

# Casino stud and a gamer for life til' the wheels fall off the bike

Owner of the Bicycle Casino and four other operations in the state of California, Haig Kelegian won't be hanging his gloves up anytime soon.

Text **Manouk Akopyan** | Photo **Armen Poghosyan**



**F**rank Sinatra begins to serenade the room with the beloved standard “Fly Me to the Moon.” He and the rest of the Rat Pack were already staring us down from behind Haig Kelegian’s elongated desk, so it felt like only a matter of time before the framed legends hanging from the walls of his office at the Bicycle Casino would start to croon. But with all the aforementioned greats long gone, the audio comes by way of Kelegian’s cell phone ringtone. “Hi Johnny. How are you doing?” says Kelegian as he answers his iPhone. Looking around Kelegian’s second-story office as he takes his call, one could think it’s a ho-hum workspace, and not

immediately discern its annex – a fully furnished apartment, replete with an opulent Jacuzzi where its busy denizen can find a sanctuary after his long days at his desk. In addition to his family photos – he has four children and nine grandchildren – the premises are strewn with photos and paintings of classic Hollywood types, Los Angeles Lakers memorabilia and Armenian icons. A quote of William Saroyan vividly reads in the hallway. One-of-a-kind sculptures of Djivan Gasparyan and Komitas Vardapet (along with a bust), Armenian brandies, backgammon sets – you name it – are everywhere. If one didn’t know he

was one of California’s most prominent individuals in the gaming industry, he might be confused as an art and memorabilia broker. “How about two o’clock? Great, come to my office!” says Kelgian at the conclusion of his brief chat. “That was poker star Johnny Chan,” Kelegian resumes, as today, he welcomes yet another legendary client to the Bicycle Casino. If it’s not Chan today, it’s Phil Ivey, or Lakers owner Jerry Buss, among countless others that he welcomes on a daily basis to the card playground in Bell Gardens, Calif. And so business goes for the owner of the “The Bike,” who also manages or has ownership

interest in four other casinos and card clubs in the state and is universally considered as one of the most knowledgeable and experienced casino operators. In addition to The Bike, he also owns Ocean’s Eleven Casino (San Diego), Crystal Casino & Hotel (Los Angeles) and has ownership interests in Club One (Fresno) and Commerce Casino (Los Angeles). For Kelegian, a regular business day starts at 11 a.m., as he makes the 45-minute drive from his house in Newport Coast, an affluent area in which basketball icon Kobe Bryant also resides, to Bell Gardens. After he looks over emails, signs paperwork and his

management team consults with him, he plays a little bit of poker, and then goes home. On his “days off,” you can find him swinging his clubs on the golf course. “I’ve enjoyed a very exciting business that’s been profitable and has put me in contact with all kinds of people from all different walks of life,” he says. “It’s a business that’s 24-7. I always tell people: find a business that will make money while you are sleeping. But more importantly, find a business or a profession that you enjoy doing. In all of his writing, William Saroyan tried to make that point. Hard work overcomes a certain lack of ability.”

Ability is certainly not a quality that Kelegian lacks. As a matter of fact, he simply has too many as his personal, professional and business acumen can be conveyed all the way into our next issue. His life and career took a turn for the good and never looked back in 1983, when he and a handful of other close Armenian friends initially invested \$100,000 into the opening of Commerce Casino. Having to overcome monetary problems and going broke in just its first month of operation, Kelegian sprang forth as the most qualified of the bunch to save their baby. Despite having never been involved in gambling, his prior experience handling several other businesses and

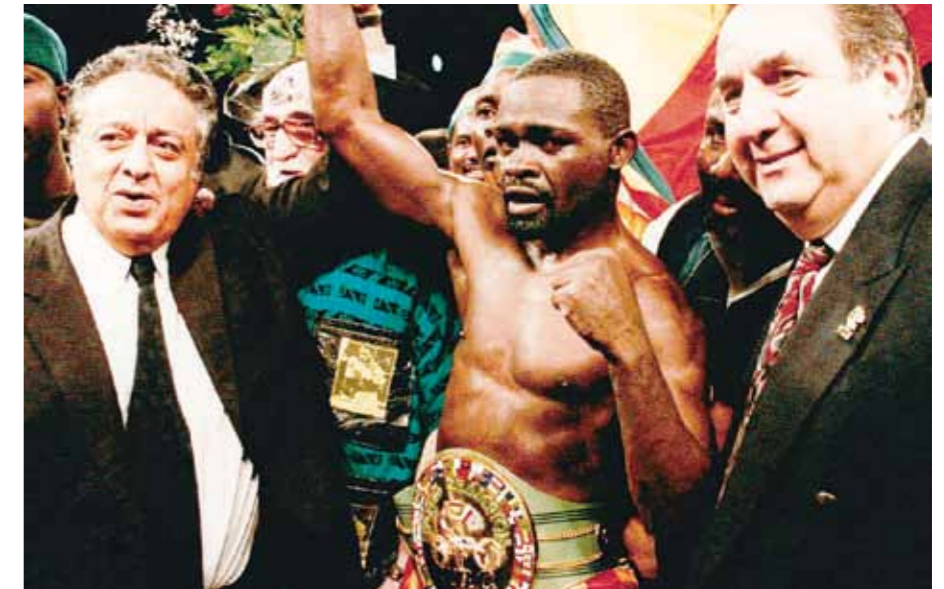
the ability to decipher financial statements proved to be the wild card. Twenty-eight years later, Kelegian, along with his sons Mark and Haig Jr., are serious players in the California gambling scene and the only deterrent to business now, compared to his rookie days at Commerce, is the overall financial crisis of the country. When asked if today's struggling economy has hindered net growth and profit for any of his five operations, Kelegian says, "Our business is down, just like everyone else in the recession, it's just that it's not down that bad. I don't think casinos are recession proof. We are able to make adjustments because we don't have product, we don't have inventory. We just have to make changes in operations and keep ourselves profitable," he says. "The most important

thing is that you have to develop employee relationships in which they are members of a team that keep the business operating on a fair and square basis. I basically operate a business that the customer is always right – except at the gaming table." Kelegian recently built what he calls "the finest poker facility in the world," a 10,000 square-foot arena at The Bike that plays hosts to the World Poker Tour (WPT), the North American Poker Tour (NAPT) and countless other sought after and celebrity-filled tournaments. Kelegian says he would have already joined the likes of Kirk Kerkorian and Alex Yemendjian in Las Vegas' Armenian casino owners club and expanded into an operation, but a California law prohibits licensed casino operators like him to delve into the lucrative world of Sin City.

"If you are licensed in the state, you cannot do business anyplace else in the world. It is totally unconstitutional and wrong, but it was a law put in place many years ago and we have not been able to change it. My sons are licensed, so they also can't invest. We are always working towards changing it; but we have a lot of opposition." Kelegian is a man all about respect. With a Godfather-like presence, a deep voice and a stern and unyielding look in his eyes, he commands it as well. He was born in West Allis, a suburb of Wisconsin. His father emigrated from Kirason, Turkey to Milwaukee in 1919 at the age of 19. His mother was born in Racine, Wisconsin; her mother was born in Adana, her father in Kharpert. At the age of 20, he did a two-year military term in the U.S. Army.

Kelegian recalls shooting dice and losing all of his money on a ship that was headed over for war in Korea. Desperate and in a bind, a fellow Armenian overheard him calling out dice numbers in Armenian and bankrolled him so he could win his money back. Nowadays at his casinos, it's a total 180. "There are lots of Armenians who play cards, and a majority of them play here. They have the attitude that they are playing at their friend's place." "Mr. Kelegian and I became very good friends soon after I met him at Oceans Eleven in the mid 90s," says Johnny Chan, globally recognized as one of the faces for poker and winner of consecutive World Series of Poker championships in 1987 and 1988. "The Bike is my favorite place to play poker in California. It has a great location. It's nice, and quiet; just what I like." Kelegian, too, plays in his domain from time to time as he frequents the tables to play the game he loves – poker. "I don't have the mental stamina to play non-stop for hours anymore. It's just too much for me. But, poker is still the greatest game in the world for a hobby," he says. Chan noted that poker was a "competitive sport," something Kelegian knows a thing or two about.

In addition to his gaming career, he was also heavily involved in the sport of boxing as a director, international secretary and treasurer of the World Boxing Council (WBC) for over 20 years. Kelegian reaches for a photo album as thick as a phone book and flips through pictures where he supervised fights for Mike Tyson, Oscar De La Hoya, Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, and Roberto Duran. In 1979, he was appointed by former – and recently re-elected – Governor Jerry Brown as the Chairman of the California State Athletic Commission, a position where every boxing match in the state was signed-off under his watch. His career in boxing matriculated into an induction into the California Boxing Hall of Fame in 2007. "He was a very well-respected individual in the boxing community and a go-getter," said Don Fraser, founder and president of the California Boxing Hall of Fame. "He had great credentials and he is a super-successful businessman and a leading citizen in the Armenian community." Chan offers more of the same sentiment: "No one will ever say anything bad about Mr. Kelegian. He is a gentleman and a great businessman. We always meet in Las Vegas and socialize together. Having been to a few weddings and having other Armenian friends, I've learned that the



↑ Kelegian (far right) and WBC President José Sulaimán in the ring during his days as the director, international secretary and treasurer of the World Boxing Council.

← Poker superstar Johnny Chan is just one of the countless players of which Kelegian holds close relationships with and welcomes to his California card clubs.

culture and people are really nice." Kelegian himself is a man immersed in the culture as he and his wife of 52 years, Jean, are continually involved in a number of benevolent projects. "I am an absolute committed Armenian. Not only am I proud to be Armenian, but I love being Armenian. I think we are different and not totally understood by the rest of the world," he says. "I'm involved in the community but I am not in the business of promoting myself. Newspapers wrote stories about me in years past after I told them to keep it down. You know how it is. An Armenian crosses the street successfully and they put it in the papers," he says with a sheepish grin, opting not to list his charitable deeds. Kelegian being the leading citizen Fraser spoke of was further displayed in 1996 when he and a few friends sponsored the Armenian national tennis team for the Davis Cup Tournament and ended up funding all facets of the countries participation in the competition. The tournament would prove to be the first time Armenia participated in the Davis Cup – in Istanbul, Turkey of all places. "It was a historic and emotional experience seeing the team introduced under 'Mer Hayrenik' with the Armenian flag.

"Tearsville," he recalls. "As the tournament got underway, it was pretty calm and steady. The Turks weren't much into tennis, until the last day. Armenia played against Turkey and you couldn't find a single seat. There were about 10 Armenians and the rest of the stadium was full of Turks. They were rowdy, screaming, disturbing the flow of the matches and the umpires were very close to calling it all off. Sargis Sargsian proved to be the only victor." Sports are very near and dear to Kelegian's heart. Growing up in Wisconsin, he was the youngest licensed baseball umpire in the state. Nowadays, if he isn't putting on the greens or framing a "Kelegian No. 1" team-autographed Lakers jersey in between the likes of Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe and a Mafioso art collage, all he's watching on television is sports. "Sports teach discipline, respecting laws, rules, and regulations and respecting other people," says Kelegian, who's also a shareholder of the Green Bay Packers. His storied career and business model are the epitome of a thriving paradigm. Although there are mucks in every deal, where players fold from fear or fate, there is no stopping Kelegian's streak. ■

