

## HINTing Towards Excellence: Mariam Sadawi's MBA Path in Entrepreneurship

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Patrick Lageraen:

Welcome to another episode of the UB School of Management's Manage-A-Bull Podcast. I'm your host, Patrick Lageraen. Today's guest is Mariam Sadawi, a first-year MBA student and small business owner developing Hint Juice and Smoothie while pursuing her MBA. We talk to her about her motivations for being an entrepreneur, the challenges of running a small business while in a graduate program, and how an MBA degree is applicable to her goals as an entrepreneur. Mariam, you're a first-year MBA student and a small business owner. Maybe we could start by just having you introduce yourself.

Mariam Sadawi:

Sure. Hi everyone. My name is Mariam Sadawi. I am currently a first-year MBA student and I'm also the owner and founder of Hint Juice and Smoothie Bar.

Patrick Lageraen:

When did you start this business?

Mariam Sadawi:

There's a little story behind it. I was an undergrad student here at the university and it was my last semester. I had changed from my biology degree to a business degree in the last semester, so a huge jump. And I was in an entrepreneurship class with a professor named Celine, so shout out to Celine and we had this project and I had told her that I have juices that I used to juice for myself back when I was 15 years old, so I was diagnosed with a disease called ulcerative colitis, which is an autoimmune disease that targeted the colon. And after going to a lot of doctors, they had told me that I had to live off of a bag and I didn't want to do that, so I started juicing and doing ginger shots and beet shots. They all didn't taste good, so I made my own recipes and I held onto them, so then I told her I brought samples and she's like, "This is the winner. You've got to do something with it." Then that's how it started.

Patrick Lageraen:

That's an awesome story. Did you go straight from undergrad into the MBA program?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. I graduated early and then I started my MBA in the fall of 2023.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Is that a three-two program?

Mariam Sadawi:

No. Actually, I had a one-semester gap just to breathe a little bit because I really needed it, and it also made me really focus on why I needed my MBA, and that's why I went back to it.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Makes sense. Talking a little bit more about your entrepreneurial venture, what was your motivation to start this? I know you mentioned it a little bit. Could you just elaborate on that?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yeah. It's a need for me. I had a need to add nutrition back to my system to optimize the nutrition, and I also wanted an alternative to any other drinks that have sugar artificial flavors. And I didn't want something that wasn't healthy. I had a mission of I need to reclaim my health. And now because I did, I want to help others see that view, get the hint from me, and now it's their turn to reclaim their health, so I think my biggest mission is to help people who are in need for that, or also people who are health conscious. If they're willing to do something like that and they like it, Hint is the option for them.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Do you think there's people out there that are willing to pay for a product like this?

Mariam Sadawi:

Absolutely. I had done over 120 customer discovery before I started the business.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Wow.

Mariam Sadawi:

I didn't want to start something that I didn't have feedback from people to see if they liked it or not, or if they need it or not. I had joined Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus IC Success Program, and one of the requirements was to do a survey and do it to people, and I had a result of 200 people answering it, and it gave me a little motivation to say, "Okay, people need it. People want it, and they're willing to purchase it."

Patrick Lageraen:

It sounds like you have a great product. I'm just wondering what stage of the business you're in. Do you have a set price that you've found to be a good balance? Where are you at other than just a good product?

Mariam Sadawi:

I had to do a lot of analysis for the product. I used to have one flavor, now I have three. I used to only do bottles with stickers on them. Now I have the full label on the bottles. I never did catering. Now we do catering. I used to do one gallon, now we do over nine gallons, so we grew, and that made me sit down and really break down the price analysis for me and also how to grow the business. And I would say that the UB curriculum right now, the MBA program has been helping me so much to achieve that.

Patrick Lageraen:

How'd you like entrepreneurship with Bob Newburt?

Mariam Sadawi:

I loved it.

Patrick Lageraen:

Did you work on your own project in it?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. I actually worked on Hint and we ended up winning.

Patrick Lageraen:

Nice.

Mariam Sadawi:

There's a little competition between the MBA groups.

Patrick Lageraen:

That's great.

Mariam Sadawi:

Hint got first place and I thank Bob because he made me realize, "Mariam, it's not about the idea, it's about the need behind it."

Patrick Lageraen:

That's the job to be done.

Mariam Sadawi:

Exactly.

Patrick Lageraen:

Which is to drink and eat cleanly?

Mariam Sadawi:

And optimize our nutrition through our product.

Patrick Lageraen:

Got it.

Mariam Sadawi:

He made me realize I had an idea, but also I did have a need personally, and that's why I pursued it, so now the customers need to understand that there's a need as well.

Patrick Lageraen:

What challenges have you faced so far in this business venture?

Mariam Sadawi:

I think a lot of challenges. One of them is when I decided to pivot to do the catering system. Before I did that, I saw the bottles. The retail part of it is great, but for a business it didn't do a lot of money and I never knew people liked bright colors, so I had to do a little color test theory. It tested on people and adults, and I realized that people love to see colors and that's why I pivoted to do catering and have these dispensers to be clear, so when I put the juice in different colors, people are attracted to it. And asked so many questions, "What's this? Why is this color?" I faced that challenge, but then I completely pivoted my system to fix that challenge, so that's one of them. Another one is how to manage school and running a small business. You rarely have time to yourself, and I learned I need to buy a big planner and make sure everything has a priority to it, and I think it's going pretty well for now.

Patrick Lageraen:

You use a paper planner?

Mariam Sadawi:

I do. I'm a paper person.

Patrick Lageraen:

Nice. I was going to ask you about that. How's the balance with schoolwork been?

Mariam Sadawi:

Really tough. I'm not going to lie.

Patrick Lageraen:

Especially that first semester.

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. We had corporate champions competition, and I was like, "How do I manage this and school, the other classes and the business?" And I realized that I need to slow down and have days to myself. And also communication is the key. Communicating with my team throughout the whole project was amazing. We had the team charter, which I loved. It made things really on the line and everyone agrees to it, so I think just spending at least one day of self-care to recharge and then you'll be back.

Patrick Lageraen:

Would you say that your instincts was to every day that you're not working on school work to go work on the business that you had to force yourself not to?

Mariam Sadawi:

No. Hint is a baby for me, and if I don't take care of it, I feel like it's going to... I'll lose it. Every time I had an hour or two, I would go on Instagram, make sure I'm really engaging with people, growing my Instagram page. And then the last project I had, it's to add another flavor. But it's been so tough because you're going to sample it, test it, it has to be seasonal, non-seasonal so I run to my business when I have that time.

Patrick Lageraen:

When I think of juice, I think of Ocean Spray or Tropicana. When I think of smoothies, I think Tropical Smoothie, Jamba Juice. What differentiates your product from what's out there already?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. That's a really good question. I want people, when they think of Hint, they think of tastes that is a hundred percent better than anything they've tried. I want them to think that I mix uncommon fruits and vegetables together to give you a great juice. And then I want them also to remember, I don't add water, I don't add sugar, and I don't add any artificial coloring. Some people ask me, "Mariam, how did it taste so sweet? Or how is the water level in it?" And thank God I did biology because I learned that cucumbers have 75% water, so I add them in some of my juices to balance them out. And the sweetness, I always use apples. They're based in my juices, so I feel like my products are very unique because they taste good, but they're also really good for your system. And I think it's reverse psychology. When something tastes good, you want it more. I keep working on that. I'm very picky. I make sure that it tastes good all the time.

Patrick Lageraen:

As an MBA student, what courses have you taken to help better this business? I know we mentioned entrepreneurship, but have any of the other ones been helpful?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. Believe it or not, accountant did help because for a small business, you need to do all your finances by yourself and learn what's a balance sheet and all these things behind it, so that class really helped me

a lot with Professor Ian. Also, marketing helped a lot for me with Professor Chuck Lindsay. I think marketing was a huge thing for me because it was my weakness and I needed to learn how to do marketing. And I think that first class with him helped me a lot and it made me research more. And now my concentration is marketing, so it made me love it. These classes really helped.

Patrick Lageraen:

There's also a program at UB. Blackstone Launchpad.

Mariam Sadawi:

CoLab.

Patrick Lageraen:

Have you done anything with them?

Mariam Sadawi:

Absolutely. They were the biggest supporters of Hint. There's a little story behind it. I went to Hedar Borden with a glass of juice, this is before Hint started, and I was like, "Hey, try it and give me your feedback." And at that time, she loved it and she's like, "Mariam, you got to compete with our competitions that here we have at Blackstone Launchpad." And I was like, "Okay, call me in. Which competition is it?" And at that time, it was the Bulls launch, and it was the first time I ever pitched in front of people, ever in my entire life, and I did not know how to do it, so I used their venture coaches and my venture coach was Reem, shout out to Reem. She helped me so much. We made a 90-second pitch and I went and pitched, and believe it or not, we won first place.

Patrick Lageraen:

Wow.

Mariam Sadawi:

We got some funding, and I would say that that competition was the start of Hint, and I always give back to CoLab because without them, Hint was not even a thing.

Patrick Lageraen:

How was the timing of that with the MBA class entrepreneurship? Was this before or after that?

Mariam Sadawi:

It was all the same time. Celine told us that you got to do networking and events, and at the same time I met Hedar at the same time I did a competition, so it was the whole semester. It was full of events and starting Hint.

Patrick Lageraen:

But that's good though because you get those synchronous benefits of it's not mutually exclusive, your schoolwork and then your entrepreneurship. You got to work on some of those together.

Mariam Sadawi:

It was really nice. I actually sketched my logo in her class, so it was funny.

Patrick Lageraen:

Cool. Thinking a little bit more about your venture, how do you stay motivated with the ups and downs? I'm sure it's not all smooth sailing.

Mariam Sadawi:

That's a really good question. I feel like as a person, Mariam, I'm really a goal oriented person, and I always set goals and I rate them in a paper and I put them in an envelope and I open them at the end of the year to see did I achieve it or not? And it's always here in my head, "Oh, I wrote this in my list, but I still didn't do it." And it kills me. I have to check something off if I want to do it. I think that keeps me motivated a lot. And it reminds me, "Mariam, you didn't do this. Go on, do it." And also family support is incredible. My family wanted me to be in biology and hopefully be in med school, become a doctor. But when I decided to change majors, they were all surprised.

But when they saw me pitch and they saw how my spirit and entrepreneurship was great, they all supported me, especially my parents, so I think family support keeps me motivated. Lastly is it's all within yourself. You have to be self-aware that you're doing this for a reason, you have a motive. And for me, I always remember I did Hint for myself to help myself to heal my gut, and I feel like it's a mission now to give it to people. I always say, "Spread the Hint, take my juice and spread it." I think that keeps me always motivated.

Patrick Lageraen:



Could you maybe give me an example of a goal that you're currently working on or what's a current challenge?

Mariam Sadawi:

Right now is getting the website up. I had tried my best to do it, and I ended up not saving my work that I did on the website. I used Squarespace and I lost everything that I worked on. That was frustrating to a level, so I ended up seeking help from other people that I know in the community to help me build a website. That's a goal I want to achieve by hopefully the beginning of spring or maybe in the middle of spring, so it's really coming up very soon. But because of everything that got deleted, oh my God, I wanted not to do it anymore. I was like, "Okay, no more website." But I remembered that I need it. To grow Hint, you need a website, a landing page.

Patrick Lageraen:

For sure.

Mariam Sadawi:

That's what I've been working on.

Patrick Lageraen:

What do you think is next after website? You have a product, you have a website, you offer catering services. Where are you looking to go next?

Mariam Sadawi:

I want to expand on the catering system, so I want to go to Seneca One Building and be a part of that, so every event they have, I want to be there. One of my biggest goal is maybe cater for a big competition like 43 North. I have a lot of goals to help and give back in the community because Buffalo is home for me even though I'm not from here, but it's been over 10 years, so it's home now. I really want to do that. And a really long-term goal is to have a location, like a brick and mortar and have people come and experience Hint. It's an experience more than a product. I want them to remember that God gave you fruits and vegetables to help your gut, and I'm giving you some liquid part of it.

Patrick Lageraen:

Have you made like in-between steps, between now and there, what you have to do? Is the in-between step catering?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. And using the Instagram to get there. I felt like social media is the thing now. If you want to grow, you grow with social media.

Patrick Lageraen:

For sure.

Mariam Sadawi:

I wanted to do that. And also networking. I felt like when you know someone and ask, "Hey, can you connect me with someone else?" And from a person to a person, you get there. I want to keep networking a lot in communities. And there's a lot of events that we have like Tech Buffalo, a lot of events that they do. I want to keep going and networking to that because that will help me to that goal.

Patrick Lageraen:

I think a lot of MBA students in general are interested in entrepreneurship. That's probably what attracts us to a program like the MBA. It's actually why they're considering entrepreneurship to be a concentration.

Mariam Sadawi:

I would love that.

Patrick Lageraen:

Speaking to those students who have an interest in entrepreneurship in the future, what advice would you give them for their own journeys?

Mariam Sadawi:

I would say always go for it. And if you see that no one is near you to help, go to CoLab, I'm telling you they will help. They have coaches, they have events that where you can practice even for a first time pitch. I feel like if you believe in your idea or your product or your service, whatever it is, once you believe in it, you make it a goal. You want others to believe in it too, so surround yourself with believers

I would say. Especially the community of CoLab, because everyone there has the spirit of entrepreneurship and everyone there will give back to you. They will help you. Whatever it is that you want to achieve, just like they helped me, they'll help you, I'm sure of that.

Patrick Lageraen:

In the School of Management, they talk a lot about networking and cultivating relationships, having an online presence, having a LinkedIn. Could you maybe speak to how that is important for what you're doing in an entrepreneurial venture?

Mariam Sadawi:

We had a LinkedIn workshop. I forgot who did it though. That's my bad. But I went to a LinkedIn workshop in my first semester as an MBA, and they helped us understand how to do LinkedIn. I had changed everything at that time. I changed my picture, I changed the background and who you are, all the sections of LinkedIn. If they do that again, that workshop, please go to it because that helped me a lot.

Patrick Lageraen:

Was that a personal LinkedIn that you created or did you make one for the business as well?

Mariam Sadawi:

It was both. I don't have one just for the business, but I wrote in mine that I'm the owner of Hint and I post about it too. I do need to differentiate them, create a LinkedIn just for Hint, so that's a goal to do. There's a lot of amazing workshops. And there's one thing I want to say. If you have the time and energy to wake up at 7:30 in the morning, go to the Tuesday coffee, the Buffalo coffee, I forgot the name of it, but it's at Seneca One.

Patrick Lageraen:

I think I know what you're talking about.

Mariam Sadawi:

What is it? I forgot what it's called. It's something coffee.

Patrick Lageraen:

We'll put it in the description.

Mariam Sadawi:

But it's 7:30 until 9:30, and there's bagels and coffee and networking. I did that.

Patrick Lageraen:

With local business owners, right?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. They had just moved location, so now they're doing it at Seneca One. I did it for a little bit, but now because some of my classes are in the morning, so I can't go. But please, if you have time and energy and you're a morning person, go. You'll meet a lot of people. And they do a give and ask. It's amazing. It's an opportunity.

Patrick Lageraen:

Sounds great. What about cultivating relationships? Have any people that you've talked to been particularly helpful in your journey?

Mariam Sadawi:

I think the one that really comes to my mind is the IC Success Program run by Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus. Shout out to Jeweria. She's the director. I think when I met her and I met that program, these people in the program, the cohort, they've introduced so much to me. They've helped me a lot. That networking system that I got to experience. I think I was the youngest person to have a little business, and I was surrounded by people who had a business, they have experience, are very knowledgeable, older than me, and I was just seeking advice. I'm like, "Tell me what did you do? How did you do it? How did you fix your problems?" I think that was something I kept reaching to them even after I graduated from the program, texted, "Hey, what's going on? How is your business?" I feel like that connection built me so much. I had just graduated from UB and I joined the program, and then after that I joined the MBA, so I never stopped. I felt like that kept me going.

Patrick Lageraen:

What do you think it'd be like to run a business in a bubble? Have no one around you to help you, and you just have to work on it a hundred percent on your own?

Mariam Sadawi:

Failure. A hundred percent.

Patrick Lageraen:

It'd be tough, I'd imagine.

Mariam Sadawi:

Without people around you, even not directly, indirectly. I don't have a co-founder. I'm just the founder of Hint. In the future, I would love to, but there's so many other people that are behind the scenes, especially the helped the kickstart. I would say alone. You can't clap alone with one hand, but together you can and you make loud noises.

Patrick Lageraen:

Great analogy.

Mariam Sadawi:

I think without people around you, yeah, you'll fail a lot.

Patrick Lageraen:

What about family and friend support? How important has that been in your own motivation?

Mariam Sadawi:

Very important. I think I had mentioned, I studied biology for three years at UB, and it was that pivot of that's not really what I want to do. And I put my family in shock. I was like, "Hey, I changed majors. Just so you know." It was a really shock for them and for myself. I never thought I would do that. I always knew I had a spirit in business, but I couldn't let it out. I'm just so scared. But I think as soon as I proved to them that, "Hey, I'm not playing. It's not just a degree and I'm going to hang it in the wall. No, I want to pursue and I want to get there."

And I think when my parents saw the Buffalo Business First newsletter and I was five under 25 for the year 2023, I think that hit them. They're like, "Okay, so you got there, you are achieving." And I was like, "Yeah, without you guys, I would've not done it." Family is first for me. My friends, on the other hand, big supporters. I think the first orders of Hint were my friends, just supporting the business.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Good friends.

Mariam Sadawi:

And tagging me on Instagram and saying, "Oh, please go support Hint." I think they've made a huge impact on me personally and the business.

Patrick Lageraaen:

If someone's running a business and doesn't have that support network, maybe they have people around them, but they don't really know about their idea that they're working on, do you have any tips for getting people on board, getting them to support you and stand behind you when you're working on this thing?

Mariam Sadawi:

Convincing them. Pretty hard.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Pitching them almost.

Mariam Sadawi:

Pitching. The first pitch I did in front of my sister, she laughed at me a little bit, but it's a little memory between me and her. But I think persuasion in a good way, so it's not always bad to persuade if you have a good impact or you have a good cause, so I think you have to learn how to persuade and convince. You need to convince my product is not something that's not going to impact the world because I believe in it. And I'll tell you one, two, three, why you should believe in it too. I think that's a huge thing, especially in front of judges.

Patrick Lageraaen:

They can tell.

Mariam Sadawi:

"Mariam, what is really your mission behind it?" And they can see through you, so I think I learned how to do that by believing in my product. Believe in your product as well.

Patrick Lageraen:

And then people believe in you.

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes.

Patrick Lageraen:

Love that. How about the rest of your MBA program in general? How's that been?

Mariam Sadawi:

This semester is a little bit less hectic than the first one, but it's unique in its own way. I think that way. I had joined a program called LeaderCORE, and believe it or not, I love to reflect and I feel logging is I'm taking a day or two in my week and I number my logs. This is log nine, 10. It made me realize how yes, you have a situation, you act upon it and this is the results. But when you go back and reflect, you learn. I learned so much and I'm very happy I joined that LeaderCORE program and it started this semester, so that was different from last semester. And I have different electives. I'm just really excited to see where it goes. I know we only have one more year after this, and I feel like that's going to go by so quick, but I feel like there's so much to learn and I'm a learner, so I like that.

Patrick Lageraen:

You mentioned that your concentration was marketing, which obviously ties into your business very well. Do you have a backup plan? Are you all in on this business or are you preparing for other career jobs or options?

Mariam Sadawi:

I love my business, but I'm an entrepreneur. I want to make Hint work and stable, and I want to go on a different venture. That's me. I don't stop. But for now, yes, Hint will be the second priority. School's first and Hint is next because I don't think it's stable yet, but as soon as it's stable, you'll see me on a different venture. I'll keep going. I think that's the spirit of entrepreneurship. You want to fix people's needs, and I'm pretty sure we have a lot of needs. I'm a part of the Prosperity Fellowship, the Western New York Prosperity Fellowship, and that's part of the mission is how do you help back to the Western New York

community? There's a lot of needs out there, and I feel like Hint is helping, in a unique way, but there's so much other problems. And part of Buffalo me and this generation, it is our duty to give back and help.

Patrick Lageraen:

Does the Prosperity Fellowship teach you about those problems?

Mariam Sadawi:

It makes us aware. There's a lot of events we do. For example, we did things with Explore Buffalo, and when I joined the fellowship, I've never walked downtown. And with them I did, and it was just so unique. I've learned so much. I became more curious to see what else is there in Buffalo? What's the history? Why do we have so many nice buildings? Why do we have amazing parks? I just kept going, and the fellowship gives us the resources to learn more, so I am very thankful for that.

Patrick Lageraen:

You'd recommend that Western New York Prosperity Fellowship?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes, and always a prosperity proud. We have that. If you have the opportunity to apply, please go for it. Because I think with the fellowship, not only I'm more open-minded and know what's going on in Buffalo, but there's a spark in me that "Mariam, yes, you are a fellow and you have a duty to make a difference, even if it's a little one." I think that's how life is.

Patrick Lageraen:

And that fits into really well with your venture too. As an entrepreneur, do you have any final thoughts on the MBA program in general? Is it worth it for entrepreneurs?

Mariam Sadawi:

A hundred percent. UB has grown. Blackstone Launchpad was in a small place, and now it's CoLab. It's in the third...

Patrick Lageraen:

That's the same thing. Blackstone Launchpad and CoLab.



Mariam Sadawi:

Now it's known as CoLab.

Patrick Lageraen:

Got it.

Mariam Sadawi:

It's grown. And that means that there's a lot of more entrepreneurs out here in the school that want this resources. And I feel the School of Management also gives you that push. Like, "Hey, you have a venture, you have an idea. Did you hear about this? Did you go network? Did you go to El Faro? Did you talk to the other MBA students?" I am very happy that I applied, and I'm also more grateful that they've accepted me.

Patrick Lageraen:

Of course.

Mariam Sadawi:

I feel like UB is one of the top schools. A little story, I came from Syria and I went to high school here, and my house was near UB, so I would always drive by that circle and see students and it was like, "Oh my God, I want to be one of them." I applied for my undergrad, got in and then I graduated and I was like, "Oh, I miss it. I want to be an MBA student," so I want back. UB has that culture.

Patrick Lageraen:

What about the coursework in the MBA program? Do you think that the variety of classes are valuable to someone looking to explore entrepreneurship opportunities?

Mariam Sadawi:

Yes. Especially the entrepreneurship class with Bob.

Patrick Lageraen:

Well, sure.

Mariam Sadawi:

That was amazing. But to be an entrepreneur, you have to learn all the branches of the business field.

Patrick Lageraen:

You have to do it all.

Mariam Sadawi:

All of it. From accounting to finance, to even economics, not going to lie. You need to learn about supply and demand. Especially in the MBA program, they split it in a really amazing way. The schoolwork is a lot, but I feel like as soon as you learn how to manage that, you'll succeed. For me personally, it's getting a big planner and a big calendar because I'm a paper girl that helped me in checking them off. But if you're a computer person and typing and all that, having a Google Calendar could work for you. My mom says always, "If things come easy in life, they're not worth it. If they're hard, they're a hundred percent worth it."

Patrick Lageraen:

I agree. Totally.

Mariam Sadawi:

The MBA program is tough, but it's worth it.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thanks so much.

Mariam Sadawi:

Thank you for having me.

Patrick Lageraen:

And best of luck on your venture.

Mariam Sadawi:

Thank you so much.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thanks for coming in. I hope you enjoyed this episode and learning about how Mariam juggles her growing business and a graduate degree. My name is Patrick Lageraen and I'm your host. Thanks for listening.