was six, I remember being awoken by my mother as she said, 'Raffi, this is your

father.' I said, 'oh' and fell back to sleep. That was the last time I saw him before moving to California."

His superior academics helped him skip one year in high school. In the 11th grade he moved back to NYC. As he was registering for classes, the administrators did not allow him to enroll because they did not recognize the credits from his Californian high school due to skipping the 9th grade. Disappointed with their decision, Raffi decided to study for and receive his GED, and later his diploma. At the age of 18, Raffi moved back to California to pursue a career in the entertainment industry. He did not have much besides a plan and a dream; he wanted to build his own house. "I lived in an unfurnished loft in the garage of a friend, with a mattress, sheets, a blanket and my suitcase." He began working at a camera shop in Los Angeles, first as a stock boy but quickly moved up to sales. "A lot of my sales skills were gained in the eight years that I worked in the shop," explained Raffi. He then made the sale that would take him on a different path. "I sold camera equipment to a man in the entertainment industry. He was looking for a production assistant and offered me the position." Raffi slowly gained more hours at the company working mainly for 20th Century Fox. This was his foot in the door of the industry he had a goal to work in.

Not very long after he began working there, they asked that he develop a distribution network for electronic press

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The largest community-owned solar garden in the nation is located in Colorado.

kits that were distributed to television studios. After three years, he was laid off because the company's contract had expired. As a natural entrepreneur, he went to the heads of 20th Century Fox and proposed to be hired through his newly found company, Direct Video Distribution, which he owned for six years. Raffi now had enough money saved and began purchasing real estate. He also purchased land in the hills of Malibu in the hopes of building his home. In 1999, his dream began to flourish as he started to lay down the foundations to not only his house, but his family's home and his future in development and solar energy. He and his brother Andrew partnered up and created A&M Home Improvement. As they began remodeling homes throughout southern California, the two saw the potential in solar and began to train in solar installations. As the company began installing solar, A&M's name was among the top three in solar installation companies at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Raffi's perfectionist ways ensured that

each installation was done perfectly and the end product was clean and sharp. The company slowly began working on commercial installations. In 2004, solar incentives decreased throughout the nation causing a dramatic slowdown in people interested in installing solar. Raffi's investment assets allowed him to stay afloat while other solar companies went under. Raffi wanted more than just a boutique solar installation company. He wanted to do it all; engineering, procurement and construction, on a much larger scale. In 2007, he was approached by Martifer Solar, a global solar company under the umbrella of Martifer Group, a \$1.5 billion construction and renewables company. The company currently operates out of 15 countries. "I began looking for solar companies in California that were up for sale" said Ricardo Abecassis, President and Board member of Martifer Solar, Inc. "I met with a few that were larger in size but felt that their vision was not quiet in sync with ours. Raffi's name was given to me as well, so I approached him. We were really impressed by his



How Solar Power Works

The solar modules or panels absorb the sun's rays and convert them to direct current (DC) electricity. The inverter then turns DC into alternating current (AC) in order to make it usable in your home or business. The AC power that you saved from solar electricity is then sent back to your utility company and subtracted from your bill.



quality of work - it fit in with the high Martifer standards all of our companies meet," explained Ricardo. After long negotiations, Raffi decided to merge and took the title of CEO for the newly named company, Martifer Solar USA, Inc. with 50/50 partnership, where Raffi had full control of its destiny. "I asked Jorge Martins, Vice-CEO of Martifer Group, why he chose A&M, to which he said, 'Raffi, I didn't choose A&M, I chose you. We share the same goals and see the same future,'" said Raffi. "We knew that Raffi was a man of integrity and the way he approached the business was in line with the way we did, and still do," said Ricardo. "We take pride in the

individuals we hire to work for Martifer. The culture created in our companies is what drives our business." The initial agreement was for Raffi to grow the Californian market, but Raffi had bigger plans for his company. He soon branched out to Colorado and the Rocky Mountains area, as well as the east coast. These days, Martifer Solar USA is expanding its activities to Canada and will help grow that market as well. "Our goal is for Martifer Solar to be one of the top five engineering procurement and construction (EPC) companies and developers in the world," said Ricardo. "Martifer Solar USA is quickly approaching that goal in the U.S." The sun is massive. It would take 1.3 million earths to fill up the sun. What better way to use that energy besides solar energy? Raffi has teamed up with leaders in solar energy to reinvent the way people can utilize this energy. Martifer Solar USA has teamed up with Clean Energy Collective to engineer, procure and construct the nation's largest community owned solar garden located in Rifle County, Colorado. On a field equivalent to three football fields are over 3,500 modules producing over 1,800,000 kilowatt hours in their first year. The solar garden allows for those who use Holy Cross Utility to purchase as much or as little solar power as they wish, making solar more assessable. Martifer Solar USA works on residential, commercial, government and utility scale projects. The company landed a national

account with Hertz Rent-a-Car locations throughout the U.S. as well as Westfield Malls. Recently, the City of Pasadena and Pasadena Water and Power had a grand re-opening of their water plant. Above their reservoir, Windsor Reservoir, you will find a sea of solar modules installed by Martifer Solar USA. Solar energy will allow Pasadena to save money on maintaining their water plant. Raffi, who has a ground mount solar array in his backyard, sees solar as more than just a way of making a living. "It is important for us to protect our environment, especially for the future of our kids," said Raffi. "This industry is booming right now. I can just imagine what the future holds for solar and renewable energy." Martifer Solar USA has only scratched the surface of what is to be seen in the future. While most industries are laying off employees, Martifer Solar USA doubled the size of its full-time employees in 2011 and is expected to continue to hire in 2012. Each project that is contracted hires even more people outside of the full-time employees, like laborers, electricians, truck drivers and subcontractors. "The secret to owning and operating a successful company is to be persistent and to think ahead," explained Raffi. He attributes his persistence to his Armenian roots. "I didn't have a male figure to look up to and to learn from. I know that my hard work and attitude comes from the centuries of Armenians thirsting for something bigger and better." ■

(Left) Aurora Municipal Justice Building in Colorado. (Below) Westfield Fashion Square in Sherman Oaks, California.

