

Zakira Ganji - Turning Resilience Into Enterprise

By Lorrie DeFrank

“I cannot put into words how much it has impacted me on a personal and professional level,” said Zakira Ganji of being awarded a scholarship to attend Jacksonville Women’s Business Center’s Entrepreneur Certificate Program.

Age 25, Ganji already had been teaching women how to start and run a small business. Yet she learned a lot from the experts who offered advice and shared knowledge with the diverse group of women business owners on a variety of topics in five courses. Empowering women gives them the confidence to move forward with their ideas and get good results, she said.

Ganji knows the wisdom of those words through her own opportunities and experiences. A former refugee, she is a college graduate who has helped other refugees earn a living and is now starting her own gift business in Jacksonville.

Born in Afghanistan, she was a teen when her family moved to India where she earned a bachelor’s degree in sustainable development from Xavier Institute of Management. She helped women open small businesses in India where employment opportunities for them were limited.

“My whole work was empowering women and helping overall communities,” said Ganji.

Last year she spoke at a church program about a workforce development program she coordinated to teach women newcomers life and professional skills. Afterward, one of the church members suggested that JWBC would be a great resource for her.

Ganji connected with JWBC Director Annie Grogan who encouraged her to apply for a scholarship for the Entrepreneur Certificate Program that includes finance, marketing, legal, customer development and leadership training. She was selected to join six other women to progress through the sessions as a cohort.

“Annie is one of the most amazing persons I met in the community. She has a heart for being an advocate for us,” Ganji said, praising all the program’s team members for their expertise, availability and honest feedback.

Ganji’s initial idea was to start a group bakery business with other women. However, a potential partnership fell through. “OK, this isn’t working out. What else can we do?” she thought, determined to succeed in business. Instead, she and her artist sister, Nadera Ganji, started a small business called Simple Crate that offers customized gift baskets and boxes.

Grogan said Ganji’s resourcefulness to change direction is a perfect example of using the program’s information to know when an idea is viable and to be willing to go with another plan when it isn’t.

The sisters launched their business late last year, offering three sizes of baskets and boxes that Nadera designs containing items such as candles, soaps, crocheted loafahs, dried fruit, tea and mugs—most hand



made. Marketing mainly through word of mouth while they are developing their website, they also are partnering with Cultivate Jax, a woman-owned gift shop in Jacksonville's Riverside neighborhood, to sell their products.

"All of the courses are great but the two that have been most beneficial to me are Financial Matters and Legal Matters," Ganji said.

"When you are building your business, it tells you what you have to have so not to put yourself in a tough position," she said of Legal Matters. "From the financial aspect, I learned the importance of knowing what a product costs you and making sure you have a good profit margin to cover your costs."

Monitoring your finances to ensure that your great idea is sustainable is necessary, she said.

Marketing Matters made her aware of the importance of consistency in using the same fonts, colors and language to make her online and print advertising appealing and familiar to potential customers. It also shared information about free resources available for website design.

Customer Development and Discovery taught her to consider her long-term goals and accept that not everybody will like her products when identifying her customers, then directing her energy toward targeting them.

"If I didn't go through this program, there are a lot of things I wouldn't know," she said. "Starting a business is like raising a baby. You have no experience and can make a lot of mistakes."

Ganji commended the great team of facilitators who share their expertise, connect them with other community resources and hold them accountable. She also credits the program's success to the cohort members who support each other. "We have things that are mutual in common and uplift each other in any capacity we can, and that is something you can't put a value on," she said.

She advises women who intend to start a small business to contact the JWBC and take their courses.

"You learn foundational things you need to remember that will build or break your business," Ganji said. "If you don't have a good foundation, it will all fall out or there will be cracks."

To contact Zakira Ganji:
Founder, Simple Crate
zakira@simplecrate.co