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MARWA AL SHO'ALA ON
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Growing the roots

Entering the family business is always a huge decision to take on and *Marwa Al Sho'ala*, Business Development Director of Gulf Markets International, will tell you why. Even though the dynamic business world of today wasn't Marwa's initial calling, she found a way to apply her passion in the company that her father built from the ground up, Al Fanar Investment Holding Company.

Where did you study and when did you graduate?

I graduated in 2000 from Concordia University and I joined the family business end of 2001, so it's been about eight years.

When you were still studying what kind of job did you want to pursue after graduating?

I thought I wanted to be a teacher and that's why I did my major in philosophy and minor in education. Because I did education only as a minor I hadn't practiced teaching, it was all through textbook. When I came back to Bahrain the teaching positions were already taken, so they started me off as an assistant/replacement teacher. I started teaching grade six and seven in Al Bayan School. It was a good experience but it was psychologically and emotionally tiring. I got attached to the kids and when I got back home I continued thinking about them. It's a very tough job. Then I was placed as an assistant teacher for primary one. I got the gratitude from it emotionally, I enjoyed it, but physically it was exhausting. At that point my dad was in the ministry and we had the family business. I began to feel that there was a need for me to take care of the family business although I didn't have any background when it came to the business field.

How did you get yourself to leave teaching?

I taught for about eight months or so. I left because, like I said, I felt there was a need for me to work in the family business. At the same time, once I practiced the teaching job I realized that it wasn't what I expected it to be; it wasn't me and I couldn't see myself in it.

How did you feel about your decision to commit to the family business?

People assume that in a family business they can come in whenever they want and they can have their vacations whenever they want, but it's actually a great responsibility because it's something that my father started from zero and I want to see it go forward. This puts an even bigger responsibility on my shoulders because at the end of the day, the family business stays with me even when I go home. When I sit with my dad at home, for example, we talk about work. It's inevitable.

Tell us a little bit about AFI.

Al Fanar Investment Holding Company is the mother company, chaired by my father. He's now adding more companies to expand the business. Recently we also added one more company in Bahrain, VLCC, for slimming. Basically we're looking into every sector. Within AFI we have Gulf Markets International, the flagship company and it's 100 percent owned by the family.

It started in 1977 and it's a general trading company with different divisions: medical supplies, agriculture, building materials and office supplies. We also have TeleGulf, which are the directories, International and Technical Supplies and Services, which supply industrial and technical products to the industrial sector, Bahrain Filters, a manufacturing unit, ScanTech, another manufacturing unit, Al Fanar Travel, Gulf Translations, Al Hilal Hospital, Al Fanar SN Retail which includes the Lilliput brand and many more that come to about 20 or 21 companies.

What are you doing within AFI?

I was working at TeleGulf for some time, with Variety Magazine, which was a bi-monthly, bi-lingual publication. It's still available but today it's more of a classifieds copy that circulates with the directories as an added value for the advertisers. For some time I had taken it over and made it into a whole different magazine. However, we had an incident of a fire in the Bahrain Tower as many people will recall, so we had to divert our attention again to the bread and butter of the company, which was the TeleGulf directory. Now I'm the Business Development Director in Gulf Markets International (GMI). I still look over some stuff in TeleGulf, although not as much as before.

Since this is not your initial interest, how are you finding the business industry now?

You have to find your passion in it. Let's be realistic; GMI for example, is into building materials and medical supplies. Sometimes that's simply not of your interest, so you have to find a light that helps you find your interest in it. That's why I started off by bringing in the brand, Lilliput.

How did you bring Lilliput into the region under Al Fanar Investment?

For a couple years I've been talking with my dad about getting into the retail market and fashion. So I went to Italy where I got acquainted with some very nice brands. My dad told me that once I got the agency that I should get it for the entire Middle East and India, so I did that. I then set off to India to find distributors. There I met some friends of my dad and through them I got in contact with the Lilliput brand, but this guy was not interested in bringing in the brands that I found. Rather, he was interested in exporting the Lilliput brand to the Middle East. I found something different than what I was looking for.

Are you still interested in expanding the fashion industry?

Yes. Because retail was something new to the business itself, it was actually a learning phase for me. It's been almost a year, and I opened two stores in Bahrain. We already opened a store recently in Saudi and five stores in Egypt. This year has been the one in which I learned the most, because it's something I learned from the beginning and saw it grow.

How did you learn all the business lingo, its ins and outs?

It took time. Actually I'm a very reserved person, I wasn't that social. In the business world, you have to be tough, you have to say no and be aggressive sometimes. You have to put your foot down at certain times. You deal with men more than women and when you're dealing with men in the business world, you have to know that they view women differently. We have to be more assertive. So it took time for me to learn and I think at this stage I'm still in the learning

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process, especially when I'm working with my dad; it's a full experience, there's always something to learn from him. Eventually with experience and by making mistakes, you stand up again and learn from it.

How long did it take you before you were able to hold the position you hold today?

Each year I feel more in-tune with the position that I'm in and each year I feel that I'm learning more and that I can take on more responsibilities. But let me be honest about it; after opening Lilliput stores in the past year, I've learned more than I have in the previous years combined. I had to deal with every sort of problem that deals with opening a business from A to Z. This was an experience by itself; it made me grow not only as a businesswoman, but also as a person.

How does one become successful at such a young age?

Like my father always tells me, “you have to believe in yourself.” And you have to remember that defeat comes from within. If I wake up in the morning and think this is going to be a bad day, I'm not going to do well and I can't do this, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy and I'm not going to achieve anything. My father always tells me that it's all psychological and if you want to do it you can go ahead and do it.

If you weren't doing what you do today, what else would you be doing?

One of two things: Either I would be a fashion designer because I just love fashion, or I would have my own small makeup studio, applying makeup as a professional. I usually do my own makeup as well as my friends' and family's, and I do a pretty good job.



What is the biggest challenge that you've come across in your career?

There are many challenges; it would take hours to mention them all! But every couple of days there comes a challenge or a frustration. Standing up again, reenergizing, trying to think positively to change the course of what happened are all challenges. The biggest challenge, like I mentioned was opening this Lilliput business from A to Z. I remember two Ramadans ago when the contractors were working on the first Lilliput store in Country Mall and I was there, standing with them, going after and before Iftar and it was really frustrating and challenging. But in the end it was something tangible that I can see and touch, so it was very rewarding in the end.

What's the most gratifying thing about your job?

It's these stores, because they're like my baby and I had the chance to watch them grow and flourish. Expansion is still going on, and we're planning to open more stores in Bahrain and in the Middle East.

What are some of your short-term and long-term plans?

When it comes to my career, my short-term plans are to make my responsibilities grow and expand. As for the projects for which I am responsible, I'd like to see them flourish. My long-term plans are to expand the business. When it comes to retail I'd like to bring more brands in, for example women's wear. I want to add a woman's touch to the business.

What advice would you give a young Bahraini individual, still studying or about to graduate, who wants to start a career or business of their own?

For people who are still studying, I would tell them, focus on your education because it's the key to a lot of things, especially nowadays. When it comes to starting off a career or a business, try to accept any negative criticism and try to take the advice that your superiors give you into account. You have to build your self-confidence and believe in yourselves. That alone will help you do many things.

Is that easier said than done?

Yes, but when you focus on something that you want and you have the passion for it, you can easily believe in yourself and do it. I don't know why but I see my dad as my source of inspiration; he just walks in the house or in my office and I feel inspired by him, his stories and the way that he built himself. He always tells us, “if there is a will, there is a way.” I think he believes in us more than we believe in ourselves and we want to make him proud, so that's my source of inspiration. I think everyone has to have their own inspiration in order to believe in themselves.