

WORLD CLASS

FIFTY-FIVE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL FOREIGN-BORN ATLANTANS

BY AMANDA K. BROWN
STEVE FENNESSY
TIAGO MOURA
PHAKISHA PETERSON
BETSY RILEY
CHANDRA R. THOMAS
KIMBERLY TURNER
ELIZABETH WESTBY

FAHED ABU-AKEL

>> ONE OF REVEREND Fahed Abu-Akel's earliest childhood memories is leaving his mother behind when he and his siblings fled Israel with their father in 1948, after war broke out between Arab nations in the region. The Palestinian Arab Christian family was eventually reunited, but that early trauma deeply impacted Abu-Akel, who came to the United States in 1966. Nearly forty years later, in 2002, he became the **first Palestinian Arab American elected head of the Presbyterian Church**—the first ever to lead a major

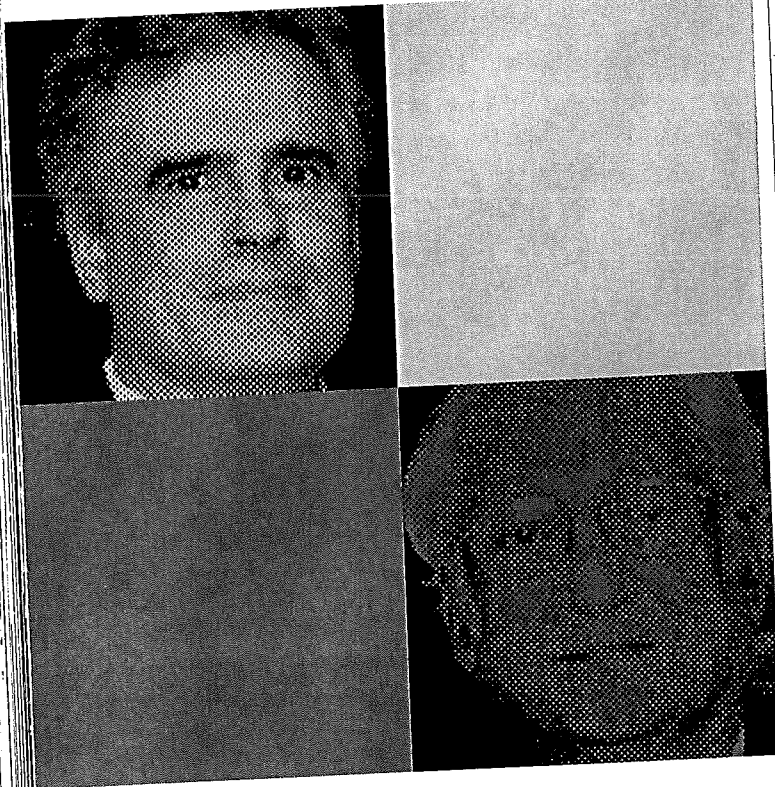
U.S. denomination. During his year-long tenure he advocated “unity in diversity” within the 2.3 million-member organization, an extension of his personal passion to spread awareness of Arab and Middle Eastern Christians. The former Interdenominational Theological Center world religion instructor now heads up missions at Atlanta’s Peachtree Presbyterian Church and directs a ministry with international students.

LUIS AGUILAR

>> AFTER LUIS AGUILAR left Cuba with his parents as

a teenager in 1961, his family traveled to Florida and Ohio before finally settling in Rome, Georgia. He was fascinated with the immigration and civil rights battles of the sixties: “Seeing all the marches, water hoses, and dogs, I wondered what was behind it all.” Inspired to study law, he enrolled at the University of Georgia School of Law in 1976.

Since graduation he has become a lawyer’s lawyer—named one of Georgia’s and America’s best lawyers multiple times by his peers. He has been a **partner at seemingly every silk stocking firm in town:**



TOP Luis Aguilar
BOTTOM Giriraj Rao

“The highly skilled workers who are critical to the business community have become a victim in the overall debate on immigration reform.”

—Daryl Buffenstein

1980s, back when nanoparticles were still called “small particles.” His work has contributed to Georgia Tech’s becoming a top-ranked institution in the study of nanocrystals, which store anything from energy to information on a subatomic level. “Research must be original, creative, and ambitious in order to become world-leading,” Wang says.

DARYL BUFFENSTEIN

>> WHEN DARYL BUFFENSTEIN began learning the ins and outs of immigration law thirty years ago, there were around 300 immigration attorneys in the entire country. Today, there are that many in metro Atlanta alone. Meanwhile, Buffenstein has seen the effects of the government’s schizophrenic policy toward foreigners. “Every governor since George Busbee has

been trying to bring foreign investment into Georgia,” Buffenstein says. “But just as the state is doing that, the federal government is slamming the door shut on the people who bring the money.”

At the Paul Hastings law firm, where he has become **one of the most influential immigration attorneys in the country**, Buffenstein helps clients navigate the Byzantine bureaucracy of American immigration law. “The highly skilled workers who are critical to the business community have become a victim in the overall debate on immigration reform,” he says. Buffenstein, who was born in what is present-day Zimbabwe, now lobbies lawmakers in Capitol Hill. “Being an immigrant myself made me sensitive to the issue.”

TOM CATHERALL

>> WHO COULD’VE DREAMED that a boy born the eldest of ten Irish Catholic children in Newcastle Upon Tyne, England, would grow up to **help create the hot dining scene in Atlanta?** Yet that’s been the destiny of Tom Catherall, who arrived in Atlanta twenty-six years ago after stints in resort hotels in the Channel Islands and West Indies. “I loved Atlanta when I first came here because the brick houses were similar to the houses in England, and it felt like home,” says the certified master chef, one of only sixty-one in the world. Today, Catherall’s Here to Serve banner hangs over eight of the city’s hippest, most popular eateries: Prime (the Lenox Square flagship), Strip, Posh, Shout, Twist, Goldfish, Noche, and a brand-new Italian concept,

Lola, located in Buckhead’s Terminus building.

SOCHEAT CHEA

>> SOCHEAT CHEA was only nine years old when his family fled Cambodia in 1975, just as the country came under the Communist rule of the Khmer Rouge. Now forty-one, he still remembers the sound of a grenade exploding across the street from his family’s apartment in Phnom Penh and seeing his neighbors bloodied and dying. Fortunately for Chea, his father worked alongside Colonel L. Brooks Martin, who was the senior military attaché at the U.S. embassy there. Martin arranged safe passage for the Chea family to the United States, where they settled outside Atlanta.

“In the beginning it was rough,” Chea says. “I never felt like I belonged. Atlanta back in 1975 was a very homogeneous society.” But at seventeen, Chea saw the film *Gandhi* and was inspired to become an attorney and work for justice. **With so many relatives who perished under Pol Pot’s regime, Chea wanted to make his life meaningful.** “It was more a redemption of my life. Why did I survive?”

In his Duluth practice, Chea has worked on more than 4,000 cases—cases of foreign-born residents who face deportation, cases of asylum, cases of families looking for their own American dream, as his did thirty years earlier. He’s headed up the local chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association and speaks frequently at national conventions. “It’s really not an economic thing to represent people,” he says. “You do it for the love of liberty.”