



My Story

CREDIT:

The story was crafted by my beloved nephew, Jim Yaghi <http://jimyaghi.com/>

The bullet whizzed past her face....

I looked over the oven, mouth open, bread half-chewed between my teeth. There was a hole in the wall and she didn't even flinch ... and I?

I selfishly chewed on.

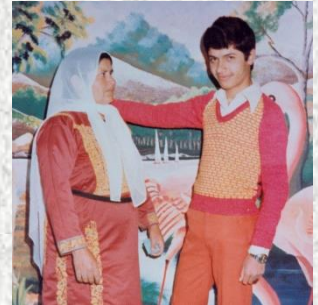
That was my mother though. Brave as a lioness. She was a great influence on my life....

I was born long ago to a poor Palestinian immigrant couple, who had a simple clear vision:

**Education Is
The Way Out of Poverty**

This was one of their core values, and it has become one of mine. The pursuit of knowledge has enriched my life in every possible way - it has shaped my personality, invigorated my confidence, provided me with income, lifelong friendships, and the opportunity to leave a legacy behind me.

My mother, may she rest in peace, raised me and seven siblings alone as my father was always working out of town and only returned for a month out of the year. She was the leader of the house and the servant. She was the preacher and teacher. My father did the impossible to bring home money. He always gave his stamp of approval to mom's decisions.



My mother never attended school, because they were forced out of Palestine when she was young. Then as an immigrant and the eldest female in the family, education was not considered a necessity; instead she worked to support the family.

She Could Not Write Her Name or Read a Price At the Grocery

Yet, she was a brilliant home finance manager, a psychiatrist, a paediatrician, and a chef. She had to make ends meet while under the watchful scrutiny of relatives who were better off than we were.

We raised a goat at home to drink her milk. We raised chicken for their eggs and chicks, grew tomatoes, onion, green pepper, and few other essentials in the tiny space around our modest home.

Gathering knowledge and learning new skills was always encouraged.

Distinction in school was rewarded.

To prove her message, mother asked us to teach her to sign her name when I was barely 10 years old. She compromised with ice cream and soda drinks, but not with education. In a time when women were married by 18, my sisters were pushed to complete university degrees and postgraduate studies. Life wasn't easy, but was enjoyable because of the warm home mother created.

During childhood, I witnessed three major wars. During one of those wars, my mother was making bread for us in the tiny backyard. The backyard – altahwiya (the minimum required gap between two homes) – was only 1x4 meters. While making bread, a stray bullet passed over her head, I was sitting there being selfish eating up what she was baking as soon as it came off the saj (a convex piece of light metal with wood fire underneath).



Brave Mother With Selfish Children

During another war, there was a huge tank parked in front of the house. It filled the walls of the neighborhood with bullets. It demolished a few buildings and killed some innocents. We were hiding under the main staircase of our building, could not move for several hours.

Through wars, frightening, she remained resilient.

Our harsh conditions were a reminder of how important it was for the entire family to find a way out and make our mark on the world.

My Father Preemptively Titled Me “Engineer Husam”

When I was only a small child, my father called me, “Al-mohandes Husam” (the engineer)

Indeed, I took school seriously throughout. My studies were top priority always, even during holidays. And i was rewarded with grades, certificates, and recognition year after year.

At the end of each school term, I was consistently ranked in the top three students of my grade.

My thirst for knowledge was not merely academic, however.

I loved books on every topic under the sun. The public library in downtown Amman was my refuge.

I Walked 15km Each Way Just To Read

At the library, I studied religious titles– the Quran, the Bible, the Old Testament; political titles–Marxism and Leninism, fiction in Arabic and English by all kinds of classic authors– Nageeb Mahfouz, Mohammed Abdul Halim Abdullah, and Agatha Christie.

I read every issue of the National Geographic magazine, and many books on chess!

I spent so much time reading that my grandmother sometimes mocked, "if you place eggs underneath him, they would hatch."



My mother, on the other hand, encouraged me to keep reading. She said, “Knowledge is power.”

One day, in 1976 my father returned from a work trip abroad with a Polaroid camera as a gift for me. Little did he know what an impact this small gift would make on my adult life.

Photography became my favourite hobby. It was a creative outlet, a means to express my imagination. Even when I later went to college and was trying to get by on meager means...

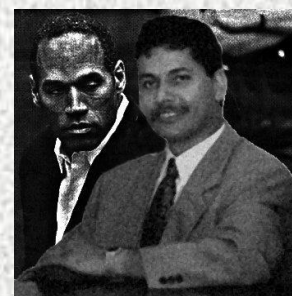


My Camera and Its Accessories Were Always Top Of The Line

In the early 80's, I learned to develop film on my own. Later, as digital scanners and digital equipment and computer software became prominent, I learned Photoshop.

I have fond memories of some of my early editing attempts and the exhilarating power I felt as I played with sophisticated photo editing software. Once, when i was doing my PhD thesis, I merged my photo with OJ Simpson in court. Another time, I added my all-time celebrity crush Tyra Banks into my photo to pretend she was my girlfriend.

Although my early photo editing was for kicks and giggles, it helped me develop visual expression skills which today help me effectively communicate in business.



Even now, I continue to spend generously on the latest photography equipment and enjoy taking photos at every occasion; personal and business alike.

But look, I've gotten ahead of myself.

Another invaluable gift my father gave me upon his return from abroad, was

The Gift Of Responsibility

He gave me his earnings to keep safe. He tasked me with the job of dispatching money to the family as needed. And he asked me to maintain a log of activities for review upon his return for the following year's vacation.

As a result of this trust, which i took seriously, I became known among the family as “our minister of finance.” This was not the kind of knowledge one could pick up in a book alone. This is experience few people get to have at such a young age.

I try too, with my own children, to give them adult tasks to teach them responsibility and I think every parent should try to do the same with theirs. Small risks in trust help children step up and act like adults.

My mother, though illiterate seemed to recognize early on the

Power Of Learning Multiple Languages

Perhaps her early exposure to the British colonists in Palestine was the reason she pushed me to learn to speak English well. Or perhaps it was because I expressed a hope that i might travel to America one day to attend college.

She raised the money, i don't even know how, and told me to enroll in some after school classes.



The Modern Languages Center was in Jabal Alwaibdeh, which was a long way from home. As the family's "minister of finance" i was also good at being frugal and

I refused to take a taxi. Instead, I walked.

I walked downhill from Jabal Alnuzha to the Hussein Camp, uphill to Jabal Al-Hussein, downhill to Alabdali, then uphill again to Jabal Alwaibdeh. After class, i walked the same way back. I did this three times a week.

I graduated top of my year from Hussein College in Jabal Al-Hussein and headed to America for university.

A common perception in the west is that middle eastern graduates are not up to the same level of American graduates. So i was required to take equivalency tests. Despite English not being my first language, i scored so high on the entrance exams I was exempted from several intro-level and mid-level subjects, including biology, Algebra, Calculus 1 and Calculus 2.

When we were young, my father spent so much time abroad, that we lacked a father figure except during summer when he returned briefly for vacation. To fill the space,



Mother Raised My Eldest Brother As Deputy

He was an example for all of us, although he was only a couple of years older than I. And we all paid him the respect of a father figure.

For the first year in college, my oldest brother covered all my expenses. He was there ahead of me completing his postgraduate education. In fact, i went to America to follow his footsteps.

But i had learned responsibility very young and i did not want to continue to impose on him-- he had a busy schedule with school and held several jobs to make ends meet for us. So i asked him if he might recommend me to his friend Dr. Mohamed Abdelraziq for work.

He complied. I got the job.

I Became A Ground Radar Samples Collector

Then I worked all summer with the NASA Remote Sensing Lab. They liked me so much they asked me if i would do additional data entry for a bump in pay.



Pretty soon, i found my feet in America.

But i felt a need for more independence, to strike out on my own and be my own man.

I asked my brother's permission to move to another state. Out of respect for his seniority, i required his approval to make any major decision. And he was tasked with responsibility for me and could have easily refused.

Fortunately, my request was approved.

Living Alone Was A Whole Other Ballgame

Living alone was nothing like having the support and companionship of my brother. However, I was well prepared and I had the necessary maturity of character, diligence, and responsibility to make it without falling into bad company.

Money was really tight...which made for some painful memories.

During extended holidays, dorms closed. Students who did not have family to visit were moved into a 'holiday dorm' for an extra rent fee. I could not afford this. So here's what i did...

On the last day of school before Christmas holidays,

I Hid Under The Bed

A dorm security officer checked all rooms, turned off lights, and made sure all windows were closed. Once all were gone, I got out and spent two weeks in the room—without lights.

If I turned on the lights, I'd be caught.

I survived by eating dry and canned food. I could not even take a shower until school recommenced.



You might have noticed how busy I kept outside of school as a child. This was a parenting philosophy my illiterate mother believed—

Keep The Kids Busy, They'll Stay Out Of Trouble.

And I knew no other mode but to keep busy.

While the average student was taking 12 to 15 credit hours per semester, I carried 19. I majored in Electrical Engineering, which was by no means an easy specialization in the first place. I also held down several jobs to make enough money to cover school fees and living expenses. I worked the night shift at a plastics plant on weekends making \$8/hour. I worked weekdays at Popeye's sweeping bathrooms.

And if you think that was enough, I also got involved in a number of school activities.

My days were always full. I had no time to waste, not more than 4 hours of sleep a day, and no money to spare.

I had seen many Middle Eastern students, even from my own country, top of their classes arrive to America and lose themselves in alcohol and drugs. But my busy schedule and tight finances kept me immune.

I did not follow a wrong path, my grades were excellent, and I was popular in the department.



I Tutored Girls If They Introduced Me To A Crush

I was a poor playboy.

Still, girls wanted to hang with me because I was excellent in math and physics and I was willing to help them with homework. I got free entertainment and VIP access to football games.

When one is successful and distinguished, people try to get close.

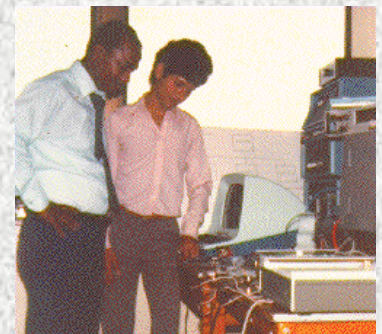
I kept out of trouble as best as i could. I did not hang with bad people. I fought my own naturally curious temptations to try things that might in the long run get me in trouble.

For instance, in 1982 when I was a student, I lived in a two-story building in a poor neighborhood. Every evening when I got home from school...

I Found My Neighbor Smoking Marijuana

The smell was good!

But I knew better. I reminded myself of images of drug addicts and how miserable their lives were. I refused to allow myself to try anything that could enslave me to anything but God. It was not easy to fight temptations, but with God's protections, parents' prayers, and a bit of wisdom, I remained free of any addiction to anything.



Sacrifice and hard work paid off.

The chairman of the Electrical Engineering Department, Dr. James Cross, asked me to

Assist On His Intel Funded Microprocessors Research

I was still in my third year of college.

Yet I had mastered digital logic and microprocessors. While giving Dr. Cross a hand, I used that golden opportunity to learn more advanced subjects with hands-on-experience.

Again, the goal was education, gaining as much knowledge and skills as possible. Knowledge is power, it paves the way to a brighter future.

The following year...

Dr. Cross asked me work with him on his newly funded CAD/CAM project from IBM for which a data center was constructed in the College of Engineering.

The guys who got training to operate the IBM 4341 mainframe had decided not to return to school and chose to stay at IBM.



I Took The Challenge

To Operate The Mainframe

I read many manuals, consulted over the phone with IBM engineers, and worked in a cold freezing data center room every day for 2 years.

Opportunities rarely repeat themselves. So when I got one, I took it regardless of how unprepared I was. I liked a good challenge anyway—it helps one grow outside their comfort zone and limitations of their experiences.

After four years of undergraduate study, I graduated with a Bachelor Degree in Electrical Engineering and I was a member of Eta Kappa Nu Honor Society.

I Applied For A Master's Degree in Computer Science

My beloved “godfather”, Dr. Cross, offered me a teaching job as a laboratory teaching assistant in addition to managing the department’s data center. In return, I got \$800 a month and a fees waiver to continue my studies!

Dr. Cross left an everlasting impact on my life (hence, the honorary ‘godfather’ title). He inspired me to impact the lives of others.

During the 90's, I became more socially involved by giving technical talks at local schools, churches, and the local chamber of commerce. The Baton Rouge local newspaper published several reports on my activities at a local K12 school and at the Chamber of Commerce. I was a young brave energetic start at the university and in the community. Even though I was an engineer, the Languages Department invited me to join them on an exchange trip to Orizaba, Mexico. I served as a mentor to a group of twenty college students.

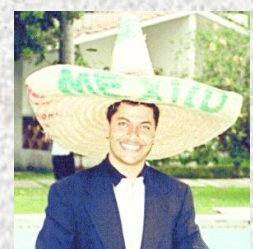


I thought, why the heck not.

It Was a Chance to Learn Spanish and Meet Amazing People

One beautiful student and her hard working mother, a restaurant owner, invited me out to dance at a local neighborhood club. I witnessed locals having fun peacefully.

They taught me Spanish and exposed me to their culture while I taught them English. We are still good friends till today. That social



entrepreneurship got me publicity in local newspapers and I felt proud.

I reached a crossroads in my career, where I had to make important decisions.

My own students who graduated and joined well-known companies came back to the university to recruit my top students. They trusted my recommendations. Some even offered me jobs (paying much more than teaching), but my passion was with teaching and coaching disadvantaged students.

Money was never a target.

I Was Pursued By Pretty Women When I Was Poor

I never had craving for fancy material things.

Though later, I realized I was selfish for pursuing my passion only without thinking of my brothers and sisters back home. Possibly I should have taken a good paying job in order to help out my family in Jordan.

I regret not thinking of them.

Somewhere in the late 80's or early 90's, my younger brother...

Majed and I Started An Internet Service Provider Company!

It was called GloboNet.

And it was the first of its kind in Louisiana.

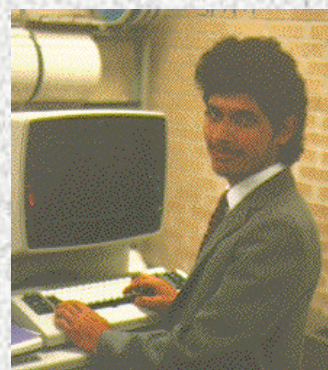
Internet users in Louisiana were getting their services from providers in the state of Texas. I had possessed the technical expertise to build and operate an ISP in Louisiana, for the Louisiana users to reduce cost and improve performance.

It was accidental entrepreneurship.

We had plans to offer content services for all subscribers. However, we shut down the company for personal reasons. It was a painful decision but the right decision all the same.

It was my first real failing at anything. But failure, as it turns out, is a wonderful teacher.

In the late 90's, I was recruited to join a company which conducts...



Training For The Saudi National Guard

My role was Chief Telecommunication Advisor.

Soon after I joined, the Saudi National Guard's Director of Information Technology, Mr. Mohamed Alkharashi, was so impressed he appointed me as the Director for Data Networks & Security.



I was the only foreigner to ever hold such sensitive position. We built high-speed networks throughout the Kingdom.

We installed biometric devices to control access to underground weapon & ammunition stores. We did wonders there.

Then ...

I Was Recruited By One Of The Top Neurosurgeons In The World

I was asked by [Dr. Nayef Alrodhan](#) me to help him build a technology company as a part of his diversified group of businesses.

I had dual roles there as well. I was Advisor at the group level (for research), and Vice President (running the company) without a president.

I wanted the best for the company, so I hired top notch senior staff; I even paid some of them higher salaries than mine.

We bid on a \$70 million project to produce the Saudi National Smart Card. And we did many more wonderful things where i learned a lot more about business.

My Latest Venture Is A FinTech Company

I am building Ateon for a conglomerate group and a prominent businessman whom I adore. Building a startup at challenging economic times! A startup that offers blockchain solutions; which is still in infancy worldwide. Oh, that's in addition to my regular job as the Chief Information Officer to the Group. The dual roles and multiple responsibilities continues just like thirty years ago.

In addition to profit, my aim is to bring in emerging technologies and financial solutions for people in remote areas, the less fortunate, and elderly. I am running Ateon as a lean startup,

with minimum capital injection and staff. It's like my own. That's dedication to distinction which keeps us happy, positive, young, and productive.

My plan is to hire ambitious new college graduates and females, train them, coach them, and pave the way for them to shine. Hopefully they will inspire others to rise and shine to make the world a better place to live.



Throughout my life, I have been involved in all kinds of projects and learning opportunities. Yet today I choose to work for a salary. Money is nice to have, but it is not my objective and it is not what excites me. Comfort is, of course, nice. But i have it.

All the same, God continues to bless me with stability and peace on all fronts.

Although I started with little, I found ways to help many. And in return they helped me enrich my life with wonderful experiences, quench my thirst for knowledge, and yes...some financial comfort too.

Today, I Raise Three Teens

I have two wonderful teenage boys and a girl who too thirst for knowledge and new experiences. And i try to pass on some of the values I learned from my virtually illiterate parents, which helped me accomplish so much.



After all, what does man leave behind him other than legacy?

My children have, with the right encouragement, built mobile applications to benefit society.

Chillax is an adult-free social network my boys made when they were 13 and 14 years old. AidMaid, another of their apps, is an emergency personal assistant, which has been downloaded by users in 76 countries.

They now counsel other teens to start their own projects (<http://www.aidmaid.net/gallery.html>). The outcome has been phenomenal.

After two years of entrepreneurship and participation in regional events, they created an entrepreneurship club (<http://www.chillaxican.org>) at school to share their knowledge and to encourage students to engage in rewarding activities. They meet once a week. This club has encouraged other students to begin their own initiatives.



Not only this, they have inspired their baby sister to start her own social project.

She created the Smiles initiative (<http://smiles.aidmaid.net>) for donations to refugee children. Her message was...

Think Of The Less Fortunate

She asked schoolmates to donate what they did not need any more of good condition clothes, toys and school supplies. The initiative exceeded expectations with involvement from schools and neighbourhoods.

Smiles is an ongoing initiative which my daughter hopes to run for many years to come in pursuit of putting smiles on all children of the world.

How about you?

What can you do today to learn something new - or- better yet, what can you teach to someone else in need?

Knowledge is currency anyone can get and give—rich or poor, young or old.

