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BE CURIOUS
READ
BE INSPIRED
We hope you enjoy reading Those Who Inspire Lebanon as much as we enjoyed writing it, and we offer our sincere thanks to everyone in Lebanon for his or her kindness and helpfulness.

We wish to thank and express our admiration and appreciation to all the inspiring and extraordinary Lebanese portrayed in this book. They are Those Who Inspire.

We extend our special thanks to Fouad Rahme, Farid Chehab, Ayad Nasser, Fadi Yarak, Hassan Diab, Chadia El Meouachi, Sandra Abou Nader and Michael Haddad just to name a few. Without their commitment, this book would have never been possible.

We also want to thank all Those Who Inspire Lebanon’s partners; they made the free donation of books to millennials possible - Discover who they are on Partner With TWI on our webpage - www.thosewhoinspire.com

We also take the opportunity to thank UNESCO for their encouragements and support, which means a lot to us, as we feel we are engaged in the same path of empowering young women and men, working together to drive social innovation and participating fully in the development of their societies.

We thank for their camaraderie and support all our Lebanese friends.

ALEJANDRO ANDRES
Co-Publisher & Co-Editor
TWI Lebanon

THANKS

كلمة الشكر والتقدير

نأمل أن نستطيعوا قراءة أولئك الذين يهمن لبنان، قدر ما استمعت بكتابك. وتقدم جزيل الشكر والتقدير لكل من ساهم وساعد في تحصيده.

نود أن نشكركم ونعبر عن إعجابنا وتقديمنا لكل اللبنانيين المتميزين وغير العاديين الذين نفرضهم عليهم في هذا الكتاب.

تقدم شكرنا الخاص لفؤاد حمزة، فريد شهاب، عباس ناصر، فادي برق، جمهور فلسطيني، ساجد أبو نادر ومايكل حداد على سبيل المثال لا الحصر، بدون النزاع، لما كان هذا الكتاب مثال على الجميع.

كما نود أن نشكر جميع شركائنا الذي يفضلونهم أسمه هذا الكتاب مثال جيد على الأفكار. يمكنكم الإطلاع على قائمة الشراء على الموقع الأكروني الخاص بـ هذا الكتاب.
Nous espérons que vous prendrez autant de plaisir à la lecture de Those Who Inspire Liban que nous en avons eu à l’écrire. Nous remercions du fond du cœur tous ceux que nous y avons rencontré pour leur grande gentillesse et leur aide précieuse.

Nous souhaitons particulièrement exprimer notre admiration et notre reconnaissance à ces extraordinaires Libanais inspirants dont le portrait figure dans ce livre.

Nous remercions tout particulièrement Farid Chehab, Ayad Nasser, Fadi Yarak, Hassan Diab, Chadia El Meouchi, Sandra Abou Nader et Michael Haddad pour n’en citer que quelques uns. Sans leur implication, ce livre n’aurait pas vu le jour.


Nous saisissions aussi cette opportunité pour exprimer à L’UNESCO notre reconnaissance pour leurs encouragements et leur soutien, qui comptent beaucoup pour nous. Nous pensons être engagés comme eux à la valorisation de jeunes hommes et femmes travaillant ensemble à l’innovation sociale et participant pleinement au développement de leurs sociétés.

Merci enfin à nos amis Libanais pour leur camaraderie et leur soutien.

REMERCIEMENTS
WHY THOSE WHO INSPIRE?

At Those Who Inspire, we believe that everything starts with inspiration...

Imagine where the world would be with zero inspiration. That’s a dark thought when you consider how valuable inspiration is. Without it you have no new ideas, no action, no progress.

Everything you can imagine that’s changed the world for the better all started with a seed of inspiration. Most people love to be around inspiration, positive energy that allows them to grow and strive to discover their full potential.

So why not celebrate inspiration? Let’s surround ourselves with it. Let’s make inspiration easy for millennials to access. Let’s go out and find people in your country and community who are passionate about what they do, get curious about their story, learn what inspires them, their advice, and their secrets to fulfillment.

The book you hold in your hands — Those Who Inspire Lebanon — is exactly that.

It is a powerful tool intended mainly for millennials. What makes it such a great tool? If the best ways to learn are through books, mentorship, and experience, you’ll be excited to know that the pages ahead cover all three. Prepare to meet dozens of Inspiring People from all walks of life, who will share with you their greatest secrets for achieving sometimes the impossible.

How to navigate the biggest challenges in life and work? How do we tackle issues like poverty, violence, inequality, education, diversity and corruption? How do we create more jobs and more opportunities?

This book explores all these questions and more through the eyes of people who are living their lives head-on to the maximum potential. People who are doing great work, pursuing their dreams and making an impact on society — everyday heroes ready to light you up with positive energy, confidence, and curiosity.

Through Those Who Inspire, nothing is impossible.

The Roots of Those Who Inspire

We had been crossing the globe for almost two decades, and by 2010, our lives and work had taken us to more than eighty countries. And it still wasn’t enough. Our passion for people had become stronger than ever, and we wanted to contribute more to the people of those countries, especially the youth. We wanted to reflect the inspiration we saw.

This was the big question: How do you inspire somebody? You tell them a story. What kind of story? One that changes their life. However, a story alone isn’t enough. You have to live by example. You have to show the way through action, not just words.

Those people who live lives of daring action and make an impact on the people around them, we call them Inspiring People — “IP” for short — and we’ve portrayed hundreds of them across the world, inspiring thousands of millennials along the way.

The first book was in Oman; the next was in the UAE, followed by Nigeria, Hong Kong, Kuwait, then Mexico and many more countries are on the way including Bahrain, Spain, Women in Spain and regions of France. And now Lebanon.

This ever-expanding collection of country focused books explores a wide spectrum of IP from all walks of life — both famous and everyday heroes — who share their true passions, experiences, successes and failures. Priceless insights to imbue the up-and-coming generations as they navigate the ups and downs in today’s world.

A single book can take one or two years to put together, as we comb through the country, searching for and exchanging with IPs from all backgrounds. And from there it’s all about getting these stories into the hands of as many millennials as possible through collaboration with local and international organisations, partners, universities, and ministries.

The global mission is this: to boldly encourage millennials to pursue their dreams, believe in themselves, and to support them in finding reliable role models and mentors in their own country. You are about to embark on a journey of discovery and inspiration. Read and reread these profiles as needed, get curious, take notes, and commit yourself to action. This book is your blueprint for how to change the world around you and make it a better place. As you read, you will find a lot of passion, commitment and a common desire to give back and share — that’s the very heart of Those Who Inspire.

This book is for all millennials.

Reading one IP per day keeps your dreams on the way!

Read and Dare
FOREWORD

Each of the 60 Inspiring People portrayed in this book are living proof that ingenuity and enterprise are cornerstones of Lebanon. Their stories demonstrate that Lebanon, regardless of ethnic or religious backgrounds, is a place where one can thrive elbow to elbow with their fellow countrymen and women.

While each person here has boldly pursued their own dreams, Lebanon as a whole has been the greatest benefactor of their effort. Indeed, the book you hold in your hands truly captures this diversity in motion, doers, achievers and brilliant minds from all walks of life. Their stories are inspiring examples of how Lebanon is a place which rewards ingenuity, and the world has seldom seen so much concentration of talent on such tiny patch of land.

Yet, instead of practicing self-indulgence, Lebanon and the Lebanese have opened their hearts and territory to the masses of refugees that have sought shelter from hardship. Foreign kids flock to the classrooms that the Lebanese children have left vacant by lunch time so that generations of young migrant brothers and sisters may pursue a certain degree of normalcy in their lives and don’t miss precious years of education. Here the Lebanese teachers embody elements of heroism, a trademark of Lebanese existence, and a benchmark of humanity for all to take note (and emulate in our everyday lives). It is awe-inspiring to see how a nation that once took the way of the diaspora has become home to the displaced.

Lebanon’s generosity toward refugees is just one example of how tradition and modernity collide in the most productive ways in this country. Without the oils, the fertile lands and the strategic locations that have empowered other neighbours, men and women, from all religions, have forged this cultural matrix of the Levant. And now, the new generations, the Millennials, are enthusiastically taking Lebanon to the next stage, essentially building the startup hub of the Middle East.

And it’s not just young coders and tech enthusiasts fueling Lebanon’s swan-dive into the modern era. Seafarers, financiers, scholars and peasants have forged the most remarkable higher learning network within Lebanon. This devotion toward education speaks of an even higher purpose that inhabits the collective will of the land. Across the board, education was mentioned as being the number one priority and asset by our interviewees. Both men and women profess and foster the love for culture, curiosity, and learning. Granting your offspring the best possible education is one’s mission in life here, for both men and women, loud and clear. And this is just one of many shared traits a part of the Lebanon spirit—equally curious, challenging, performing, ambitious, caring, hospitable, self-reliant and food-loving.

This is what it means living in a place like Lebanon.

A diverse tiny nation, larger than life in its diaspora, full of people who love fast-paced competition, challenge and opportunity. And this is what you get from Those Who Inspire: Lebanon—an experience-driven constellation of secrets to success, lessons learned, inspiring stories and insights on how to move forward in this digital era with your anchor well set in centuries-old universal values.

Please use this book to build your own personal blueprint for navigating the seven seas while inspiring others.

Climbing your way up in life never is about money or pride but about discovering and pursuing the things that give meaning to life. Learn all you will from previous generations and peers, apply that knowledge, be empirical and create something big. This book is full of great mentors who can provide the right insight into new directions yet, ultimately, it is no other than you who determines the path to follow. The power and freedom to build and shape a new Lebanon is in your hands.

A collection of inspiring Lebanese awaits you in the pages ahead. Marvel at their failures and successes as they invite you to tap into that priceless commodity called experience. Engage in divergent thinking, connect the dots, and imbue your heart with light and wisdom. As you read, you will be in the company of women and men who transcended fear and doubt, who rose above every imaginable limitation to turn their dreams into a reality, yes, here, in Lebanon.

Before diving into each profile, pause for a moment of silence and allow your sense of curiosity to heat up and boil over as you get ready to explore the amazing ones. And as you read, remember this: awareness precedes knowledge, and curiosity precedes awareness. And the most exciting thing about curiosity? It’s available to you right here, right now.
JOIN THE MOVEMENT

It is thanks to the Those Who Inspire Movement that we can get this book for free into the hands of as many millennials as possible as well as organise talks and round tables at universities, organisations and companies.

It is thanks to the Those Who Inspire Movement that our books can inspire youth with the stories of their fellow countrymen and women from all walks of life, and enable them to connect with all the potential mentors portrayed as IP (Inspiring People) in Those Who Inspire country books.

So many people are involved in the Those Who Inspire Movement: All our IP who spread inspiration to the youth; all our Partners, whether they are involved financially or not; universities; local and foreign governmental institutions; TWI Ambassadors and drivers of Inspiration; the press; and mainly the youth sharing the stories that most inspired them with peers who didn’t get a chance to receive a book from their company or university.

All the IP portrayed in this book have agreed to become mentors to young people who will contact them via Those Who Inspire.

They will either do one-on-one mentoring and/or join us to exchange directly with youth at universities. If you are a Lebanese millennial and want to reach out to an IP portrayed in this book, please visit Meet the IP on www.thosewhoinspire.com.

Join the Movement

Be curious - read - be inspired

Share the stories
www.thosewhoinspire.com

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The following portraits are in alphabetical order
GO INTO SOMETHING YOU LOVE DOING. WITHOUT THAT LOVE, THINGS DON’T COME OUT THE WAY THEY SHOULD.

Launched in 1955 and formally established by President Camille Chamoun in 1956, Baalbeck International Festival is one of Lebanon’s foremost cultural institutions—and May Arida has been there right from the very beginning. “I volunteered with the festival since 1955, and I was in charge of music and ballet. It was a lot of work. I used to follow up on all the details and I usually came back home at around 3 am. I gave everything for the festival. It was a marvellous time!” she recalls.

Charismatic and passionate about art and culture, May took over as president of the festival in 1974—just one year before the war broke out—and faced the challenge of getting the festival through the war years, ensuring that its reputation and artist network survived, and reviving it again after the war had ended. “Even if the festival was no longer organised, I felt that I had to stay in the country to see that no one destroyed what had been built. Even during the war, I couldn’t stay idle. We had a house in the north but I had to come down to Baalbek to make sure that the sites were taken care of, to ensure that they weren’t trashed. I was constantly thinking about the day when we would bring the festival back to life,” May recalls. In addition to preserving the integrity of the venues, May also saved the Baalbeck Festival archives. “At the beginning of the war, militiamen came to our premises looking for money, and they made a mess of all our records and documents in their search for valuables,” she says. “We spent two months after this incident bringing all that paperwork back to order.” She subsequently compiled the preserved documents, photos, booklets and posters and finally, they became a book, Les Riches Heures du Festival, featuring photos, poems and commentary by great Lebanese and foreign artists.

May successfully revived the festival in 1997, and it has continued dynamically ever since. Now the oldest and most prestigious cultural event in the Middle East, the festival promotes culture and tourism in Lebanon and nurtures an enticing environment and cross-cultural exchange. It continues to showcase the arts, project a positive image of Lebanon to the world and work towards a better country through the power of culture and tourism. Its success—May’s legacy—is the perfect continuation of a love affair with music, art, and culture that started when May was still a girl. “My mother played the piano, my brother the violin, and I studied solfège—we were a very lively family!” she laughs. “This strong love for music I experienced at home has been my great source of inspiration throughout the years. I was very happy at music class learning about opera and everything else. I applied these hours of study and this drive to managing the Baalbeck Festival. I was checking everything before the show, down to the tiniest detail. It was hours and hours of exhausting but incredibly rewarding work.”

Through good times and through bad, for fifty-six years, May set a shining example of dedication and commitment to showcasing Lebanese culture and promoting the arts in the country. And it’s her personal passion for all three of these things—Lebanon, art and culture—that has enabled her to go above and beyond. From discovering music as a young girl to bringing the region’s most prestigious festival back to life after a seventeen-year hiatus, her secret was a love for her work combined with patience and perseverance. “My father was a perfectionist and I followed in his footsteps. Just as with music when I was young, so with the festival. I loved it, and I never complained about how exhausting this endeavour could be,” she explains. “The key is to go into something you love and adore doing. Without that love, things don’t come out the way they should,” she points out. “Follow the passion within, always!”

IN SHORT
Naturally charismatic and passionate about culture and her beloved Lebanon, May Arida has been a part of the Baalbeck Festival since the beginning and has served as president of the festival committee for 37 years, seeing it through the tumultuous war years. Her legacy is unquestionable, and she has no reservations about the sacrifices she made to promote the country’s arts and culture. “I love Lebanon as much as I love my children,” she says.

WHILE WE WERE PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCHES TO THIS BOOK, WE WERE DEEPLY SADDENED TO HEAR ABOUT MAY ARIDA PASSING AT AGE 92, ON MAY 13TH, 2018. WE HAVE DECIDED TO KEEP HER JOURNAL AS IS, AS ONE OF THE LAST INTERVIEWS SHE GAVE BEFORE SHE PASSED AWAY. MAY ARIDA’S IMPORTANT LEGACY, INSPIRING, UPLIFTING AND MOTIVATING WORDS LIVE ON IN THE MIND AND HEART OF EVERYONE WHO HAD THE HONOUR OF MEETING HER AND LEARNING FROM HER, INCLUDING THE THOSE WHO INSPIRE: LEBANON TEAM.
ZIAD ABICHAKER
CEO
Cedar Environmental

I LIKE
• Jazz
• Good food
• Local economies

I DON’T LIKE
• Bureaucracy
• Greedy people
• Savage capitalism

IN SHORT
Self-professed “master garbage man,” Cedar Environmental CEO Ziad Abichaker is on a mission to improve Lebanon through waste management, contributing to environmental protection, job creation, sustainability and community improvement. He aims to build more recycling plants as well as a self-sufficient eco-village. “Unlike some people, I look forward to Mondays so I can put into practice all the ideas that I’ve had over the weekend,” he admits.

“I am an environmental engineer. I also have a degree in industrial engineering. My master’s is in something called bioprocess engineering. Don’t pay much attention to these degrees though, because I consider myself a garbage man.” That’s how Ziad Abichaker, CEO of Cedar Environmental, greeted a packed auditorium at TEDxBeirut in 2011, in a talk titled A Garbage Love Story. This love affair had started with an elective in environmental engineering and an invitation to join a team researching composting techniques. From there, he started working on a decentralised recycling plan concept. Almost instantly, he knew he wanted to continue in waste management—a combination of his passion for engineering and his childhood decision to help transform Lebanon for the better. “Growing up during the Civil War, I experienced this country in shambles. And that’s what made me decide that when it was all over I would have a role in making it a better place,” Ziad explains.

Garbage is something we should process and transform to benefit the community instead of sending it to faraway landfills to be buried out of sight and out of mind—and this simple truth is at the heart of Ziad’s philosophy. His team came up with an environmentally sound composting technique that turns waste into high-grade compost that can even be used in organic agriculture. Going beyond compostable waste, they also developed techniques to recycle all kinds of materials that other countries are currently struggling with, including the infamous disposable nylon bags. These are processed into Eco-Board, a form of hard plastic with a wide range of commercial applications, from furniture to walls. For example, the bags can be turned into chairs while plastic bottles can be turned into thread to make cushions. “We are not just protecting the environment,” Ziad points out. “We are making new products, stimulating the economy, and creating jobs.”

Through his company, Cedar Environmental, Ziad designs and manufactures recycling plant machinery that solves the problem of excess waste using the company’s hallmark zero-waste technique. Producing the machinery locally substantially lowers the cost, meaning that these recycling plants are much more affordable for municipalities across the country. “If you take household waste and apply all the techniques that we have already developed, you don’t have to throw away anything,” Ziad says, and although not everyone is ready to embrace his no-nonsense community-based approach, Cedar Environmental is committed to action despite the naysayers. “I am very persistent by nature. I’ve learned to never quit! If things don’t work out the first time, you keep trying until they do,” Ziad says. “Facing troubles is part of the journey. You don’t shy away from them. You fight. You don’t let anyone intimidate you, especially if you are doing the right thing. You don’t give up.”

Ziad learned valuable lessons from the people he has met along the way: values of hard work and humility, doing more and talking less, and knowing that what really matters is the results. “It matters what you do, not what you say,” he points out, and true to his word, Ziad is all about helping the younger generation get the tools they need to shape the future. “I make sure I open my doors to those who need help, those who want to learn more about the environment. I don’t see myself as a philanthropist, I see myself as a good citizen. I do lots of good actions if you will—I’ve donated green walls to schools so they can teach the kids the value of garbage, the value of recycling,” he explains, stressing the importance of cultivating not only learning but also focus and patience. “We must counter the effects of technology on the brain. The reduction of our concentration span can be dangerous to us as a species,” says Ziad, ever the engineer. “The brain is a wonderful tool. It is able to concentrate on a problem and solve it.”

FACING TROUBLES
You don’t shy away from them. You fight.
RAYMOND ABOU ADAL
CEO and Chairman
Holdal Group

In the cusp of retirement—in the process of determining a suitable successor so he can move on to other ventures—Holdal Group CEO Raymond Abou Adal is as invested as ever in the future of the business his father founded in 1947 as Georges Abou Adal & Cie. “My main objective now is to delegate successfully via a succession plan underway, to leave a strong leadership at the head of the company,” he says, explaining that even in a family business, business has to come first. “We are a family company, like 99% of companies in Lebanon, but management is not related to family ties. If one of the family is equally or more capable than an outside professional then good, they have priority. But if not, skills and capabilities will prevail over family ties. Good governance is key. Being objective is key,” he stresses. And his opinion has some clout. Soon after graduating from his studies, Raymond was called to join the business founded by his father, as the latter intended to focus on his political life. Starting at the bottom of the ladder, Raymond was appointed to head the commercial operations of the Group. In 1992, he became CEO and chairman of Holdal, which by then included over 10 operating entities from manufacturing to pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, luxury goods and FMCG.

Raymond’s father passed on to him more than the business. “My father was a multifaceted visionary, a great intellectual who went into politics for love of his country,” he says, freely admitting that his father is one of his greatest inspirations. Raymond’s own love for Lebanon is manifest. “I love it because my roots are here, because it is a lovely mix of cultures and contradictions. It’s very interesting, and it’s very difficult to understand for someone from the outside,” he smiles. “We are open-minded, multi-cultural, multi-religious, and have endured incredible hardships during the War. Lebanon today is a model of coexistence precisely because of its multi-religious nature.”

The key to getting ahead—in business, philanthropy, and life—lies in the key values we carry with us and implement in our daily lives. Holdal’s success is built on its integrity, willingness to challenge norms and a burning desire to make a positive impact in the region. For Raymond, anyone looking to get ahead needs to start on solid foundations. “Listen, be open-minded and communicative. Read and learn and find out where things are going. Take a breath when you need to and give yourself some distance to evaluate,” he advises, but he’s all too aware of the speed with which the world is transforming. “There are huge changes in the way things are evolving. There is disruption all over. Younger generations are living through difficult times. They must learn to bide their time, to adapt, or to develop some sort of crystal ball!”

Asked if he has any words of wisdom, a core belief that informs his decisions that he wants to share with the world, Raymond’s answer is disarming. “Love others.” His love of Lebanon is more fundamental than love of country; it’s a love for the Lebanese people, their diverse communities and unique individuals that comprise it—a love for humankind. This is clear in Holdal’s numerous CSR initiatives. The company supports food banks, fundraises for children’s hospitals, campaigns for blood donation and runs cancer awareness campaigns. There’s also a focus on sustainability, through the company’s commitment to recycling and raising environmental awareness. “We do not have the budget of a multinational, but we do allocate funds to a variety of causes. More importantly, we devote people and resources to maximise its impact. We also work to decentralise our CSR processes in order to allow each department to maximise its impact. “We do not have the budget of a multinational, but we do allocate funds to a variety of causes. More importantly, we devote people and time—hearts and minds,” says Raymond.

IN SHORT
Confidently navigating the often tricky waters of family business, Holdal CEO Raymond Abou Adal has helped the business grow into a key force in local markets and develop a wide range of grassroots activities to empower communities and support young people. “Lebanon is unlike other Middle Eastern countries,” he says. “There’s a cultural influence from Lebanon to the world and vice versa, a truly global reach to and from all continents.”
Those who inspire Lebanon

Italian, English, Arabic, French, speaks

USJ Literature French MA in EDUCATED Beirut 1963 BORN

L'Officiel Levant

Editor in Chief

FIFI ABOU DIB

• Seeing my cherry tree grow
• Seeing my daughter grow
• The joy of beauty

I LIKE

• The joy of beauty
• Seeing my daughter grow
• Seeing my cherry tree grow

I DON'T LIKE

• Crowds
• Narcissism
• The French word concotter

You need to be present in real life. You need to take the time to look.

S
pending her childhood and twenties between her native Beirut and Paris, Fifi Abou Dib was always clear about where home was. “Things were good in Paris, but I always felt that my place was here in Lebanon. I always felt the need to come back,” she recalls. “I kept thinking about what was going on here, what I’d left behind, what I could do for the country. I felt a need to play my part. And to take back my identity.”

Growing up in the midst of a war was certainly not easy, but Fifi notes that it brought out a unique sense of togetherness amongst the communities it affected. “The neighbourhood used to get together and somehow the fear that came from the shelling, the insecurity and unsafety made us very close and intimate. We were like a huge tribe in the district. Everyone caring for each other, always doing something for others. That terrible situation somehow brought out the good in people,” she explains.

Fifi’s first job was in teaching. She returned to Lebanon from Paris with a degree in French literature and took a job as a teacher at a French school. That career was short-lived. “The situation was very fragile at the time, and I really felt like I had something to give to the children. The kids were an inspiration, and I instilled in them a love for reading, for literature. But it wasn’t my calling,” she explains. When the opportunity came up to join L’Orient-Le Jour as an intern, she seized it. “I really felt I had found my place. It was a bunch of crazy people. Like a family—a really crazy one,” Fifi laughs. The newspaper kept her on after the internship, putting her on cultural reporting. It was 1986, and Fifi found herself seeking out cultural activities in the midst of war. “You had great artists like Saloua Raouda Choucair working away in their workshops despite the shelling and creating masterpieces,” she says, noting the invaluable support of her mentor and senior editor of the cultural pages Marie Thérèse Arbid, a social powerhouse of her generation that had drawn local and international artists around her during Lebanon’s pre-war heyday as a hub for Arab artists and intellectuals.

Post-war Lebanon faces a completely new set of challenges—political as much as social, from healing a legacy of conflict and corruption to negotiating the brave new world of socialisation through technology. So many young people are addicted to instant information and online media that Fifi believes it’s taking away from fashion by accident. When I started, I was completely out of my territory. But I discovered with time that fashion is a fascinating expression of our era. Fashion is the mirror of every group in society,” says Fifi, who got into that line of work at the same time as digital photo-sharing platforms like Instagram took off, redefining the role of image in everyday life. “It was challenging, but I am grateful for fashion, for travelling around the world because of it. I’ve had beautiful experiences with great fashion houses, I’ve met and collaborated with truly creative people, real artists. It’s a side of the world I would not have discovered otherwise… But my aspirations now have changed,” Fifi confides. “I would love to retire and write books.”

Today, Fifi is editor-in-chief of fashion magazine L’Officiel Levant and columnist at L’Orient-Le Jour newspaper. “I came to fashion by accident. When I started, I was completely out of my territory. But I discovered with time that fashion is a fascinating expression of our era. Fashion is the mirror of every group in society,” says Fifi, who got into that line of work at the same time as digital photo-sharing platforms like Instagram took off, redefining the role of image in everyday life. “It was challenging, but I am grateful for fashion, for travelling around the world because of it. I’ve had beautiful experiences with great fashion houses, I’ve met and collaborated with truly creative people, real artists. It’s a side of the world I would not have discovered otherwise… But my aspirations now have changed,” Fifi confides. “I would love to retire and write books.”

IN SHORT L’Officiel Levant editor-in-chief and L’Orient-Le Jour columnist Fifi Abou Dib has written on culture and fashion through some of Lebanon’s most challenging and interesting times. Her words of wisdom? “Hang on. And it’s her roots talking. “I am from the mountains,” she explains. “I am a peasant with mud on my shoes. Sometimes the city girl in me panics, but my peasant part says, ‘It’s okay. Time will do. There’s a solution for everything.’”

BORN 1963 Beirut

EDUCATED MA in French Literature USJ

SPKES French, Arabic, English, Italian

CONTACT IP fifiaboudib@gmail.com

YES TO Mentoring Talks

LEBANON

L’Officiel Levant
SANDRA ABOU NADER
Chairwoman
Cedrar

As a young graduate and mother of four who had never had the chance to put her education to use in the professional world, Sandra Abou Nader took the bold decision to start her business life. She took on various volunteering roles at her children’s school and elsewhere. As more and more opportunities presented themselves, she also decided to refresh her education. “I’m very proud to have become pro-active rather than wait for things to happen,” Sandra says. “It was very challenging to get up after raising four kids, and say ‘That’s it. I have to turn the page and start my life,’ but I did it. The kids would be studying in their rooms, and I’d be studying in the dining room. And when I felt that I was ready, I chose one of the opportunities offered to me and just started,” she explains.

In 2004, Sandra joined Saradar Group and took charge of managing and restructuring a number of companies after the merger with Bank Audi. She also drew on her love for Lebanon’s majestic nature and began formulating an idea for a real estate project. “This is a special, wonderful place that I’ve always loved visiting to sit by myself, to just breathe,” she says. In 2009, this idea led to the founding of Cedrar—of which she is now chairwoman—which has undertaken a project in the famous region of the Cedars that combines respectful development and environmental action. Along with the small village it is constructing, Cedrar is reforesting the historical cedar forest by planting seedlings originating from the seeds of the same forest in an additional 130,000 square metres. Cedrar also supports Saint Joseph University’s research on the multiplication and conservation of the endemic Iris cedrel species.

Sandra’s love for Lebanese nature is matched by her love of art and her belief in its power to heal. When she was approached to sponsor an exhibition of Lebanese art in 2008, she decided to go beyond that, co-founding the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL), a non-profit dedicated to putting Lebanese art on the world stage and granting scholarships for fine arts students. “Media coverage of the war destroyed the image of our country,” she explains. “We wanted to show the real face of Lebanon, its potential—to give students and emerging artists an opportunity to show the true face of our country across the world,” Sandra explains, adding that she hopes to see this initiative impact generations to come. From Washington DC to the Royal College of Arts in London and the 2013 Venice Biennale, APEAL has already brought Lebanese art to some of the world’s major cultural centres and is now working on creating a dedicated museum to be completed by 2021. BeMA (Beirut Museum of Art) will host the Ministry of Culture’s Lebanese collection, constituting a platform for creativity and conversation. BeMA also organises artist residency programmes across Lebanon, nurturing dialogue within and between communities. “Art is a vehicle of peace. Through art you can create dialogue and bring people together,” Sandra says. “Art inspires tolerance, acceptance of the other—and this is something we need in this country.”

Sandra’s dedication and commitment in all her endeavours is, in many ways, a mission. In 2005, she was injured in an explosion targeting former PM Rafik Hariri. That made her reconsider her life. “It was a lesson. It helped me understand that I shouldn’t focus on things that aren’t important. It helped me understand my priorities in life—family, friends—the things worth investing in,” Sandra explains. “The past is history. The future is a mystery. But the moment, the present you live in, is a gift. I want to get the best out of it.” For Sandra, it all comes down to love and faith. Throughout this experience, her faith played a key role, helping her realise that she was spared for a reason. “This faith is illuminating my heart, helping me to come over. I understood that I have a lot to do, that’s why I’m still here.”

IN SHORT
Making a courageous choice to enter the workforce for the first time after raising four children, Sandra Abou Nader has focused her professional life on culture and nature. Through BeMA, she seeks to promote Lebanese art, encourage emerging artists, and foster creativity and dialogue. “Lebanon is a wonderful multicultural country,” she says. “It’s an example of cohabitation, and our hope is that we will be able to keep it that way.”

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Lebanon has gone through a lot and that’s left scars, there’s much to improve still, but I’m in love with it. It’s my roots. It can be tough, but it’s also a place of diverse, passionate people and human warmth. The Lebanese have developed an acute survival instinct and this is what makes us magic,” Asma Andraos explains. “That constant state of uncertainty that we’ve endured for decades is both what holds us back and what has made us strong. It allows for a permanent, constant, intense energy, because we all are in an emergency mode. It’s both our weakness and our strength. And somehow, we always bounce back. That’s what Lebanon is to me.”

Lebanon was always in Asma’s heart throughout her years studying in France, England and Canada, where she earned her degree in political science. She returned within two months of graduating, in 1992. After working as a freelance copywriter and journalist for a few years, Asma co-founded Stree, an event marketing and live communication agency, with her partner Michael Nakfloor in 1999. Following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, she put her skills to use in a different capacity. Without making any formal preparations, she sprang into action, creating a spontaneous movement in her wake. It grew into the Civil Society Group OSAMAM, becoming a key force at the sit-in camp that grew around Martyrs’ Square, organising logistical necessities for the camp, and helping disseminate protesters’ voices to the outside world. That same year, Time magazine chose to feature her as one of 37 people “who are changing the world for the better.”

Despite being a political outsider—not being aligned to any party and showing up to her interview with the Senior Foreign Advisor wearing pink chucks—Asma was approached with a job offer by the Prime Minister’s Office. “I told them I had no experience in politics, that I wasn’t really politically correct, and I was never going to wear a suit. But they said that’s exactly why they wanted me, because they wanted that energy,” Asma recalls. She worked as communications advisor in the Presidency of Council of Ministers from 2006 to 2010, and then resigned to join PM Saad Hariri’s team as head of PR and events until her resignation in 2017.

“Suddenly one day I couldn’t keep going. It became too heavy. I was burned out, exhausted. Something had cracked. I realised that the cause we had gotten into back then was gone, and it was really political now. And this is not me. This is not what I want,” Asma explains. “My aspiration now is to be happy. What I want is a Lebanon free of interference—no more Iran, no more weapons, no more Hezbollah, no more Saudi, no more corruption. I want sustainable solutions for our pollution, education and healthcare,” she continues. “Is it feasible? Why not? This new generation can save us, but we have to let go. The problem is, that’s difficult. Power is addictive and you become self-assured and complacent. But it has to happen. There’s so much to be done.”

Inspired by the tenacity and solid values of her parents, stepfather and grandparents, and by the contribution and self-sacrifice of those Lebanese politicians who stuck it out at great personal cost and suffering, Asma is committed to doing her part for the country. She is a founding member of the non-profit civic NGO OSAMAM, a member of the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA) and Young Arab Leaders (YAL), an Aspen Leadership Fellow, mentors young people, gives talks, and does hands-on volunteering whenever there’s a crisis, helping with things from logistics and planning to fundraising. “We’re lucky to be alive,” she says, disarmingly. “We have to make the most of it. None of us started with a full setup, none of us started with tonnes of money in our accounts, none of us started knowing where we were going. So hang in there. You have to put in time and effort, give it your all, and keep at it.”

We’re lucky to be alive. We have to make the most of it.
Sometimes I feel that I have Stockholm syndrome with Lebanon. It stole my life and now I’m in love with my kidnapper,” jokes filmmaker Philippe Aractingi. “It’s a chaotic land, a crossroads and a chaotic place—and chaos is the first ingredient of creativity. The earth was created out of chaos in the Bible. Chaos in alchemy is the first element before creation. If you don’t have chaos, you don’t need to create because everything is fine,” he adds, laughing. Philippe grew up in chaos. By the time he was 14, he knew he wanted to become a filmmaker, and by the time he was 16 he was already working as a war photographer and interpreting for French journalists. “I was often in the streets with my camera bearing witness to what was going on; fascinating, traumatising, dramatic surely,” he recalls. Working a series of jobs in the broader audiovisual field, Philippe kept fuelling his passion and honing his skills. He filmed his first feature-length documentary when he was just 20, directed news programmes and filmed reports for TV. But the constant exposure to the gruesome side of the war eventually took its toll.

Philippe moved to Paris when he was 25, and went on to direct over 50 documentaries and short films, working in France, Africa, and South and East Asia. Right from the get-go, he was clear about the need to preserve his own identity in his work. Whilst over the years he has worked on a diverse range of topics, much of his work is dedicated to exploring the Lebanese psyche. “I always wanted to do poetry, but I find it very pretentious to say ‘I am a poet’ or ‘I am an artist’. You don’t become one like you become a dentist,” Philippe explains. “I’ve always wanted to do fiction, poetic stories, but I went into documentaries first because the reality of war was more imposing than any fiction that you could create. But then, with time, I made it.”

He returned to Lebanon after 12 years and started his work on fiction films. His work, which includes Bosta, Under the Bombs, Heritages, and Listen to name a few, explores the resilience of the Lebanese spirit, the impact of war, the collective experiences of exile, memory and transmission, and even love as an act of resistance and survival.

Philippe’s work has put the Lebanese film industry in the limelight, earning international recognition and a host of awards over the past 15 years. Driven by his innate curiosity and proclivity for pushing the boundaries and delving into thought-provoking ideas, Philippe continues to experiment. Alongside his own films and Fantascope, he also coaches students, sits on the jury at ALBA, is a founding member of Fondation Liban Cinema, and serves as Vice President of the Board at the Screen Institute Beirut, an organisation that helps up-and-coming artists shape and execute their ideas and documentaries. In 2018, Philippe was named a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French state for his contribution to the enrichment of cultural inheritance.

Looking to the future of Lebanon, Philippe points to the potential and power of young Lebanese to shape the country anew. “But they are lacking the awareness that they can make a difference,” he says, attributing this partly to a loss of identity—a loss of connection with language and culture—and to an inherited sense of futility. “They have a great desire for life but also complete dissociation from the whole picture. They ignore the fact that they could act in politics and change things,” Philippe points out. “But it’s not their fault. Layers and layers of people have been trying and not succeeding, so they gave up consciously, just as their elders gave up. They have been taught by war leaders and politicians to fear one another, to fear their neighbour. We are stuck in our religious identities, so my message is this: Fear less. Believe more.” The capacity to change things, Philippe points out, is still right there, in your hands.

Philippe Aractingi
Storyteller Filmmaker
Fantascope Productions

SOMETIMES I LIKE

- Dancing
- Music
- Love

SOMETIMES I DON’T LIKE

- Discord
- War
- Noise

IN SHORT
A war photographer by 16, a news director by his 20s, and a documentary and fiction film director whose work has toured the world and put the Lebanese film industry on the world map by his early 30s, Philippe Aractingi is a self-taught movie director whose work explores and celebrates the multiple—often contradictory and difficult—aspects of the Lebanese experience.

“Lebanon is a nation of abundance; water, generosity, folly and madness!”

BORN
1964
Beirut

EDUCATED
Self-taught

SPEAKS
French,
Arabic,
English

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YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

LEBANON

FEAR LESS. BELIEVE MORE.
Ever since we were kids, our parents told us that we were ambassadors for Lebanon, and this has marked us in everything we do,” says Christine Assouad, CEO of Meeting Point, the Assouad Group company that owns and operates the Dunkin Donuts franchise in Lebanon, with more than 30 outlets around the country. “We were blessed to be born to parents who made us passionate and appreciative of life, who really push us in everything we do while making us feel safe even in the most unsafe conditions,” she adds. One of four siblings, Christine remembers a happy childhood and the long-lasting impact of the years spent as a Scout and Guide. “That was such an important part of my childhood. Everything I know about leadership and how to run a business, I learned from the Scouts.”

Getting ready to return to Lebanon after finishing her studies in Canada, Christine realised that what she would miss most were the coffee shops. It was the mid-’90s, Lebanon was just beginning to recover from the war and there was nothing comparable in the country. “It’s hard to imagine now but there wasn’t a single international chain, not one coffee shop, and I loved the idea of bringing that to Lebanon: a place where students and young people could come together, have a coffee, chat. That’s why we called the company Meeting Point,” Christine explains. And as luck had it, the timing was perfect: Dunkin Donuts was looking to expand into the region. “I was only 22, but they decided to give it a go. It’s been an amazing experience. For me, Dunkin is really about spreading happiness, and we’re now going on 20 years of doing that for our customers.”

Serenity seems to favour Christine. In 2007, whilst in Washington for a conference, she got talking to her taxi driver about Lebanese cuisine. And when he suggested she opened a Lebanese restaurant, the idea clicked. A new mission: to take Lebanese cuisine all over the world. Christine founded Semsom in 2008, offering traditional Lebanese food “with a twist.” The chain has since spread from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE, Egypt and the USA, with even more locations in the pipeline.

Christine’s first experience with mentorship came through a programme that matched female Arab entrepreneurs with women entrepreneurs from the US. “It was an amazing experience, and I have since been mentoring others myself. I started with just one mentee; mentored 18 and have three now. It’s been such an enriching experience. It’s amazing to see them keep pushing forward and I intend to keep doing this for a very, very long time,” Christine says, remembering her own path when she was starting out. “I never had an actual mentor back then, but I had my pool of guardian angels who helped me over the years, who offered advice and feedback and put me in contact with people,” she explains. And of course, there’s the inspiration she draws from her family: her serial entrepreneur dad, her super-organised and big-hearted mum, her ever-optimistic businessman grandfather. “Even in the worst situation he will find the tiniest littlest positive thing. And this for me is the biggest lesson. This is what I try to do,” Christine smiles. “There is a solution for everything. We just have to find it. We have been through so many up and downs, but we are resilient. We know that happiness is a choice.”

The keys to her success—the same advice she gives the young people she works with—come down to the most basic attitudes and practices. “Finding something you are passionate about is rule number one. Do what you love and try to be as good as you can be in that particular field you choose,” she says, pointing out that it’s perfectly normal to have different passions at different times in your life. “Make sure to surround yourself with amazing people, because you cannot do everything on your own, but having the right team counts. And don’t lose focus of the numbers. You need that profit to grow, to sustain your business and to fulfil those dreams.”

IN SHORT Serendipity, business acumen, positivity and just the right balance of innovation and tradition—these are the ingredients that have driven Christine Assouad’s success in the food and restaurant business. As CEO of Meeting Point, which owns Dunkin Donuts in Lebanon, and founder of Semsom Lebanese restaurants, she’s spreading happiness through great coffee and amazing hummus. “Happiness is a choice,” she smiles, “and everything has a solution.”

YES TO Mentoring Talks

CONTACT Christine assouad@ddlebanon.com

THOSE WHO INSPIRE

Christine Assouad
CEO
Meeting Point / Treats Holding

LIKE
• Travelling
• Time with my daughters
• People with positive energy

I DON’T LIKE
• Hypocrisy
• Politics
• Negative energy

BORN
1974
Beirut

EDUCATED
• BA in Food Science
American University of Beirut

SPEAKS
• Arabic
• English
• French
• Italian

Happiness is a choice.
**THOSE WHO INSPIRE**

**SAAD AZHARI**  
Chairman & GM  
BLOM Bank

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**BORN**  
1961  
Beirut

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**EDUCATED**  
MBA  
University  
of Michigan

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**SPEAKS**  
Arabic, English, French, German

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**THE WORLD IS CHANGING VERY FAST, BUT THERE IS A GOLDEN RULE: ALWAYS THINK POSITIVELY.**

Head for numbers, strong initiative and good communication and relationship-building skills are invaluable tools in any businessperson’s toolbox—and for Saad Azhari, these attributes are practically innate. Even when he was a child during the war, in the mid to late ’70s, they shone through in the way he transformed his experience, supporting those around him and doing his part to make sure that everyday life and community spirit somehow continued. “We lived in a 34-flat building, and we all soon became like a huge family,” he recalls. “Oftentimes, you couldn’t even get out of the building, so we launched a makeshift school inside it. Each child would teach the rest what they knew best. I was very good at maths, so I taught the other kids maths.” With the war still raging, Saad pursued his university education in the US, studying computer and electrical engineering, and earning an MBA in 1986. Soon after, he started working in banking in Zurich, pursuing ambitious projects and always pushing his skills. “I always have an aim, a drive towards improvement,” he says. “You always need an objective.”

The apple, it turns out, hadn’t fallen far from the tree. “I’m a banker who does not encourage his children to be bankers—that’s what my father always said,” laughs Saad. His father, Naaman, had come to Beirut from Damascus in 1962 to take over as general manager and then as chairman of BLOM Bank. And although Naaman never encouraged his children to follow in his footsteps, his professional prowess and integrity inspired them nonetheless. Saad’s foray into banking didn’t go unnoticed by BLOM’s shareholders, as he was invited to join BLOM in 1991. Today, Saad is the bank’s chairman and general manager. “As a family, we have an important but not controlling stake. We care about the institution because our money is here but, on the other hand, we are held accountable if we don’t do a good job. It is a fair and good combination,” he explains.

“If you work hard and believe in what you are doing, you can achieve your dreams,” says Saad. “So, when I came back to Lebanon I focused on what else we can do to improve; my role was trying to turn BLOM into a regional bank, and I aspired to make it one with a major presence in the region.” Today, we are in a dozen countries in the Middle East and Europe, and we are one of the strongest banks in the region. The key is keeping your calm, a skill that Saad owes to his experience of the war. “Living in the presence of constant risks, I learned to always remain positive and look for ways out of the problems. You have to look at the positive side, build on the positive elements of a situation,” he counsels. “This is the only way of achieving something. If a situation is so bad that you feel it cannot get any worse, that means it can only improve. Tomorrow will be better. They’ll run out of bombs!”

But hoping for the best is not enough; you have to be proactive. Just as Saad actively sought out ways to grow BLOM, he has sought out ways to create a positive impact on the community. The bank runs a number of CSR initiatives, including providing mentorship, career training and scholarships for young people; running outreach programmes to raise awareness and teach children how to stay safe from key threats like drugs and sexual harassment; funding landmine removal; sponsoring the Beirut Marathon, which brings together Lebanese of all backgrounds sharing a common goal; and contributing towards the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal for education. “I learn a lot from young people,” Saad freely admits. “The world is changing very fast, but there is a golden rule: Always think positively. Look to the future,” Saad says. “I believe the young will have a better future than us. Of course, you’ll want to be successful, but you must also contribute something to the community. This is key.”

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**IN SHORT**  
A key figure in Lebanon’s—and the region’s—banking, Saad Azhari is BLOM Banks’ chairman and general manager, having overseen its successful expansion into numerous foreign markets. Dedicated to helping those less fortunate and doing his part for Lebanon, he contributes to multiple causes and initiatives through BLOM’s CSR. “You can’t ask others to do what you’re not willing to do yourself,” Saad points out. “You have to lead the way.”
Lea Baroudi is determined to help Lebanon reconcile with its past and move towards a future of coexistence. March uses art and culture to promote freedom of expression, diversity, women’s rights and conflict resolution, and to foster a more participatory and collaborative community in Lebanon. Despite tough odds, her efforts are paying off. “I’m not saying it’s easy,” she says, “but anything can change.”

Lebanon is a country of contradictions, a melting pot of different people, and this can be a great asset,” says Lea Baroudi, co-founder and director of March, but she’s reluctant to call Lebanon a paradigm of coexistence. “Since the war ended, we have treated it all as taboo: Let’s not talk about the past. Let’s act like nothing happened. But you cannot erase people’s thought and memories,” she explains. “This is why March works on fighting censorship and promoting freedom of expression, especially when it comes to art and culture. Art and culture can be cathartic, tools for truth and reconciliation, which are necessary for moving forward.”

Lea believes that there is still much work to be done to ensure that all Lebanese are empowered and to allow Lebanon to emerge as a model of true coexistence. Lamenting the fact that there are still young people in Lebanon being raised in poverty and marginalisation, conditions that some exploit to manipulate them into sectarian thinking, Lea notes that her own awareness of the divisive power of sectarian fault lines developed gradually. Growing up in a non-politicised household, her experience and understanding of the biases perpetuated by all sides didn’t come until her late teens and her time at universities. But as her frustration with the situation grew, so did her realisation of just how deeply she loves Lebanon. “When I did my master’s in France, I realised that I am very attached to Lebanon,” she admits, “and since I returned, I became very involved in all sorts of activism to make this country better.”

March was founded in 2011 with the aim of creating an empowered civil society through freedom of expression. Inspired by the inquisitiveness of Hercule Poirot, one of her favourite characters growing up, and motivated by the work of Zeina Daccache, who uses theatre to rehabilitate inmates, Lea decided to employ art in its various forms as March’s primary tool. One of their projects in some of the most deprived areas of Tripoli used theatre to reconcile youths on opposite sides of sectarian violence. “We ran auditions and recruited young men and women aged 16-24. We told them we wanted to do a play to show the rest of Lebanon how they live and what they go through. At first they used to come to rehearsals armed. It was tough,” Lea recalls. “But then we took them out of their environment and they started having fun together, getting on well with each other, telling each other stories because we told them that the play was inspired by their lives. And when they started to tell each other stories, they realised that they were much more alike than they thought; they started bonding.” The play was a success, and it also led to the opening of the Kahwetna Cultural Café, a platform for youth from both sides to meet, be exposed to art, learn, have fun and exchange stories and experiences.

The takeaway is simple: “We realised that the root cause of violence and conflict in a lot of these poor areas in Lebanon and maybe in other areas in the Middle East is not ideological. It is poverty, marginalisation, desperation. Giving people a sense of hope, allowing them to channel their frustration in more positive ways, breaks that cycle,” says Lea, adding that the key is to have patience and resilience, and to come into this work treating people as equals. “When you believe in them, they start to believe in themselves,” she points out. “I have met many people who have made mistakes and have been labelled, but there’s more to it than that. I believe that with the right tools you can put people on the right path. I believe in the good in people.” And for Lea, it’s all about keeping at it, moving forward, changing the perspective: “Our collective efforts produce results. Stop saying Lebanon is not going to change. Stop saying there is nothing you can do to change Lebanon. Believe that we all have a duty to try and change something in our country or in the world, to make it a better place.”

IN SHORT
March Co-Founder and Director Lea Baroudi is determined to help Lebanon reconcile with its past and move towards a future of coexistence. March uses art and culture to promote freedom of expression, diversity, women’s rights and conflict resolution, and to foster a more participatory and collaborative community in Lebanon. Despite tough odds, her efforts are paying off. “I’m not saying it’s easy,” she says, “but anything can change.”

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March lebanon.org
In a sense, sports are in her blood. Her mum and dad were both volleyball players in their youth and she grew up encouraged to participate in sports, from basketball to swimming and everything in between. “At three years old they threw me in the pool and at four years old they threw me on the slope,” Ray laughs. “I never asked for anything in return,” she says. In a sense, sports are in her blood. Her mum and dad were both volleyball players in their youth and she grew up encouraged to participate in sports, from basketball to swimming and everything in between. “At three years old they threw me in the pool and at four years old they threw me on the slope,” Ray laughs. “I was also very good at running and athletics, and I did judo and martial arts.” Over the years, her dedication to sports has shaped her character. “Sports build character. They change the way you perceive things. It’s not just physical. It’s also a mental art. It’s teamwork,” she says.

Ray’s love for trapshooting began when she was around fifteen. “The first time, I turned blue because of the recoil. It was hard but I kept shooting. My mum was not pleased when she saw me,” she recalls. But she was hooked. She continued practising through the end of her university years, where she studied international business management. “I wanted to go straight into sports, but my dad was adamant that I prioritise my education. Now I’m actually considering going back to get a master’s,” admits Ray.

“It’s the little things in life that push you,” says Ray, who overcame financial and personal hurdles to continue training and compete in major international tournaments. In 2007 she won bronze at the Junior ISSF World Championship in Cyprus. In 2015 she won gold at the Arab Shooting Championship in Morocco; and in 2016 she won gold at the ISSF World Cup in Cyprus. She also represented Lebanon at the 2012 and 2016 Olympics. “It’s like an inner force I never knew I had. It’s a gift,” says Ray, who partly attributes her perseverance and luck in finding solutions to overcome financial and personal hurdles to continue training and compete in major international tournaments.

Ray’s dream and aspiration is to participate—and win—at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. “It’s non-negotiable,” she says. “When they first asked me ‘What do you want?’ I said I wanted to be a legend. They asked me ‘Why a legend? What does that mean to you?’ I told them I don’t want to be in a competition without being in the final and winning. I want to keep on winning and winning and winning. And I’ve won a lot… but I haven’t won at the Olympics.” Winning an Olympic medal in Tokyo is the motivation that gets her out of bed and sees her through her rigorous training routine every day. “You have to dream it. Believe it. Achieve it,” Ray says, radiating with conviction.

“When they first asked me ‘What do you want?’ I said I wanted to be a legend. They asked me ‘Why a legend? What does that mean to you?’ I told them I don’t want to be in a competition without being in the final and winning. I want to keep on winning and winning and winning. And I’ve won a lot… but I haven’t won at the Olympics.” Winning an Olympic medal in Tokyo is the motivation that gets her out of bed and sees her through her rigorous training routine every day. “You have to dream it. Believe it. Achieve it,” Ray says, radiating with conviction.

Ray says, radiating with conviction. “At every step, I use my positivity to deal with the struggles and the problems. I’ve learned a lot of lessons along the way,” she explains. “There will be ups and downs, I might get sick or have zero income, but I will not let any of this deter me. From the difficulties, I draw strength. They give me the will and drive to surpass them.” After all, her commitment is to Lebanon. “Whenever I compete, it is for my country,” Ray says. “My success is for my country.”

Saint Charbel Makhloul. “I took a vow. I prayed to him. It worked and it still works. I felt inspired to go even further because of him,” she explains.

Ray says, radiating with conviction. “At every step, I use my positivity to deal with the struggles and the problems. I’ve learned a lot of lessons along the way,” she explains. “There will be ups and downs, I might get sick or have zero income, but I will not let any of this deter me. From the difficulties, I draw strength. They give me the will and drive to surpass them.” After all, her commitment is to Lebanon. “Whenever I compete, it is for my country,” Ray says. “My success is for my country.”
MONA BAWARSHI
CEO and CMN
Gezairi

I LIKE
• Reading
• Travelling
• Classical Arabic music

I DON’T LIKE
• War
• Rudetess
• Overbearing behaviour

BORN
1947
Beirut

EDUCATED
MBA
American University of Beirut

SPEAKS
Arabic, English

WHEN my father started this company in 1945, he called it Gezairi—the Algerian—in honour of his own father, my grandfather, who had come to Lebanon from Algeria,” says Mona Bawarshi, CEO and CMN of Gezairi Transport. “They always maintained a deep connection with Algeria. My father helped, from Lebanon, to see the country to independence,” she continues, admitting that she inherited his passion for Arab unity. Her mother, however, was her greatest inspiration. At a time when girls were generally not encouraged to pursue careers in business, Mona’s mother saw her daughter’s future in the company as a natural right. “It’s not so much that she encouraged me. She made me feel that this company is my fate. She engraved in me the fact that I not only have to take it over but I also have to be very successful. I couldn’t let my father’s work go to waste,” she explains.

Mona joined the company at 25, the only woman in a non-secretarial position working in the male-dominated environment of Beirut’s port in the 1970s. Over the years, and despite gender bias and those who felt she had no place at the port, she worked her way up the ladder, supporting her father in running the company and eventually taking over after he passed. Working alongside key executives, who had themselves been mentored by her father within the company, and her husband, Mona set out to modernise infrastructure and processes to ensure it could keep up with its ever-expanding operations. Just as she had introduced the use of shipping containers earlier on, she set out to introduce new management methods and innovations, seeing the business grow into the successful international freight forwarding, shipping and logistics company it is today.

With an eye on the future and always aspiring to innovation, Mona knows that it’s time to infuse the business with new blood and new ideas. “It’s another era now. That of my children,” she says, explaining the importance of maintaining good business practices. Reducing her hours in order to make space for the next generation of leaders to emerge within Gezairi, she’s turning her attention to charitable endeavours with a focus on education, personal development and social responsibility.

Building on Gezairi’s core values—honesty, hard work and perseverance—which shaped the corporate culture that still drives the company to success today, Mona is a firm believer in the importance of values and ethics—the cornerstones laid during a proper upbringing which determine our path through life. “The foundations are important. Everything else you can learn later on, but the values, the ethics, you carry with you,” she points out, explaining that this is at the heart of her work with Makassed Philanthropic Islamic Association of Beirut, of which she is a member of the board of trustees. “I believe in raising children properly. I believe in Makassed because they just don’t work on education; they promote education in the sense of civic responsibility, moral education, good ethics,” she explains. “This kind of work makes me happy. I’m passionate about it, because we are not just leaving things to chance. We are about taking a very hands-on approach to ethical education, to instilling values and building a strong ethical background.”

Active on multiple fronts, Mona is also a member of the board of trustees of the International College, president of Abdul Salam Bou Azza El-Gezairi Charity Foundation and a founding member of Injaz Lebanon, which is a non-profit organization that offers Lebanon’s youth a varied range of educational programmes that focus on entrepreneurship, work readiness and financial literacy. Ultimately, success comes down to good values and a solid work ethos. “I believe in perseverance and in doing the right thing, because that’s the only way to get the country out of the rut it’s in,” Mona says. “We have to believe in our country. It will stand up again.”

The foundations are important. Everything else you can learn later on, but the values, the ethics, you carry with you.
Having lived for over a decade in each of the US and the Gulf, Rindala Beydoun has never felt at home anywhere but in Lebanon. “It’s going against the current, because the world is supposed to be getting more global and we’re supposed to all feel like international citizens—and I get it—but Lebanon is my home, my only home. It’s the spot on this Earth where my great-great-grandfathers come from; the spot that I like to make better; the spot to which I like to give back,” she says. Rindala returned to her native Lebanon when she was 42, after 25 years abroad. Many questioned her decision, pointing to the various fronts on which Lebanon still has a way to go. But Rindala saw only opportunities to make a difference. “I see the glass half-full. I see the potential in my country,” she says.

Brought up to appreciate the importance of drive, hard work and education, Rindala was raised around solid, core values that transcend backgrounds and confessions. Her parents made sure of it. Coming from a Muslim family and attending a Jesuit school, she was entitled to playtime while the Christian children had catechism—but her father wouldn’t hear of it. “He came to school and insisted I go into the catechism classes. He said something I’ll never forget. ‘What do you think they teach there? What did Jesus teach? To love each other, give money to the poor; the exact values that we hold dear, so you are attending those classes,’” she recalls. “And this is important. I’m completely colour-blind as to people’s sects, Muslim or Christian. When I hire for my firm, I look at people’s achievements, grades, studies and work ethic. That’s what matters to me.”

From barely speaking a few words of English when her family immigrated to the US in 1987, Rindala overcame language and financial barriers to pursue and earn a BA in Political Science followed by a JD and an LLM in International Law from leading US universities. Along the way, and inspired by her business law professor at Duke, Professor Cox, Rindala’s initial interest in criminal law gave way to an interest in business law. For 17 years, she worked at major US law firms initially as an associate and later as a partner, including heading regional offices. In 2011, she founded boutique law firm Tribonian Law Advisors, which specialises in corporate and mergers and acquisitions transactions and has offices in Lebanon, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Yet she holds her greatest achievement to be her return home. “My most important achievement is that I was able to come back to my country, find a role to play and hopefully make a difference,” she explains.

Part of Rindala’s commitment to giving back is her contribution to the next generation of women lawyers. A successful attorney and mother of two, she uses her own story to inspire others to stay in the game. “Mentorship is part of American law culture, so it has stayed with me,” she explains, adding that she now mentors several women as part of her work with the Lebanese diaspora group LIFE, and is involved in other professional women organisations. She points out that luck is a key factor to success, but there is no substitute for hard work, perseverance and ethics. “In life, you get what you pay for; and I don’t mean in a material sense,” Rindala says. “I hate shortcuts. If you want to do something, do it well or don’t do it at all.”

When it comes to Lebanon, Rindala is still just at the beginning of her journey. Eager to address the culture of sectarianism and corruption, she is joining like-minded individuals to create a positive force for change in the country through Kulluna Irada. “Not everyone in the government is corrupt, but even those who aren’t are just standing by and doing nothing,” she says. “Do we have it all figured out? No, but at least we are trying and not giving up hope. Today, our strategy is to create awareness on key issues, lobby for them and act as an influencer on the Lebanese political scene.”

THOSE WHO INSPIRE

If you want to do something, do it well or don’t do it at all.

RINDALA BEYDOUN
Managing Partner
Tribonian Law Advisors

I LIKE
• The sun
• Family
• Having a sense of mission

I DON’T LIKE
• Thieves
• Laziness
• Dirt

BORN 1970
Bint Jbeil

EDUCATED
Juris Doctor
Duke University

SPEAKS
Arabic, English, French

YES TO
Talks

CONTACT IP
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IN SHORT
Rindala Beydoun is the founder and managing partner of Tribonian Law Advisors. After 25 years abroad, she returned to Lebanon determined to use her optimism and perseverance to contribute to the improvement of social, economic and political life in her country. Her aim is to see an end to the culture of sectarianism and corruption. “It’s a long road ahead,” she says, “but the human capital is very rich in our country. That’s why I have hope.”
THOSE WHO INSPIRE

ANTHONY & NICOLAS BOUKATHER

A.B.: CEO, A.N. Boukather Automotive
N.B.: Chairman, A.N. Boukather Holding

For three generations, the Boukathers have been pioneering businessmen, driven by their entrepreneurial spirit, commitment to innovation, and dedication to family. Back in 1927, Nicolas Boukather senior became one of the first importers of American automobiles to the Middle East. This passion was passed on to his son Antoine and, in turn, to his twin sons Anthony and Nicolas.

“There’s no such thing as overnight success,” says Anthony. “Building bridges requires building relationships.”

Anthony and Nicolas are as different as they are similar. Their focus on family combined with a keen business acumen means that they boost each other’s potential. Inspired by their parents and their insistence on staying in the country, the twins have taken on complementary roles at the company. “To succeed, you need to work hard and have good governance,” adds Nicolas. “We thus decided to segregate our roles and coordinate our activities, creating synergies inside our business lines while preserving our solid values and strong sense of higher purpose, empowering others, innovating, and never giving up our goal to broaden our dreams, desires and ambitions.”

“Our vision, our motto, is Enjoy Moving Forward.”

Three words,” says Anthony. “Enjoy, because happiness is key to sustainable success; we want our stakeholders, our staff, our customers to be happy.” Only together with their stakeholders, they can go far in pursuing their higher purpose. And “with each generation we move forward: Our grandfather introduced automobiles well before others, our father pioneered in 1967 by introducing Japanese products, and we initiated further growth and innovation by introducing bikes, buses and innovative real estate projects in addition to new disrupting technologies.”

The key to their success is working well together and working well with others. “You need to be emotionally intelligent and culturally conscious,” says Nicolas. “You must know how to communicate, but also have empathy and give back.”

Bringing up in Lebanon gives early on, that it’s possible to grow and create opportunities even in difficulty,” says Nicolas. Like so many of their fellow Lebanese, the brothers have childhood memories of sleeping in bomb shelters, and have learned to turn challenges into opportunities. “A pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. An optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty,” adds Nicolas. “Every challenge is a great opportunity to innovate,” says Anthony, and the brothers definitely live by their word. Over a ten-year period, 2006–2016, while the country was facing financial difficulties, the brothers grew their business twenty times, increasing company jobs tenfold, and created a corporate accelerator that has already seen the creation of two startups. The average age of the workforce has progressively gone from 49 to 33 years old.

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IN SHORT

Armed with a positive outlook, a strong love of family and an entrepreneurial spirit, brothers Anthony and Nicolas Boukather have achieved spectacular growth since taking on ANB Holding. The key to their success is working well together and working well with others. “You need to be emotionally intelligent and culturally conscious,” says Nicolas. “You must know how to communicate, but also have empathy and give back.”

Contact:

ANTHONY: ab@anbholding.com
NICOLAS: nb@anbholding.com
Maroun Chammas made his foray into entrepreneurship at 14. “I started a business selling digital watches and electronic calculators. Technology was just starting to be a big thing,” he says. Using his mother’s closet to store the electronics, he ran his business professionally, keeping inventory cards and sales records. “It taught me the basics of managing a small business,” Maroun recalls. After completing his studies in engineering and his MBA in the US, he returned to Lebanon and went to work in the family business, the Chammas Group, founded by his grandfather in 1910. Today, he is vice chairman and general manager of MEDCO and director and deputy general manager of MEDCO and the Group, Maroun Chammas also plays a key role in shaping the ecosystem that nurtures and supports Lebanese innovation and entrepreneurship through his role in Berytech. Having raised millions in equity capital for Lebanese startups, he wants to see more young people step up to the challenge. “The environment, the money, the infrastructure are all there,” he says. “No more excuses.”

There is no limit to inspiration if you are ready to look at things in a different way. Maroun says. “No more excuses.”

Chairman of Berytech, an initiative by St Joseph University, Berytech is an incubator and accelerator for Lebanese entrepreneurship. “I joined in 2004, two years after it was established, and we became the seed of Lebanon’s entrepreneurial ecosystem. I soon realised that we had the facilities, the people, and the talent. We simply needed the equity money,” he says. Reaching out to banks and major businesses, and investing from his personal funds, Maroun set up Berytech’s first venture capital fund, worth US$6 million. “That first fund, we invested in 15 companies. Some failed and some succeeded—and some are now on their second or third round of funding,” he smiles. “To me this is a personal achievement. Of course, I’m in the family business, and I’ve added a lot of new things there… But the real challenge was creating something from scratch.”

Along the way, Maroun learned the value of independence, drive, and calculated risks, traits that have served him well in his career as a businessman and serial entrepreneur. “There is a sense of adaptability, curiosity, and entrepreneurship that makes Lebanon competitively positioned to accept risk and challenges,” Maroun says, pointing out that have served him well in his career as a businessman and serial entrepreneur. “The sun does not forget a village just because it is small.”

IN SHORT
In addition to being at the helm of MEDCO and the Group, Maroun Chammas also plays a key role in shaping the ecosystem that nurtures and supports Lebanese innovation and entrepreneurship through his role in Berytech. Having raised millions in equity capital for Lebanese startups, he wants to see more young people step up to the challenge. “The environment, the money, the infrastructure are all there,” he says. “No more excuses.”
You have to aim to learn something new every day. If you don’t keep learning, you don’t grow.

To be a male means assuring the continuity of the family name, so when my mother was about to give birth, she stayed in labour for three days because she was afraid to give birth to a girl and upset my grandfather, who we used to call the patriarch! The entire system of discrimination in Lebanon is based on the patriarchy, which I saw in all aspects of my family life. It gave me a challenge and a focus, says Abir Chebaro, advisor to the Prime Minister on women’s affairs. She remembers the patriarchy and gender inequality that surrounded her growing up, the casual sexism that was so normalised it didn’t even register as discrimination. “It still exists across cultures and confessions in our region.” By five years old, Abir was already aware that she wasn’t expected to amount to much; so she made it her goal to prove that she was just as capable as anyone else, regardless of sex. “I decided to show them what I’m able to do. I worked hard. I was first in my class in school and then at university. And now I have an influential leadership position,” she says. “I am well informed, I am focused on what I want, and I know my field. But it’s important to keep learning. You have to learn something new every day. If you don’t keep learning and growing, you’re going to stagnate,” as Bruce Cockburn said.

One of Abir’s earliest memories of the war is from its very first year, when she was just four or five years old. She was downtown with her mother to pick up something when the fighting broke out. The chaos, death and destruction she witnessed while they were running to get to safety left a mark on her, and for years her biggest dream was to see Beirut restored. She even wrote a school essay about it when she was 11. “I wanted to rebuild the city, to play in the streets where I had been running with my mum while people were being killed around us,” Abir recalls. “So when I heard of Rafic Hariri cleaning up the downtown and restoring it, I felt he was a magician come to make my dream come true. He’s been such a big influence and source of inspiration to me,” she says. “And I still have that essay!”

Through her work with the government as advisor to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Women’s Affairs, and as vice president of the National Commission for Lebanese Women, Abir is helping develop policies that address gender equality, including legal framework for criminalising sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. “I am happy that I am working on what I want,” Abir says. “I am working on what I want, and I know my field. But it’s important to keep learning. You have to learn something new every day. If you don’t keep learning and growing, you’re going to stagnate,” as Bruce Cockburn said.

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IN SHORT Through her work as advisor to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Women’s Affairs and as vice president of the National Commission for Lebanese Women, and through more than a decade of volunteering with women’s rights NGOs, Abir Chebaro is working to address sex-based discrimination and engage more women in politics and leadership. “Having a just cause is very important. It motivates and empowers you,” she says. “Gender equality is my fight.”
Happiness is the self-contentment of being able to give back what the cosmos gives you.

When the idea of the global village turned out to be more like a global metropolis, the sheer scale of it started casting shadows on the experience of billions of people around the world. “We are surrounded by big data, big countries, big economies... It reduces us to nothing,” points out Farid Chehab. “In a smaller place, we can try to be ourselves again. We can try to find our humanity.” For Farid, there is no doubt that Lebanon is just the place. “I tell everyone to come visit, to see Lebanon as a new role model, to learn how we can live together, see the different ways of communicating with each other, of mingling different cultures together for the better,” he says. “This country is very creative because we’re a fusion of different cultures living together.”

Farid’s first lesson in the power of new ideas came when he was 11 years old. An avid comic-book reader, he was particularly fond of Buck Danny, a series about an air force pilot. One day, he got everyone to ditch their standard game of cowboys and Indians and play pilots instead. “We set up two base commands and two jets and had great fun,” Farid recalls. “But there was one boy who didn’t like the change. He and his friends cornered me on the way home and beat me up. That was my first lesson in how ideas can change people’s behaviour for better and for worse, and that pushed me more into conceptualising things.” Conceptualising certainly worked out for Farid. Without any formal training in advertising, he found himself excelling in this competitive industry. “I learned by practising and learning every day. I was a sponge,” he says. His skills soon drew the attention of Nadim Safouri, a Geneva-based Palestinian working for some of the top firms in the sector. “He gave me access to internationality; he mentored me, taught me all the tricks of the business. I owe him everything really,” Farid continues. “And eventually, years later, he was the one that got me to Leo Burnett.”

From handling major accounts in the Middle East to earning Leo Burnett a host of awards as chief creative officer for CEEMEA, Farid has spent decades both being recognised for his talents and eager to realise the talents in others. “Everyone has got something to offer if you care to share your knowledge and let them act on it. This is the meaning of inspiration, of mentoring—you mentor by example,” he explains. “You’ve really made a difference when you have inspired someone. That’s the meaning of happiness. And that’s why I wrote my last book, On Happiness and Ideas.”

Today, in addition to being honorary chairman and advisor to the board for Leo Burnett MENA, Farid also writes books that share his knowledge and experience in the domain of communication. He’s currently working on a book about the new generations in the new economy.

Farid hopes to see new ideas transform not only business and the economy, but society and politics too. He works to pass on his knowledge, spearhead initiatives to promote sustainability, and mentor future leaders who can affect change, and he’s quick to point out that the way forward lies in creativity, productivity and collaboration. As much as we need to embrace diversity and work together, we also need to reconnect with our own potential to contribute. “Our productivity used to be about hunting, making fire, staying alive. It was given to us to help us survive. Today, we’re drifting away from productivity towards consumption. But when you don’t fulfil your purpose of being productive, you lose your sense of happiness,” he explains. “Happiness is the self-contentment of being able to give back what the cosmos gives you. I get from the cosmos and I give back to it—that’s productivity. When we stop being productive, we’re not happy. Your biggest achievement is your mind. This is the state of evolution. You need to be productive.”

Farid goes on, “Use your mind to produce! Don’t be a looter. Be a creator. When you start being productive, you find happiness.”

In short: A true believer in collaboration and productivity, passionate supporter of inclusiveness and openness, and gifted creative with a notable advertising career, Farid Chehab is a champion of brand Lebanon. Through books, mentoring and initiatives, he’s driven to turn its dramatic past into a brilliant future. “We learn from the past and create a new paradigm for coexistence,” Farid says. “This is what Lebanon can offer, an osmosis of cultures.”

I LIKE
- Beauty
- Nature

I DON’T LIKE
- Politicians
- Dishonesty
- Fanaticism
For me, it’s my life before 2005 and my life after 2005. When you’ve been witness to your own death, it cannot help but change your life,” says May Chidiac about the assassination attempt she survived 13 years ago. Initially a maths major, she had switched to journalism when the civil war broke out, starting her career on radio before moving to television to become one of Lebanon’s most famous television journalists. For more than twenty years, she had been in homes throughout Lebanon with her political talk show, and while she wasn’t the only female journalist, she was hands down one of the most daring and vocally outspoken ones, particularly when it came to the Syrian occupation, and even more so after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

A fearless journalist and staunch critic of Syrian interference in Lebanon, May was soon targeted by supporters of the people she was reporting on. “I didn’t think at the time that I was so threatening to them. I didn’t consider the impact of accusing the Syrian regime and the Hezbollah of being behind the killing of Rafik Hariri on satellite television. People were telling me I was crazy. I was being threatened, but I always thought it was just for intimidation, so I continued on the same path until the moment they decided to get rid of me,” she says. “They wanted to show everybody that if you opened your mouth, this is what would happen to you.” On 25 September 2005, May survived an assassination attempt. A bomb had been placed under the front passenger seat of her car. “In an instant, my life changed,” she says. She lost her left hand and forearm and her right leg up to her knee. She also suffered extensive burns across her body.

Still, May’s determination never diminished, despite the fact that she went through more than forty surgeries over the following years. “I know what I want, and I will continue to fight for it. I want peace. I want prosperity. I want people to enjoy life,” she says. “So I persevered. I stayed true to my fight.” Thanks to her unflinching drive to continue her mission, irrespective of the hurdles, she has gone on to achieve numerous accomplishments, both for herself and for Lebanon. Since the incident, she has completed her PhD, published books and articles, and established her own initiative, the May Chidiac Foundation. The Foundation offers hands-on learning in media, women’s rights, conflict resolution, and development. Through its annual conferences and award ceremonies, it promotes the core principles of human rights and social responsibility. May’s efforts to champion freedom of speech and women’s and human rights have garnered the attention of numerous organisations and awarding bodies in Lebanon and internationally. Her accolades include Dame of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great, bestowed upon her by Cardinal Patriarch Moran Mor Bechara Boutros al-Rahi on behalf of Pope Francis; Chevalier of the French National Order of the Legion of Honour, for which she was decorated by French President Jacques Chirac; the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWWMF) Courage in Journalism Award; and the UNESCO Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize.

Addressing the youth of today, May notes the importance of self-confidence and perseverance. “Young people need to believe in themselves. Don’t look back, even if you’re having challenging moments,” says the best-selling author, university lecturer and aspiring politician. “Women are not represented well and equally in Lebanese politics. Yet we are very active on different levels of society,” adds May, ever undefeated and still in the driver’s seat. “I am a political journalist, and I’ve decided to start a political career in order to help make the difference I want to see in my country.”

IN SHORT: After surviving an assassination attempt that took her hand and foot and caused severe burns over much of her body, May Chidiac refused to be defeated. She returned to her outspoken brand of political journalism, took to the screen and set up the May Chidiac Foundation. She’s now planning a career in politics. “Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone,” that has been my motto ever since that day.
Borne during the war and spending the first decade of her life living in a bomb shelter, young Zeina Daccache thought that living in a shelter was normal, and that there was war everywhere in the world. “When I was 11 and the war ended, I asked my parents if the war had stopped everywhere, and that's when I found out that it had only been in Lebanon. I cried and I cried. It was like a revelation. I didn’t see it as lost time before. I thought playing in the shelter and not seeing the sun was normal, so finding out it wasn’t was devastating. It was like telling a kid Santa doesn’t exist,” she recalls, able to joke about it but still vividly remembering the anger the realisation caused. Through the war and after it, Zeina was a daring child, bold and adventurous and always wanting to explore the limits. “I always wanted to discover more and more and more, and if you told me not to I would ask why not, let me go and see myself.”

The complexity of the emotions Zeina experienced in her childhood was a decisive factor in the path she would choose later in life—alongside the devastation of war, there was the loss of her brother when she was still a small child. “My brother was ill and died when he was 11. I was four. I didn’t quite understand the loss at the time, but it did make me want to learn more about ill people.”

Zeina founded Catharsis, the Lebanese Centre for Drama Therapy, in 2007. Lebanon’s first organisation dedicated to using theatre as a tool for person and social therapy, it didn’t immediately receive a warm welcome. It took a year and a half before she even got approval to work with inmates in Lebanon’s prisons. “My job during that time was finding and visiting every relevant governmental official you can imagine and negotiating,” she recalls, but when she did get the relevant permissions, she was ready to make the most of it. Her first project in prison, Twelve Angry Lebanese, was a major achievement. Interpreted by inmates of Roumieh Prison, it received international recognition, highlighted the need for penitentiary reform in Lebanon and drove the enactment of Lebanon’s early release law.

“I wanted to do drama therapy and theatre, but I didn’t know starting out that this play would implement the law. But the change came, and we started seeing sentences reduced for good behaviour. It was more than rewarding!” Today, Zeina’s advice to anyone wanting to affect change in the world or their own life is simple: “If you have an idea, try it. Don’t complain it will take too long or be too hard. What’s a few years compared to a lifetime?” she says. “And if people say no, go knock on more doors. Knock more doors, inside yourself, do more research.”

If a play can raise awareness, drive change or affect policy, let’s do it.

In SHORT: Bringing together theatre and therapy, Zeina Daccache founded Catharsis, the Lebanese Centre for Drama Therapy, to give a voice to marginalised and disadvantaged communities and help participants heal. From penitentiary reform to women’s rights, she doesn’t pull her punches. “I love Lebanon a lot,” Zeina says, “but there are a lot of issues. I’m a drama therapist, so I’m using drama therapy and the theatre tools I have to change policies.”
HASSAN DIAB
Vice President
American University of Beirut

IN SHORT
Hassan Diab owes his success to determination, reason and a methodical approach. He has published extensively, served as Minister of Education and Higher Education, won many awards in recognition of his contribution to education and the community, and remains committed to promoting diversity and acceptance. “I support being inclusive and open to different perspectives in all aspects of life,” he says. “It’s not only enriching—it’s necessary.”

THOSE WHO INSPIRE LEBANON

The diversity of our society should be seen for what it is—a source of wealth.

In 1976, Hassan Diab found himself in England, determined to excel despite being alone in a strange land while his country was at war. Defying norms and expectations, he pushed through. “I was on a mission. I was adamant that I was going to succeed,” he explains. “That’s my life story. Whatever I decide to do, I eventually find a way to do it. It was a tough but enjoyable ride. I did everything, from O levels to getting my PhD, in just nine years.” That was a learning experience of tremendous value that taught Hassan crucial skills like responsibility, setting goals and getting things done. “It resonated in my mind that hard work always gets you there. But hard work alone isn’t enough. You also have to be focused, know what you want and where you want to go,” he points out.

For Hassan, the keys to efficiency and to successfully pursuing goals are reason, wisdom and open-mindedness. “Every issue is multifaceted, so you have to look at all the different perspectives before you can make a calculated and reasonable analysis of the situation and determine how to go forward,” he says. “But one of the most important tools to help you understand a situation is being an attentive listener. Listen not just with your ears, but with your brain.” That means keeping an open mind, being willing to accept that you may be wrong and that there may be truth in others’ opinions. “I’m very much for being inclusive in all aspects of life, for being open to different perspectives,” he explains. “In my opinion, it’s not only enriching, but also necessary.” Open-mindedness, acceptance and diversity are core beliefs that have informed Hassan’s career over the past 34 years, since he returned to Lebanon and took a job at the American University of Beirut, of which he is now vice president. He also served as Minister of Education and Higher Education during 2011-2014—one of a handful of non-party aligned technocrat ministers in the history of the country and the first Lebanese Minister of Education to actually come from a professional background in higher education from one of the top universities in the world.

“Lebanon means everything to me. It’s where I was raised and where I raised my family. It’s my culture and my people. I travel a lot, and every time I come back, I skip a heartbeat when I land in Beirut—I’m happy to be home despite any problems we’re facing,” Hassan shares. During his term as a minister he introduced a decree for secondary school students: sixty hours of service over three years, amounting to almost one million hours across all schools. In 2014, he established the Rifqa Taji Foundation in memory of his mother, which is dedicated to promoting women’s empowerment with events for mixed youth audiences, helping the community, and supporting education. He’s also a long-time board member of Social Welfare Institutions, which helps thousands of underprivileged and vulnerable people of all ages, creeds, and circumstances across Lebanon.

Hassan’s goal is to have a positive impact on the country for generations to come, and he hopes to see more non-partisanship in government, more focus on achieving results for Lebanon. “Pope John Paul was right in saying that Lebanon is more than just a country—it’s a message to the world. It has such a rich social mosaic and is so diverse on every level. The diversity of our society should be seen for what it is—a source of wealth,” he says. Grounding his hope for the future on open-mindedness, he looks to the country’s youth to carry it forward. “Dream!” he urges, “chase after your dreams. But also plan how you can best achieve them. Everything will happen if you plan for it, seek it, work for it,” he continues. “The wealth of our country, of the region, doesn’t rest in oil, minerals or material things. Our wealth is in our youth, in their mindset, in their fresh outlook, in thinking outside the box. That’s how our future path should be shaped.”

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BORN
1959 Beirut

EDUCATED
PhD in Computer Engineering
University of Bath

SPEAKS
Arabic, French, English

I LIKE
• Achieving
• Non-partisan governance
• Seeing my children succeed

I DON’T LIKE
• Impunity
• Apathy
• Hatred

YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

The contact information is visible on the page, indicating that the reader can reach out to Hassan Diab for mentoring or talks.
Believe in yourself. The bottom line is to be a happy, fulfilled person.

Being yourself and believing in yourself and following your own path is at the heart of Alex Demirdjian’s philosophy of life—indeed, it practically runs in his veins. “One hundred and fifty years ago, we changed our family name to Demirdjian. Demirci, in Turkish, means ‘someone who works with iron’” says Alex, explaining it comes from the word for iron, demir. “We’ve been in steel for four generations: My grandfather’s father did it, and my kids will be the fifth generation,” he says.

Alex joined the family business, Demco Steel Industries, the largest steel company in Lebanon, after graduating and soon consolidated his role in it, leading its diversification into other sectors including real estate development and shipping. Today, he serves as Demco Group’s CEO. “It’s challenging. It’s rare to have four going on five generations that continue to be successful and sustain growth,” he says, but the Demirdjians have succeeded. “Growing up, my grandparents’ stories were about the Armenian Genocide. The history of Armenia is a sad history. The history of Lebanon, as I lived it as a child, was a war history. So I experienced a lot of turbulence as a young kid growing up,” he explains. “It makes you stronger and it makes you believe in yourself because it gives you no choice. And when you don’t have a choice, you have to move forwards. Good things can come out of bad things in life.”

Generations on, the experience still resonates in the Demirdjian family, who are actively engaged in giving back to the community, particularly so to their Armenian roots. Their charitable activities include support of the Armenian General Benevolent Union and the Demirdjian Centre youth centre in Beirut. But Alex also supports a number of Lebanese charities that work with children. “I want to be more active in charity for everybody. We are all humans, and I believe we can give back to everybody as humans, as people of the world,” he says. Deeply proud to be part of the Lebanese community, Alex points out that for too long, ethnic and religious divisions have separated and held back the Lebanese. “We must continue to work on this. Young people are starting to see that being Lebanese is the priority and that religion is a private matter,” he says. “We have to respect each other’s backgrounds and differences, but we shouldn’t let them affect the output or the productivity of our country.”

“I believe that life is first emotion; things start from the heart and then go up to the brain,” says Alex, stressing the importance of trying to realise your dreams. “There’s social pressure and people try to change you, but you shouldn’t let that happen. You should always try to be yourself. As long as you respect others and you are lawful, you should always behave according to what you want in life. Believe in yourself. The bottom line is to be a happy, fulfilled person.”

This is key to Alex’s worldview in his professional and personal life alike. Over the years, he’s turned his childhood love of car racing into passion that sees him take to the tracks regularly as a Formula 3 driver. “When I race cars and when I do business, it’s the same—I believe in what I do and I don’t focus on others around me. Once in a while I’ll look in my rear-view mirror or check what the competition is doing, but I like to do things differently,” he says. “I believe in what I do.”

Alex gives it straight: “Working on yourself is a continuous challenge, and sometimes the key is to stop worrying and let yourself live in the actual moment,” he explains, adding that self-confidence breeds success breeds more belief in yourself in an ever-onward virtuous cycle. “Self-esteem empowers you to fulfil the dreams you had as a kid,” he says. “But to have the self-esteem, you need to have your own individuality and characteristics. You have to be your own person, not live the life of somebody else.”

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IN SHORT
Businessman, philanthropist and F3 driver, Demco Group CEO Alex Demirdjian believes in celebrating individuality and embracing differences—respecting that each of us is our own person, but not letting that interfere with coming together to achieve the best possible results. “Challenges are different every day,” Alex says, “but this is the only way to be happy when you wake up each morning: Follow your dreams.”

THOSE WHO INSPIRE
Alex Demirdjian
CEO
Demco Group

I LIKE
• Working and the success that comes from it

I DON’T LIKE
• Hypocrisy
• Insincerity
• Deception

YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

EDUCATED
BA in Economics University of Southern California

BORN
1970
Beirut

SPEAKS
Arabic, English, French, Armenian, Spanish, Italian, English
When Raya El Hassan took office as Lebanon’s Minister of Finance in 2009—a historic first for women in the Middle East—there was very little glamour involved. In addition to being hounded by the press, Raya faced a hostile environment within the Parliament, where some colleagues would try to undermine her by patronising her or by throwing sexist remarks. There was, standing with the national budget in hand, silently outraged by their inappropriate behaviour. Although it felt “horrible,” Raya soon learned to play the political game. “I knew my stuff, but I hadn’t yet been sensitised to political dynamics,” she remarks. “You learn to confront them by maintaining a calm and professional demeanour, and with time you build confidence and eventually start forming alliances.”

Long before any of this, Raya had already been toughened by the 15-year Lebanese Civil War, which erupted when she was just nine. “I spent all of my childhood, my teenage years, even my early twenties living in constant insecurity and dread. War was the norm,” she recalls. Raya lived with her family in a twelfth-floor apartment, very much exposed by their inappropriate behaviour. It was one of many big projects Raya would tackle throughout her career, which taught her that “the bigger the problem, the more difficult for one person or a small group to deal with it,” she says. “So, when implementing any kind of reform, you want to approach it in a piecemeal fashion. You do a bit here, a bit there, hoping that you create momentum so that it all comes together. That’s the only way. Trying to put grandiose plans together will not work.”

Raya is now chairperson and general manager of the Tripoli Special Economic Zone, an industrial, innovation and entrepreneurship hub. She knows the road ahead is long, but she remains determined and level-headed. In addition to focusing on significant socioeconomic challenges including high poverty rates, low economic activity, and high unemployment, and on creating a friendlier business environment, Raya works to help people in Tripoli with skill acquisition—especially women. “Only fifteen percent of women in Tripoli are active in the labour market,” Raya explains, adding that part of the opportunity here is to further assess the labour market and bolster local vocational and technical schools.

When the Prime Minister brought this project to her, Raya admits that she was initially reluctant. Its scope has pushed her well out of her comfort zone, but she continues to rise to the challenge, just as she’s always done. At the end of the day, she says, nothing worthwhile is going to be easy. There’s always going to be a price. But she encourages Lebanese to make their efforts worthwhile for the country. “Don’t abandon your country. Don’t lose faith in it. The social fabric here is strong, like a big family.”
In 2003, May El-Khalil decided enough was enough. Lebanon had gone through more than a fair share of conflict and tragedy, and people now needed something to bring them together again, something that would build up their endurance, patience, perseverance and determination, and help them overcome boundaries and reach goals: a marathon. The decision was driven by her own experience with running, the life-changing qualities it built up in her and her desire to share them with others even when it looked like she would never again be able to participate herself.

Just two years earlier, May had been in a terrible accident. Hit by a truck whilst training for a marathon, she fell into a coma and woke up in hospital ten days later to be told she would never run again. “I woke up with external fixators on both legs. My hips were fractured, my femurs were broken, there was tissue loss… It was very bad,” May recalls. “But my first thought was that things happen for a reason, so if I can run myself, I want to make sure others can. I decided to put Lebanon on the international map.” She’s the first to admit that coming from someone who just woke from a coma, this sounded odd. “People thought I was in denial, that I was delusional… But I was very clear. I didn’t want to pity myself. I had a choice: I could let this disaster break me or I could fight it and beat it. Setting that goal helped me come back, it helped me rebuild my confidence and self-esteem.”

Through multiple hospitalisations and a total of 36 surgeries in the two years that followed, May held fast to her goal. Going door to door in her crutches, she used her personal experience as an ice-breaker to warm people up to the idea of sport as a way to heal, as an antidote to sectarianism, as a means to rebuild communities in the wake of turmoil and war. After all, the qualities she had learned from running—endurance, patience, perseverance and determination—were instrumental in her recovery after the accident. And May was determined to empower her fellow Lebanese using these same tools.

This first Beirut International Marathon was held in 2003, attracting over 6,000 runners from 49 countries; in 2017, it attracted over 47,800 runners. “We’re a country of 18 different religions and 20 years of civil war, and suddenly we were all facing the same direction,” she says of how the marathon brought them all together. True to May’s original vision, the Beirut Marathon Association (BMA) anchors itself in the heart of the younger generation. “That’s the most important thing,” May smiles. “Enabling the younger generation to become the heroes of tomorrow, helping them to build resilience and confidence through the effort of sports. We believe these values are quite embedded now in the hearts of the youth. And they are the change-makers, the future leaders, the foundations for a better tomorrow. After all, peace-making is not a sprint. It’s more of a marathon.”

BMA’s commitment to unity and empowerment is manifold. In addition to its marathons, BMA supports a number of charities, provides training programmes for aspiring runners, and organises fundraisers to purchase handcycles for wheelchair users. For May, though, the biggest achievement is the contribution to establishing a culture for running in Lebanon, putting it in the heart of the younger generation. “That’s the most important thing,” May says. “Enabling the younger generation to become the heroes of tomorrow, helping them to build resilience and confidence through the effort of sports. We believe these values are quite embedded now in the hearts of the youth. And they are the change-makers, the future leaders, the foundations for a better tomorrow. After all, peace-making is not a sprint. It’s more of a marathon.”
CHADIA EL MEOUCHI
Managing Partner
Badri and Salim El Meouchi Law Firm

BORN
1974
Beirut

EDUCATED
LLM
Georgetown University

SPEAKS
Arabic, English, French, Spanish, Italian

I LIKE
• Sea
• Dancing
• Emotional vulnerability

I DON’T LIKE
• Hypocrisy
• Cowardice
• Laziness

Sent off to boarding school in England when she was eight, Chadia El Meouchi learned from a young age to grasp opportunities and be her own person. “It was a great childhood full of opportunities not just for developing academic skills but also for sports and all sorts of extracurricular activities. It gave me the ability to stand by myself, learn on my own and develop my character,” she says. The price paid was the separation from Lebanon. “It’s a bitter privilege. You’re in a constant state of worry. You have one foot here and one foot there. And I think that has made me realise that for most of my life I’ve never had two feet anywhere.” Perhaps that’s why she’s developed such a knack for multitasking and problem-solving. And whilst it can all be exhausting at times, knowing that she’s helped so many people and accomplished so much in different areas makes it all worthwhile.

Chadia is managing partner at Badri and Salim El Meouchi law firm, where she has worked since 2000, seeing the firm expand to Qatar and gain momentum across the region. “It’s a tough market, so I’m proud of the firm, and I’m proud of the fact that we maintain a majority of women all the way to the very top positions. My wonderful team members and family and friends give me the energy to keep pushing forward,” says Chadia, who channels her energy on multiple fronts, including a number of professional associations; amongst these is the Middle East Leadership Initiative, which she co-founded with the Aspen Institute. Looking at the geographical definition of the region and setting aside religious and ethnic boundaries, the initiative mentors fellows committed to undertaking entrepreneurial ventures that will impact the region and its communities. “If we break down the social barriers that make us hate and fear each other, we can do amazing things. So I always try to bridge the differences between people. All of my initiatives have an element of bridge-building.”

Giving back is an intrinsic part of who Chadia is. “I cannot feel completely happy without the mentoring, the philanthropy, the volunteering. I easily spend half my time doing these things,” she admits. Chadia volunteers with various organisations, trains young and aspiring lawyers, gives lectures at universities and works in community projects. “All the NGOs I have co-founded work for the benefit of local communities and regions,” she says, but ultimately, her hope is to benefit the whole world. LeapLearner—the online education platform she co-founded with friends from the Aspen Network last year—started in China, but the plan is to scale and expand to the whole world. “The idea is to teach self-learning. It’s an edutainment platform where people can learn soft skills, coding, problem-solving and entrepreneurship skills while playing games. For every subscription sold, we give a free one to underprivileged students in refugee camps or poor villages,” Chadia explains.

Technology features heavily in Chadia’s plans for the future, both in her ventures and in terms of her legal interests. However, she stresses that the digital age also has drawbacks. “There is too much noise in the world that we live in. You have to stop the noise and try to listen to what’s really going on inside you and know who you are. If you don’t block out the noise, you will never hear your inner voice—because you can barely hear it anyway,” she says. And for Chadia, listening to this voice is key to giving back and to building a better future. “What drives me most is my children, what I want to leave behind for them and what I want to contribute to the world they will live in,” says Chadia, noting that our limited time on this planet should be a driver, not an excuse to do nothing. “We have limited power but unlimited potential. We can do great things and have a huge impact,” she points out. “You have to try to hear what your heart is saying and put that into action, and the impact can only be positive.”

IN SHORT
Chadia El Meouchi is a managing partner at Badri and Salim El Meouchi Law Firm, an entrepreneur and a philanthropist. She works hands on and through various groups to build bridges between people and communities, and contribute to a better world for future generations.

“If we break down the social barriers that make us hate and fear each other, we can do amazing things.”

“Always think that love will conquer all,” she says. “There is always light in everybody. Our duty is to find that light within and connect it to the light in others.”

YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

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LEBANON
We should be focused less on material achievements and more on building the Lebanon we want.

Spent the first 20 years of my professional life chasing success in business and in politics, and I am thankful that I was able to get there. But when I did get there, I realized that this was not what is most important in life,” says Robert Fadel, who is committed to doing his part for Lebanon through his work in the private and public sectors. After all, this has been his dream since he was 12 years old and the family relocated to France following the Israeli invasion. “For many years, Lebanon for me had been a paradise lost. I was eager to return and give back to my country—and to some extent, the choice of my studies has been influenced by that desire,” Robert explains. After completing his MA in Public Administration and a brief stint at the ABC Group, which has been owned by the Fadel family since 1972, Robert took a strategic consultant job with a Boston-based firm. “It was a very powerful six years. I felt like a Lego toy that’s taken apart and rebuilt—I was re-engineered by this experience,” he shares. “At the heart of it was something that people at the time were maybe not very familiar with here: giving and receiving feedback. I think that really changed the way I am as a person, the way I work and the way I learn. It helped me understand the saying in life, you either succeed or learn. You learn from every failure. If you accept that, there’s no limit to what you can learn,” he adds.

Returning to Lebanon in 2003, Robert re-joined the ABC Group and soon took over as CEO and chairman. Alongside his traditional duties, Robert also made it his mission to further enhance ABC’s standing as an equal opportunities workplace where employees feel valued, and turn the Group into a dynamic, family-owned but professionally-run company. Robert, currently the only family member working at ABC, resigned from his position as CEO in 2016 and brought in a professional. “I’ve learned to delegate. My next objective is to step down as chairman and have ABC fully managed by professionals,” he says. He also wants to make sure that the Group’s reach is put to good use. “When you run a company like this, you can have a huge impact on the community if you choose to. Very few companies, in my opinion, use their full potential,” he explains. The Group has been at the forefront of CSR in Lebanon, working with charities on a range of causes, including vulnerable children and health, and running major environmental projects like placing the largest photovoltaic installation in Lebanon—over 4,000 square meters of solar panels—on the roof of its Achrafieh department store or introducing a large scale recycling initiative and running workshops on recycling for thousands of schoolchildren.

Out with his capacity as head of the ABC Group, Robert continues to do his part for Lebanon. In 2005, he founded Bader, an NGO dedicated to supporting young Lebanese entrepreneurs—one of the first of its kind in the country. In 2010, Robert and his wife, Hala, co-launched the Maurice Fadel Prize to promote entrepreneurship in northern Lebanon. In 2009, he was elected MP for Tripoli as an independent candidate until his resignation in 2016. “I resigned because of my frustration with the system and how things are done. But I remain hopeful. The new generation is very promising, and they will effect a renewal of political leadership in Lebanon: new blood, new ideas, new values. People more invested in fighting inequality and injustice, and in protecting the environment,” he says. “At the end of the day, what matters most is not money or power. We should be focused less on material achievements and more on building the Lebanon we want: sustainable, green, fair, peaceful.” After he steps down from his current position, he wants to turn his full attention to reforming the political culture in Lebanon. “We need to change the way people do politics in Lebanon,” he says. “We’re not just here to make money,” Robert explains matter-of-factly. “We’re here to make Lebanon a better place.”
Despite growing up in France, Hala Frangié Fadel was raised in a Lebanese household. “At home, it was always Lebanon. My parents created a small Lebanon: We always spoke Arabic, we cooked Lebanese food, we were brought up with Lebanese values which at the time were all about tolerance and education. Lebanese culture, the music of Fairuz, and the hope of returning to Lebanon,” Hala recalls. When she first came to Lebanon in 1996, the reality came as a shock. “The home, the dream that was Lebanon was no longer there. It was a challenge to reconcile the idea of Lebanon that I had in my mind with what I was seeing around me. And this triggered in me the desire to do something to reconcile the idea of Lebanon with reality.”

Ask Hala today why she does what she does, and her answer will disarm you. “To change the world,” she says, all bright smiles and confidence that the future is going to be brighter. And her three main positions—co-founder and managing partner of VC firm Leap Ventures, chair of the MIT Enterprise Forum Pan-Arab, and president of Ruwwad Lebanon—are all geared towards the same end: empowering youth and entrepreneurship. Leap Ventures is a tech-focused venture capital firm that works primarily in the MENA region, providing mentoring to entrepreneurs and critical growth capital to startups to enable more exits from the Arab region. The MIT Enterprise Forum Pan-Arab is an MIT-affiliated non-profit that aims to develop and nurture a culture of entrepreneurship across the region through networking, mentoring and knowledge sharing. And Ruwwad Al-Tammeya is a non-profit that works with disenfranchised communities through education, youth volunteering and grassroots organising, including an initiative that provides scholarships in return for volunteering in the community centre.

Education and entrepreneurship go hand-in-hand in Hala’s approach, in a virtuous cycle that promotes and reinforces the values that can bring us together and make our world better. “For me, what makes a human being are their values. For a lot of people, identity is about religion or nationality, but for me identity should be about values,” she explains. “Through shared values I can connect to people all over the world, from all kinds of backgrounds. If we make our identity first and foremost about religion or nationality, we create barriers between us.” Hala believes the entrepreneurial mindset holds the way forward. “An entrepreneur is someone who is open, who is a team player, who is hard-working, who trusts the future,” she says, explaining that entrepreneurs are problem solvers, and that it’s precisely this pro-active entrepreneurial resourcefulness that could well make the world a better place.

Open-mindedness is key. “Don’t go into things with prejudice and preconceptions. Look at everything with new eyes,” she advises. “We are conditioned, without even realising it, by the people and things around us. We talk about censorship, but the most dangerous censorship is when we censor ourselves. So when you look at something, look at it with fresh eyes, free of prejudice. Being able to do that is the ultimate freedom.” Her passion to fight for a better world has been inspired by a great-aunt with whom she corresponded by post for years. “She was a fighter. She stood against injustice. Her passion was dignity for every human being, and that really shaped me,” she says. Hala’s greatest tool in her own path is love. “It’s the most powerful thing, and we forget that,” she smiles, recalling an incident with a man who was about to pull a gun. “I just took him in my arms, and he just stopped immediately. He started crying. Love is by far the most powerful tool we have. Whether it’s feeling love or hugging or expressing it in any other way, it is the most powerful thing.”

**IN SHORT** Leap Ventures co-founder and managing director Hala Frangié Fadel believes in the power of education and the entrepreneurial mindset and works on multiple fronts to secure a better future for Lebanon and the region. “The inflection point will come when we have a new generation of self-made entrepreneurs leading Lebanon,” Hala says. “When we prioritise hard work, empathy and our shared values over the things that divide us.”

**YES TO** Mentoring Talks

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**HALA FRANGIÉ FADEL**

Co-Founder and Managing Partner
Leap Ventures

**I LIKE**

- Nature
- People
- Music

**I DON’T LIKE**

- Injustice
- Selfishness
- Discrimination

**BORN** 1974
Zgharta

**EDUCATED**

MBA
MIT

**SPEAKS**

Arabic, English, French, German, Italian
**GILBERT GHOSTINE**  
CEO  
Firmenich

**I LIKE**  
- Family  
- Optimists  
- Lifelong learning

**I DON’T LIKE**  
- Complacency  
- Lack of integrity  
- Closed-mindedness

**BORN**  
1960  
Beirut

**EDUCATED**  
Advanced Management Program  
Harvard  
Business School

**SPEAKS**  
French, English, Arabic

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When Gilbert Ghostine found himself at a crossroads in his professional life, he knew that the right path was the one that challenged him most. After seven years of managing the Middle East, Africa, Eastern and Central Europe for Diageo, he found himself faced with a dilemma: take a position with the same company in the US, or stay in the Middle East and run the ME and Africa operations for one of two major FMCG companies courting him. “It became clear to me then that staying in my comfort zone was not for me. I needed to keep reinventing myself. I needed a bigger challenge and this is why I chose the Diageo USA opportunity,” Gilbert explains. Choosing to challenge and push himself paid off. The move spring-boarded him into an international executive career, working across four continents with leading multinational companies such as Diageo, where he spent 21 thriving years, and eventually joining top fragrance and flavour brand Firmenich as CEO at their headquarters in Switzerland.

For Gilbert, success isn’t something to enjoy on your own. For the past 15 years, he has been sharing his time, skills and experience with the next generation of aspiring executives and entrepreneurs across three continents. “I have been mentoring young talent for over 15 years, and I’m glad that I can leverage my international experience to help future leaders. It is a social and moral obligation for me, and it is a great way to give back,” he explains, adding that he too draws inspiration and learns from the mentees in the process. “I am very inspired by the many young and upcoming leaders I mentor and coach on a regular basis,” he says. “As digital natives, they always teach me a lot about the world around us and how to best leverage technology.”

**Respect for the importance of education** was instilled in Gilbert early on—not through schooling as much as through the threatened lack of it. Fifteen years old and living in Gemmayzeh when the war broke out, he vividly remembers how the conflict severely impacted every day life. “All the things we used to take for granted became a significant challenge: We had no tap water, no electricity. Our house was hit by two bombs. Even worse, we had to dodge the bullets of snipers to go to the grocery store or to school to study,” he recalls, recounting experiences shared by hundreds of thousands across Lebanon. “This period defined my belief system in two key ways: It instilled in me a deep sense of courage, determination and resilience, and it also taught me the value of education,” he continues. “Going to school was a critical anchor for my generation, as education was our only hope to break out of the cycle of horror around us. That’s why my generation is extremely grateful to our educational system which kept going in spite of the war.”

Indeed, in 2016, Gilbert and USJ established the Gilbert and Roula Ghostine Fund for Education, a $500,000 fund to support students from the USJ in their graduate studies.

A self-proclaimed eternal optimist, Gilbert insists on keeping calm and pragmatic in the face of adversity, looking at the facts and opting for a positive outlook to find a way out of every difficult situation. “I always see the glass half-full. Your attitude dictates your altitude in life,” he says, and that’s his approach and advice for professional achievement. “Don’t look for a job. Look for a challenge, and keep on reinventing yourself.” Thankful for the support and encouragement he has received throughout his life—from his parents, wife and children to his fellow students, professors and colleagues—he feels a strong sense of duty to pass that along. “My purpose in life is to make a positive contribution to people and communities. That’s my North Star,” Gilbert says, and he has a solid CSR record to prove it. “I get my energy from leading business as a force for good.”

**IN SHORT** From Gemmayzeh to Geneva via four continents, Gilbert Ghostine spent a stellar two decades with Diageo prior to his appointment as CEO of Firmenich. Determined to make a positive contribution to people and communities, he is actively addressing key societal challenges through sustainable business solutions while mentoring future leaders and entrepreneurs. “My goal is to enable people to lead the change they want to see in the world,” he says.

**YOUR ATTITUDE DICTATES YOUR ALTITUDE IN LIFE.**

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Disability is a state of mind. It’s about breaking our own barriers and building bridges.

Paralysed from the chest down following a jet-skiing accident when he was six, Michael Haddad was told by doctor after doctor that he’d have to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. But young Michael soon discovered that through determination, anything is possible. To this day, he counts his first step as his biggest achievement. “I spent 13 years practising; I don’t have the core muscles that stabilise the body, so this first baby step was the achievement of my life. Everything else is beyond that,” he says. As he started walking and exploring his potential, he realised disability was not a fate to be resigned to. “I discovered that disability is a state of mind; it’s about breaking our own barriers and building bridges,” he explains. “I realised that I have to walk, to express myself, to reposition myself within my community, within my identity, and look to the world and humanity. I, Michael Haddad, the Lebanese person, am walking with the Lebanese community and the Arab community and the global community. And now I am walking the North Pole for humanity.”

Michael’s boldness and sense of adventure was nurtured by his parents, who never stopped treating him like a normal kid. “They encouraged me to explore the energy inside me. I was never a ‘poor disabled person;’ I was Michael Haddad with a future.” Alongside the support and encouragement of his loved ones, Michael has also had the help and support of scientists at the Faculty of Engineering of the Lebanese American University and the American University of Beirut, who are taking exoskeleton technology to its next stage, allowing Michael to stand up, walk and climb stairs relying solely on the strength and balance of his upper body. Even with this, Michael’s movement involves 102kg steps and up to 14g-forces on his body, requiring calculation and determination. “I made the choice to never give up—to deliver the message that nothing is impossible,” he explains. “Success has to be for something beyond yourself. We as humanity never live our present; we take the past and deliver the future. So an important part of our lives is giving something back to humanity, to the future, to the earth, to coming generations.”

To date, Michael’s achievements include a 60,000-step 19km mountain journey, reaching the Black Summit, the highest peak in the country, climbing Raouché rock, and carrying a cedar tree from Bsharri to Tannourine in an initiative for reforestation. His next adventure takes him to a whole new level: He is going to the North Pole for a 100km journey in extreme conditions, a feat that nothing is possible. “The most beautiful, most powerful tool in the world is ideas. An idea worth sharing will move, will be carried far and wide by people,” Michael says. “This is where I live. For eternity. I was paralysed from my chest down so I used my brain. I recovered using my brain. That’s how you go beyond things; how you see reality behind things.”

Through his experiences and achievements, Michael has learned that with willpower, faith and determination, each of us—and all of us together—can overcome anything. And he’s discovered what that makes this possible. “The most beautiful, most powerful tool in the world is ideas. An idea worth sharing will move, will be carried far and wide by people,” Michael says. “This is where I live. For eternity. I was paralysed from my chest down so I used my brain. I recovered using my brain. That’s how you go beyond things; how you see reality behind things.”

Michael’s advice: “Break your own barriers; build bridges; believe in yourself. Know that success is never easy, and never ever surrender to your comfort zone,” he heeds. “Don’t blame your problems on others, and don’t wait for life to happen to you.”

In SHORT Athlete, adventurer and UNDP Climate Champion Michael Haddad has used the power of his mind, his faith and his determination to overcome a spinal injury that left him paralysed from the chest down, and go on adventures most of us only dream of. “We have to remember who we are,” he says, committed to doing his part for the Earth, humanity and Lebanon’s unique identity. “We must break our barriers and start giving back to humanity and the world.”
BAHIA HARIRI
President
Hariri Foundation
for Sustainable Human Development

I LIKE
- Peace
- Stability
- Human connections

I DON’T LIKE
- Hate
- Violence
- Arrogance

BORN 1952
Saida

EDUCATED
Teaching Diploma
Centre for Research and Educational Development

SPEAKS
Arabic, French, English

IN SHORT
Born to a poor family in Saida, Bahia Hariri aspired to become a teacher because she thinks that education is at the root of everything. And even after entering the political arena in 1992, and creating and working for a number of NGOs, this aim has not changed: helping her fellow citizens to make their aspirations and dreams come true through concrete measures, without copying the past or forgetting their roots.

“Education is at the root of everything; it is the first step towards any change,” Bahia stresses. “I like giving young people the necessary tools to help them build their own future. My family helped me gain trust in myself, but not every woman is as lucky as I was. That’s why our aim now is to help young people, especially women, in their career development through building their skills and activating civil involvement in the process of social change.” But finding the true mechanism for putting theory into practice remains the trickiest part. “We have to learn every day,” she says.

“I was 27 when I assumed the Foundation’s leadership,” Bahia remembers. “At that time, without any help from the media, it was not easy for a young woman born to a working-class family to gain publicity.” But she succeeded despite the odds. Bahia had to rely on her own experience, observing and reviewing herself constantly for fear of not being up to the task both in her personal and professional life. Importantly, she adds that she always prompted her children and grandchildren to be independent instead of simply copying their parents and role models. Remaining independent may be a challenge, but Bahia’s aim with the Hariri Foundation has always been taking care of others, maintaining a spirit of generosity, being an example without telling people what to do.

To Bahia, it’s important to keep your faith when faced with problems. Having worked with her brother, Bahia always looked up to him as an example to follow. After his tragic death, carrying on became her mission. Keeping stability, championing modernisation for her country, helping make it a great place to live became paramount to her. In daily life, she always tries to remain close to her fellow Lebanese, never shunning a phone call, remaining at their disposal as she has always been since she entered the political arena in 1992 as a deputy for Saida, accumulating honours and acclaim in government and NGOs. “Politics means being at the service of people,” she explains. “I see myself as a facilitator of people’s dreams and rights.”

Don’t look to the past but dream of your role in the future instead, and set out to achieve it—that is Bahia’s advice to the youth. “Know the past but don’t copy it,” she elaborates. “The challenges are huge, new problems always arise. The only way to see your dreams come true is by working together. This way, you will be able to build a new life. It will take many baby steps but each of them should be based on concrete calculations and careful consideration.” As for those leaving the country, Bahia says, “If you want to become expats, make sure you never forget your roots. Mine are here too.”

THOSE WHO INSPIRE

I see myself as a facilitator of people’s dreams and rights.

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YES TO
Mentoring
Talks
We must be honest and transparent. And we must keep on learning.

Lebanon is everything to me. I had many opportunities to leave, especially during the war, but I couldn’t,” says Eugenie Hosri, chairwoman and general manager of Sacotel. “My family were abroad, but I stayed to provide a living for our 40 employees and their families. And I don’t regret it.” Born into a family that valued education and open-mindedness — her grandfather established the Shoueifat International School — Eugenie benefitted greatly from the flow of ideas that permeated her childhood. After acquiring a BA in Political Science, she entered her father’s company, a pioneer in transport and travel. “My father was always a great inspiration. He always encouraged me and held me equal to my brothers. Because of him, I always knew I could do whatever I wanted as long as it was in the right direction — and I did!” Eugenie laughs.

Just over a decade after joining the family business, Eugenie proposed the expansion of the telecommunications department into a full-blown company. “I liked the business, and the telecom field was emerging in the ’70s. I knew we couldn’t keep it as just a department,” she says. “But there was never any question of leaving. I preferred to stay and run the show rather than go to Saudi Arabia, where my husband had established a business to support the Lebanon operations, because there I would have been compelled to stay at home and do nothing.”

Eugenie doesn’t shy away from challenges, but she makes sure to never bite off more than she can chew. “I don’t gamble — I take calculated risks. I try to analyse and act fast, and I never give up. I don’t run away, because I don’t put those who are relying on me in danger,” she points out, and that way of thinking was really drilled into her during the war. “We couldn’t quit. We had to face it. It was a lesson in endurance and perseverance, in taking initiative and finding a way to continue. You have to lead by example,” she says, explaining that she finds this takeaway just as relevant in today’s challenging environment. Her advice to young people is disarming simple: “Think about what you want to do and what the prospects are. It’s not only about having diplomas. It’s about having the right education to be able to find a job and not have to leave the country,” she says, pointing to the importance of learning how to use your hands as well as your brain.

It’s no surprise that Eugenie keeps coming back to education. She champions learning and openness, stressing their importance not just professionally but culturally and socially. “We need to read and learn and be open. We need to let go of preconceptions and pigeonholing. There are excellent people and very bad people everywhere,” Eugenie says. “We have to adapt, accept others, analyse things — not just blindly follow leaders. We must be honest and transparent. And we must keep on learning.” In addition to being a board member of the AUB President’s Club, Eugenie is also head of an organisation her grandmother established in 1909, which today supports women’s participation in the workforce. “We help mothers take courses and find work,” she says. “Our aim is to help these women be active members of society.”
Before turning his energy to helping underprivileged and marginalised people become empowered, productive members of society, Pierre Issa went through his own rough patch. “I dropped out of high school, opened a motorcycle garage with a friend, studied accounting at a community college, held a string of odd jobs here and there, got involved with drugs, even ended up in jail in Cyprus,” he recalls. “But even during those wild days, I never stopped feeling inspired. We end up understanding things as we live. And during all my different phases I’ve been happy: before the war, during, after, while doing drugs, in prison, as a businessman, as a social entrepreneur, in my humanitarian work. I’ve always been positive and creative. I believe being a hippy is just as worthy as being a businessman. At the end of the day, we are here to be happy beings, and that can be achieved in a myriad of ways. One can be wild and productive.”

“I’ve now realised that the future relies on revolutionaries and laughs at smaller rebels, as Jacques Brel used to sing,” says Pierre, reflecting on his rebellious days. Growing up in a family that valued culture, education and respect for others, his happy childhood instilled in him a love for books and for learning—for seeking out knowledge on his own. The path wasn’t always easy. He struggled with addiction, and still remembers the moment he realised he had gone too far. “I was about 23. Bombs were falling, but I started walking the streets like crazy in search of some pills—and I realised that I was totally out of control,” he says. He resolved to pinpoint what he felt he was gaining from using drugs and to determine how he could compensate for this; his plan involved a combination of chocolate, sports and community contribution. To that end, he reached out to his old school friend Antoine Assaf, who was then secretary general of the Scouts in Lebanon, and began working in a centre for people handicapped during the war. “Time went by, and I saw my friends die from drugs, and realised I’d survived thanks to this work. I decided that if it’s thanks to these handicapped people that I’m alive, I must repay all I owe them,” Pierre explains.

arcenciel was established in 1985. An initial idea for a furniture factory that employed handicapped individuals and addicts eventually evolved into a full-fledged non-profit that today supports Lebanon’s most underprivileged and marginalised, regardless of religion, political affiliation or nationality. “Antoine and myself were the founders, but we have often been the bosses and oftentimes the workers too, doing both with the same pleasure and happiness,” says Pierre. arcenciel promotes diversity, integration and development through five core programs—agriculture and environment; mobility and health; responsible tourism; youth empowerment; and social support. Amongst other things, it provides jobs to handicapped and marginalised individuals, and brings together medical professionals to provide free healthcare to people in Lebanon—both citizens and refugees—who cannot afford such services. At every step, the organisation insists on ethics, transparency and adaptability. “There are no miracle solutions,” he says. “We must apply specific measures for each situation, adapted ad-hoc.”

Adaptability and open-mindedness are key—knowing when to stand firm and when to be flexible. “In our modern world everything is codified, so the initiatory rites of our society imply breaking and infringing the laws and rules. Kids feel like grownups when they break the rules, and the mistake parents make is to reinforce those prohibitions,” Pierre says, emphasising the need for tolerance and dialogue. “Khalil Gibran wrote that our children are not ours, that they are the children of life. That instead of forcing them to follow us, we should follow them,” he continues. “The youth are the leaders and we’ll do our best to follow them. They shouldn’t follow us. We are the past; they are the future.”

IN SHORT
Throughout the ups and downs of his life, Pierre Issa never lost track of his love of learning, the value of happiness and his respect for others. He has co-founded arcenciel, an NGO that helps Lebanon’s marginalised and underprivileged, and he hopes to create a civic movement for political reform nationwide. “Lebanon is a microcosm of the planet and amazingly diverse; a wonderful country,” Pierre smiles. “I’ll never be cured of being Lebanese.”
LEBANON

THOSE WHO INSPIRE

HISHAM ITANI
Chairman and CEO
RGH Holding

“I LIKE”
- Holidays
- Gastronomy
- Time with my kids
- and family

“I DON’T LIKE”
- Egoism
- Reluctance
- Lack of authenticity

BORN
1972 Beirut

EDUCATED
MBA
American University of Beirut

SPEAKS
French, Arabic, English

Hisham stands for hope but also for challenge. There’s an abundance of talent and competition is stiff. Lebanese children already know this by the time they’re in school, constantly challenging themselves—and being challenged—to improve their grades, develop social relationships and build their extracurricular activities. And this, according to Hisham Itani, chairman and CEO of RGH Holding, gives Lebanese a major advantage on the world stage. “Lebanon is a very competitive place that prepares you to face anything. You learn from a young age that you either fight or you’re left out. So wherever you go in the world, you can adapt very fast and can succeed,” he says.

Hisham’s own childhood growing up in Lebanon was no different, especially in light of the war, which gave him two of the most formative experiences of his life. In 1980, his grandfather, a journalist who young Hisham looked up to, and idealised, was assassinated at the peak of his career. Just a few years later, following the Invasion, Hisham returned to his childhood neighbourhood to find it taken over by a Syrian camp. “Those two things taught me that even Superman can be killed, and that everything can change. Nothing is permanent. You have to fight hard, but you must also be humble,” he says. “Because what kills you, in my opinion, is your ego. When you base your decisions—your life—on egoism, it ends there. You have to learn to be smarter, but at the same time you need to keep your ego in check. For me, the name of the game is adapting and being true to yourself.”

Drawn into the security-printing family business, Inkript, while still at university, Hisham exhibited a knack for forward-thinking entrepreneurship that completely transformed the company. Investing in R&D and emerging technologies, he saw the company grow into an international provider of secure solutions to telecom and financial institutions as well as governments. His key strengths were anticipating future trends, trusting his gut, and aiming for competitive advantage. “We have ventured into high risk markets which constituted opportunities to deploy our resources and find solutions that positively impact the citizen experience,” Hisham recalls of his bold business moves through which he was able to support his R&D endeavours that eventually led to the founding of Resource Group Holding (RGH) in 2008. His formula for overcoming hurdles and achieving results, then and now? “Keep hustling 24/7. Even if the pressure is unbearable, just believe that you’ll find a way to overcome it. If you let the pressure get to you, you will not be able to keep afloat—so keep hustling.”

Today, RGH is evolving further. Its portfolio developed from security printing and smartcard manufacturing to biometric identification solutions, and from telecom infrastructure to cyber-security and secure communications solutions. And the Group is also emerging as an incubator of technology-based start-ups, providing advice, strategic support and resources. “We want to inspire people to create things, to develop ideas and help make their life better,” Hisham explains, adding that he plans to focus on technologies that promote transparent governance and citizens engagement. “This is what I see myself doing for the next ten years: working towards achieving more transparent and fluid partnerships.”

IN SHORT
Starting with a family business and creating a cutting-edge technology group and tech incubator, RGH chairman and CEO Hisham Itani is all about anticipating the future whilst laying the best possible foundations. His secret weapons? “If you want to succeed, you need passion and you need to build a good team. You need a good corporate structure with good governance,” he explains. “You are only as good as your team.”

Keep hustling. Even if the pressure is unbearable, believe that you’ll find a way to overcome it.
Surround yourself with love and respect, and make these the backbone of everything you do.

M uch has been said about the transformative power of pain, but few words are more succinct than the poet Rumi’s words: The wound is the place where the light enters you. For in moments of great loss and tragedy, each of us faces a choice; surrender to the darkness or turn towards the light which heals. In 2011, when seventeen-year-old Talal Kassem was hit and killed by a car while crossing the road on his way to school, his mother found herself facing that very choice. And despite the pain, she refused to surrender. “I couldn’t let it be in vain. I wanted to make sure his death meant something. I decided to make a difference,” says Zeina Kassem, who founded Roads for Life – the Talal Kassem Fund for Post-Accident Care in his memory.

Roads for Life (RFL) aims to save as many lives as possible across Lebanon and to increase victims’ chances of survival within the first 60 minutes following an accident, a window known as “the golden hour of trauma.” The organisation’s efforts initially focused specifically on addressing the aftermath of road accidents, but it soon became clear that there was a real need to address the bigger picture; to train trauma professionals, from first responders to nurses and doctors, throughout its stages. Working with the Lebanese Red Cross—and a number of respected foreign institutions including the American College of Surgeons in Chicago, the Society of Trauma Nurses and the American University of Beirut Medical Centre—RFL funds and runs training courses for paramedics, nurses, doctors. “At the beginning it was difficult to convince people about the importance of this training,” says Zeina, explaining that everyone assumed doctors and nurses are specialists who already know their jobs inside out—but trauma situations are different. “We succeeded in showing how important it is to teach trauma techniques and coordination to these professionals, so that everybody in their field knows what to do and how to work together in a trauma situation,” she adds. “The Ministry of Health even made these courses a requirement for the accreditation of emergency staff.”

“Every life that is saved through this work is saved because of Talal. He was never afraid of anything, he never let anything deter him, and I always knew that he was going to be important,” says Zeina. “This work I’m doing is his mission, in a way. Every day, I wake up and I am proud of it. I know this is what he wants me to do.” Her path to the healing light wasn’t easy. Zeina put her pain into words in a book, Crossing, which was published in 2015. She is grateful for Talal’s parting gift to her, lyrics that he gave her a few days before his death. “It’s about a boy singing about how he loves his mother and how he values what she does for him. He promises to make her proud and says he will understand the value of her when he has children of his own. It was his farewell,” she says, and she takes the opportunity to stress the importance of letting your loved ones know how you feel, of making each moment count. “Always tell those you love that you love them and make the best of the time that life gives you. Surround yourself with love and respect and make these the backbone of everything you do. Value love, respect and faith.”

RFL has trained more than 510 doctors, 560 paramedics and 280 nurses all over Lebanon to date, and has launched training courses for security forces and police officers, who are often the first responders on the scene of an accident. But the scope of RFL’s work extends beyond Lebanon: RFL has sent teams that have helped establish trauma courses for nurses in Cyprus and Kenya, and has also been invited to Sudan and Dubai. “There are those who wonder why I go to these different, difficult regions to help start something. It seems that they would rather have me go to Switzerland or the US,” Zeina smiles. “But what I do is help people. I go where help is needed.”

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THOSE WHO INSPIRE

ZEINA KASSEM
President
Roads for Life

I LIKE
• Music
• Photography
• Friendship

I DON’T LIKE
• Unfaithfulness
• Injustice
• Corruption

BORN
1967
Beirut

EDUCATED
BA in Political Science
American University of Beirut

SPEAKS
Arabic, French, English
We Lebanese love joy. It’s what makes us survive. Georges is aware of the power of his position to promote understanding and provide a positive role model. “I try as much as I can to go back to human values and principles in order to be able to live in peace both within myself and in society. As a person and as a people. We all deserve peace.”

Jean Georges, this is an opportunity to promote his key message: “Love, and tolerance, and accepting others,” he says. “We have a big problem when we do not tolerate or accept others. I want us to be able to look at each other without prejudice, and this is not feasible without love,” he continues. “The war broke many bridges between cultures, and now we are trying to rebuild them. Culture can contribute by enabling people to be at peace with themselves.”

Screen and stage actor, writer and playwright, director, producer, theatre professor and one of the country’s most beloved comedians. It’s no coincidence that Georges Khabbaz was born into a family that lived and breathed theatre. In fact, theatre is exactly where his story starts. It’s where his parents first met, and he was just five years old himself when he first took the stage for a production of The Life of St. Maron. “That’s when I decided to be an actor,” he says, admitting that growing up in an artistic family—his parents, siblings and even uncles are all involved with the performing arts—was a catalyst. Growing up in the sleepy city of Batroun, which back then had no theatre, Georges made theatre in open spaces and eventually moved to Beirut where he started taking small roles in plays and on TV. “It was a snowball effect,” he smiles. “Now I have my own theatre, my own movies, my own identity.”

A musicologist by training, Georges has participated in over two dozen television shows, has written and directed sitcoms as well as written, directed and starred in over a dozen plays. He played the lead in the 2007 film Under the Bombs, wrote and starred in 2013’s Ghadi, and wrote 2014’s Waynon. “My generation was deeply affected by the war. But it also allowed us to express ourselves through art,” he says. “That gives hope. We Lebanese, we love joy. It’s what makes us survive. It’s true that we have gone through a lot of hardship. But we love life and we have short memories,” he laughs. “Theatre especially gives me joy and happiness because there is direct interaction with people. Even more so now that we have diversified audiences—people of all ages, economic backgrounds, social levels… This makes me love what I’m doing, it makes me feel like I’m really alive. It is a form of therapy to overcome challenges. It allows me to escape and to stop time, my own time. I consider myself lucky because often we come across the opportunity to stop time.”

Theatre and cinema facilitate healing, unity and understanding. As platforms, they provide opportunities to address key values and principles. For Georges, this is an opportunity to promote his key message: “Love and tolerance and accepting others,” he says. “We have a big problem when we do not tolerate or accept others. I want us to be able to look at each other without prejudice, and this is not feasible without love,” he continues. “The war broke many bridges between cultures, and now we are trying to rebuild them. Culture can contribute by enabling people to be at peace with themselves.”

People often ask Georges why, since he’s so talented, he never left Lebanon. “I tell them that my mother is sick and I will never leave her,” he says. “There’s an attachment to the roots and our land that embraces us. If it gets sick once, we have to embrace it as much as we can, but we cannot embrace it without loving each other. We are different, true, and the ones who do not love try to make us focus on those differences.” Georges explains. “I try as much as I can to go back to human values and principles in order to be able to live in peace both within myself and in society. As a person and as a people. We all deserve peace.”

IN SHORT His story starts from the theatre stage and branches out to cinema, television, music and teaching, always coming back to the stage. His roles range from actor to director and from writer to producer, with a side of professor for good measure. His tool is accessible storytelling on the stage and on the screen. His message is unmistakable. “Love,” says Georges Khabbaz. “Love, and tolerance, and acceptance.”

Contact Georges
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BORN 1974 Batroun

EDUCATED Licence in Musicology USEK

SPEAKS Arabic, French, English

LIKE
- Women
- Art
- Lebanon

DON’T LIKE
- Injustice
- War
- Zucchini
Lebanon is a message. We have to build it the way we want it—as a country of richness, diversity and respect for each other. This is the real Lebanon. It’s what I have lived in this country from my first day, with all my friends, my neighbours, all Lebanese citizens—despite the war. It’s a way of life. It’s about making a life with each other, as a community, as a country—not through words but through living together, co-existing harmoniously and through sharing.” Melhem Khalaf believes in a Lebanon of diversity, unity and mutual respect. He’s been working towards that ever since he was but a teen-aged university student. And he doesn’t mince his words. “The crisis in the world today,” Melhem explains, “is not an economic or financial crisis or anything of the sort… It is actually a crisis of values and all the choices in the world.”

Volunteering as a first- aider with the Lebanese Red Cross for a decade during the war, Melhem resolved that just talking about ending the madness wasn’t enough. He and a group of fellow volunteers felt it was time to do more. “Of course, it’s good to say you’re against the war, but how exactly do you stand against it? What do you do?” he says. “The war in Lebanon was just to separate the people between north and south, between religions, between communities. So if the idea of war was to separate the people, and our goal was to go against the war, the way forward was to counter separation with unity: We had to bring people together. Melhem and his friends founded Offrejoie—the joy of giving—in 1985. Themselves barely out of their teens, they came up with the idea of organising summer camps for kids of different ethnic and religious backgrounds to come together under the values of love, respect and forgiveness. “This was not in the name of the charity but in the name of dignity,” Melhem points out.

From the get-go, Offrejoie was made possible through the contribution of volunteers. The first camp hosted 117 children for 15 days with the help of 35 young volunteers and numerous other contributors. Today, Offrejoie is a well-established apolitical and nonconfessional NGO that advocates for a plural Lebanon, united, free and fair. Since 2012, it has been working in Iraq, and continues to expand its presence with branches in Europe (in France since 1986) and the Middle East. “We are more than a charity or an NGO. The ‘Joy of Giving’ is a movement, a meaning of life—and this meaning of life is based on defending human dignity and the right to coexist. This aim of living together is the cornerstone of our movement. We live according to certain principles: love, respect and forgiveness. These are our three pillars,” Melhem explains. These values make ethnic and religious differences irrelevant and bring communities together. “Our aim is to show that living together is possible, that it’s happiness—when you share it, when you live it. But you cannot just talk about it,” he stresses. “It’s not rhetorical. Love, respect and forgiveness are not just words. They are a way of being, a way of living. And our movement is based on these choices.”

Melhem is also an attorney by trade and vice-chair of CERD, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. On every front, he maintains his conviction, his faith, and his belief that change is possible. “To me, achievement means making every day a new day with hope, happiness and joy for each person. I am living with my hope and happiness, and I have to share them. I have to fight against the misery, against the unfairness and the injustice, and every day I say I am ready and willing and in a position to do my part to change these things,” he says. “You have to believe things can change. You have to show people that another way is possible. Plant the seed of love and you will see how much you’ll get in exchange. Hope. Don’t be negative, and don’t give up. Make true what you believe.” This is Melhem’s message of positivity and optimism.

IN SHORT: Melhem Khalaf has always felt that faith should create unity, not division. From Red Cross first- aider volunteer to attorney, and from co-founder of Offrejoie to vice- chair of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, he has used three core values of his faith—love, respect and forgiveness—as tools to restore the Lebanon he cherishes. “As the Good Book says, we are here to serve, not to be served,” he explains.
Think globally and innovate. Don’t sit in the shade. You want to be facing the sun.

Tarek is passionate about enabling people to realise their ideas and ambitions through insightful financing practices. “Be persistent no matter what your ideas are, no matter how unconventional. Question everything. And be creative. Think outside the box. Don’t be limited by convention; aim for productive disruption,” he advises. “Think globally and innovate. Don’t sit in the shade. You want to be facing the sun.”

Innovation, determination and perseverance are at the centre of Tarek’s approach—and of course, never letting hurdles stop you. “There are many aspects to a problem, but the cornerstone of solving it is understanding it,” he points out. “First, you have to listen; do not react immediately. Passive listening can diffuse the issue. Finding a solution is step two, not step one. And in order to find the solution, you must believe that a solution exists. You must be a bit of an optimist,” he continues. “You have to be willing to look at the facts, not jump to conclusions—perseverance will do the job. If you have the readiness to look at the facts and face reality, to listen, to get to the right diagnostic instead of rushing things, you will solve your problem. In fact, part of the solution is telling yourself, ‘this is not a problem; it is just a work in progress.’”

Think globally and innovate. Don’t sit in the shade. You want to be facing the sun.

In SHORT Creditbank chairman and general manager Tarek Khalife has led the growth of what was once a family owned bank into one of the biggest in Lebanon, making sure to emphasise hard work, transparency and the personal experience along the way. “Giving back is a constant in my life,” he says. “I want to enable people to bring out the best in them. After all, achievement is one part merit, one part circumstance. It’s our actions we can be proud of.”
Eli Khoury was raised by a single mother in a relatively poor household. The Civil War broke out when he was a teenager, making his young life all the more challenging. “It was a struggle to get the best education possible out of not-so-fantastic education opportunities,” he recalls. “So I became a bookworm. It was my escape from reality—not just heavy war, but the harsh reality of a broken family.” And so Eli developed the habit of reading everything he could get his hands on. He also cultivated a knack for drawing. By the age of fourteen, he was submitting cartoons to newspapers and wound up doing stage design for his mother’s plays.

He was just seventeen when he left Lebanon. A lot of people experienced displacement during the war—however, it was Eli’s political cartoons that got him into trouble with the Syrian army. “So I ran away, I was caught by a Syrian army roadblock, and thank God there was no Facebook back then! They couldn’t be sure if they had the right person or not,” he says. “I was interrogated for four hours, denying that I was the guy who did the cartoons.” They let him go, denying that I was the guy who did the cartoons. “They couldn’t be sure if they had the right person or not,” he says.

Eventually, Eli had taken the cartoonist career far enough. He’d grown bored. And so he went into advertising, where he enjoyed international success—and then got bored again, yearning to do something even bigger with all the experience he had gained. The transition set the stage for the work he does now in Lebanon as a strategic communications specialist with Quantum Holding, of which he is founder, chairman and CEO. “In order to be happy in life, or at least achieve whatever it is you want to achieve, you have to constantly dream. And there is no problem in changing your dream as you grow,” Eli advises, adding that one of his current dreams is to have an impact on the future of Lebanon, to help shape it. This is why he played a strategic role in the Cedar Revolution of 2005 and continues to focus on advising policy, public affairs, and programme management through Quantum Group.

Strategic communications are an important part of real-world success, which is why Quantum is able to provide such a valuable service. Perhaps equally important for success and growth is mentorship, another area of focus for Eli. He recalls one of his early mentors from when he was into cartoons: “I knocked on the door of one of the most prominent cartoonist of the day, Stavro, who published internationally,” Eli mentions. “I wanted to clean his stable, fix his ink, clean up his colour palette, and watch him work. Luckily, he accepted. And then I became his assistant, free of charge.” The experience had a formative impact on Eli, and it is a big reason why he keeps his door open today for young people who want to learn. He encourages Lebanese youth not to wait too long to learn what they need to. “There is no reason why you shouldn’t know more, no reason for you not to succeed, especially with the technology we have today.”

IN SHORT
Eli Khoury grew up caught between the twisted reality of war and a broken family. When his political cartoons in the newspaper began to cause trouble, he had to flee. Eli spent the 1980s working in California but eventually returned to Lebanon to set up Quantum Group. And he’s always trying to improve his country’s future, about which he’s optimistic: “All the potential negatives, they will end up being washed out by the real Lebanon.”

YES TO
Mentoring

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SANDRA MANSOUR
Designer and Founder
Sandra Mansour

WHEN SANDRA MANSOUR decided to get into fashion, she was determined to do so without shedding her Lebanese identity. “There are a lot of European fashion designers, but not many Lebanese, so I wanted to enter the market as a Lebanese designer,” she says, referring to her French heritage and the years she spent in Geneva growing up. Born and raised in Geneva, Sandra came to Lebanon at 13 and left again at 18 to pursue her studies to return once more when she was 25. From the moment she set foot in Beirut, she knew there was something about it. “I realised that Beirut is different. There is a special kind of energy here.”

Sandra got into fashion through a chance encounter. She had completed a diploma in business at her father’s insistence, and had studied fine art for two years to satisfy her dream of becoming a painter, but she still felt that something was missing. So it was fortunate that she met renowned Lebanese fashion designer Elie Saab in Beirut. One thing led to another, and Sandra decided to do an internship at Elie Saab. “It was a wake-up call. I finally realised that it really isn’t painting that I wanted to do; it was fashion design. I could finally mix two essential elements together, my love for drawing and my desire to create clothes for women to wear. I played around with it by mixing embroidery, prints and multiple textiles,” she explains. Serendipity struck again, and she managed to enrol in the prestigious Istituto Marangoni on just a few weeks’ notice. The experience taught her much, but the time away from Lebanon took its toll. “I was done with Europe. I wanted to go back to Beirut. I felt very detached,” Sandra recalls. “I needed to get back to the place that provided me with endless inspiration and guidance.”

Returning to Beirut, Sandra was offered a job at Elie Saab, but after a short while, she felt that she needed to branch out into her own personal path. “I’m a very loyal person, so if I stayed, I was going to stay. At the time I was twenty-five years old, and I felt like it was time for me to do my own thing,” she recalls. She thanked Elie for the opportunity and set out to find her way, heedings his parting advice to focus on one thing and be wary of getting lost in distractions. Sandra signed up for language classes to improve her Arabic, dedicated time to getting to know her country better, and started scouring the city for suppliers and seamstresses. “I found my first tailor—she’s still with me—and we started working out of her house because I didn’t have any budget to speak of,” Sandra says.


to establish her own atelier in Beirut, Sandra Mansour seems to excel at whatever she sets her mind to. Her goal is to stay rooted in Beirut whilst growing her business representing Lebanon on the world fashion stage. “If I were doing this in Paris or New York, I would not feel as fulfilled,” Sandra says. “I like being in Beirut. It is a platform of constant inspiration, allowing me to dream and create.”

IN SHORT
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“Looking back on it all now, I was crazy!” says Sandra, thinking back to trying to get together the capital for her fledgling business and her first employee. That first year involved lots of driving around trying to pre-sell designs to finance the materials she needed. “I spent much of that year in my car going door to door, from client to client,” Sandra laughs. “And it was really a word-of-mouth affair. I did a dress for my cousin, two girls saw it and contacted me, and so on. I’d even go to their offices to do the fittings!” Today, the Sandra Mansour brand designs two product lines—bridal and prêt-à-porter—which she showcases twice a year in Paris. “Markets are evolving towards e-commerce. I prefer to maybe just have a showroom in Beirut, somewhere where people can come, get the feel of the boutique, get measured or get personal touches,” she says. “Everything is produced here in Lebanon, on demand, so it’s one of a kind.” Sandra beams with pride at her team of employees. That first year involved hard work and determination to get the business up and running. “The key is to set goals. Because when you set goals, you work to achieve them. You have to persevere and always be open to exploring alternate routes.”

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BORN
1983
Geneva

EDUCATED
MA in Fashion Design
Istituto Marangoni

SPEAKS
French, Arabic, English

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YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

THOSE WHO INSPIRE LEBANON

SPEAKS
Marangoni Istituto Design Fashion MA in EDUCATED Geneva 1983 BORN Arabic, French, • The rain • Animal poachers (I often forget!) • Cats • Reading • Art I LIKE IN SHORT From business school to art school to establishing her own atelier in Beirut, Sandra Mansour seems to excel at whatever she sets her mind to. Her goal is to stay rooted in Beirut whilst growing her business representing Lebanon on the world fashion stage. “If I were doing this in Paris or New York, I would not feel as fulfilled,” Sandra says. “I like being in Beirut. It is a platform of constant inspiration, allowing me to dream and create.”

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When Soumaya Merhi was twenty-four, she was struggling to advance her career. Finishing up her studies in Montreal, she was lacking the experience required to catch the attention of employers. That’s when a counsellor at a local youth employment centre gave her some life-changing advice. “She suggested that I stop applying for jobs and start thinking about what I really wanted to do,” Soumaya recalls. “I had been missing that objective guidance. It was like someone had turned on the lights for me.” She was one of several people who have inspired Soumaya along the way. However, you cannot look at just one person as your source of inspiration, Soumaya emphasises, because you change and evolve over time. “I am inspired by all those who have worked very hard and earned it. Those with a social consciousness. Those who care about the people around them—not just about the big bucks.”

When that employment counsellor in Montreal suggested that she needed to find what she really wanted to do, Soumaya had no way of knowing that within just a few years she would be making waves in Lebanon’s health food industry as general manager of her own company, Taqa, a bakery that specialises in wheat-free, GMO-free and vegan products. “I love the health food industry. I find that consumers today do not have much choice over what they eat. There is a lack of independent food manufacturers going against the mainstream and saying we are going to do it, we’re going to address this issue and highlight these problems—not just at the artisan level but actually making food a commercial commodity of good quality.”

The overall goal, Soumaya continues, is to create affordable, healthy snacks for an active lifestyle using as many local, natural ingredients as possible. “Today, eighty percent of what we eat in Lebanon is imported. I was still able to make a product with very limited resources that can compete with these imports,” she says. Although Taqa isn’t able to source all of its ingredients locally, the focus is on using unprocessed ingredients. “This is not a health trend. You have to look at it as an industry, look at it globally, understand what’s happening. The goal is to simply produce a healthy snack for anybody who would like to consume it.” Soumaya says, highlighting how healthy nutritious food goes way beyond trends.

Her venture is continuing to gain momentum and customers—however, the process is far from easy. “It is very difficult for an artisan to bridge into commercial manufacturing, because you don’t have the volume, the sales team, the marketing budget. It’s all about word-of-mouth and positioning.” Soumaya explains. Her company started in Tripoli and has expanded into Beirut. Having started so small taught Soumaya valuable lessons on approaching challenges from a creative angle, constantly engaging in market research and offering her team professional and personal support. “I try to generate a micro-impact on everyone I work with by helping, supporting, and mentoring,” she explains. “Also, my consumers are my big cause. Today, the Lebanese consumer can pick up our snack and know that it is a healthy, clean, simple product—not always the case with many food products in Lebanon.”

Of all the achievements—large and small—that have come while building this business, what Soumaya considers her main accomplishment is having stuck with the values and teachings her family passed on to her. “I was raised in a very small, quite isolated village surrounded by olive trees in the region of El Khoura. My parents valued simplicity.” This has obviously influenced her choices at Taqa, too. “I had a very creative childhood. The motto growing up was ‘If you can do it, you do it yourself.’ You look at your own resources and you do the best you can do with what you have.” And she truly has.

IN SHORT Soumaya Merhi is making quite an impact in Lebanon’s health food industry. Taqa, her bakery, specialises in wheat-free, GMO-free vegan-friendly snacks. But, perhaps surprisingly, Soumaya didn’t always know this was what she wanted to do. “You have to identify the things you might like and speak to somebody. With so much going on, we sometimes need to be guided by someone who sees the larger picture, which is why mentoring is so powerful.”
Michelle Mouracade’s positivity is practically infectious, and it’s a gift bestowed upon her in childhood by her parents. “I was very lucky because my parents gave me a very happy childhood despite the war. They were always positive. My father taught us to find refuge in sports—even when we were in the shelter, he’d have us play tennis against the wall—and my mother rarely complained, even during the most difficult times. She was extremely strong and resilient, and always focused on the positives and on things that would make her family happy,” says Michelle. “She’s been my inspiration. She taught me to be positive, strong and resilient. She made me the person I am today.” And this positivity is a great asset when you’re in Michelle’s line of work.

Working for Alfanar as country director for Lebanon. Michelle is tasked with taking the proverbial glass half-full and empowering its holders to fill it to the brim. With a long string of senior private sector positions—in project management, strategy, HR consulting, and business development—under her belt, Michelle decided to make a change and join Alfanar. Established in 2004, Alfanar is a venture philanthropy organisation that works exclusively in the Arab world to strengthen social enterprises that transform lives in the region’s most disadvantaged communities, with a focus on improving children’s education, promoting job creation and women’s empowerment. “It’s a combination of consulting, financing, training, mentorship and coaching,” Michelle explains. “Our objective is to empower these organisations to become stronger and more financially sustainable so they can have a bigger and more lasting impact.”

An adamant believer in the power of networking, Michelle always makes the time to sit down with the entrepreneurs that come to Alfanar—even those that don’t qualify for their portfolio. “Just an hour of conversation or an introduction can make a difference. Every conversation brings you something. We should all network more, especially young people,” she says. “It’s only by talking to others that you discover who you are, that you learn things and grow. Going to school and reading isn’t enough. You have to meet very different people. The more different people you meet, the more you learn, the more you connect the dots and find opportunities for yourself.” And this last part is something she hopes young people take to heart. “To find opportunities, you can’t simply send emails. You have to knock on hundreds of doors and be very persistent. Don’t dismiss any opportunity because you might find success and happiness where you least expect it,” she counsels.

Michelle’s own path to helping others started with small steps. Volunteering here and there, then for a longer stretch during her sabbatical. “I strongly believe in empowering people. I believe that every person has potential; unfortunately, there are people whose circumstances don’t allow them to explore their potential to the fullest,” she says, explaining that she’s committed to doing everything she can to empower people to realise their dreams. “I think it makes the world a better place if people are able to focus on their strengths. I’m convinced that when you open doors for people and help them grow then you’re helping them be more successful—which, in turn, helps others in a virtuous circle that ends up improving the lives of the entire community.” And the good news is that every single one of us can lend a helping hand, each in our own unique way. “It can be through a conversation, an introduction, volunteering, mentorship, donating money, anything... We can all find ways to have a positive impact and empower others to be successful,” Michelle points out. “The trick is to find out how and make it happen. We each have a role to play in society, and finding it will make us happier.”

Michelle Mouracade is the country director for Lebanon of Alfanar, an organisation that strives to be a beacon of change in the Arab world. She works to empower social enterprises to achieve lasting, positive social change. “The Lebanese are wonderfully resilient, ambitious and creative,” she says—and those are just the ingredients for overcoming challenges. “Behind every crisis and obstacle there’s an opportunity to have a positive impact.”
School is not only about learning. It's also about fostering healthy relationships.

Even as a teenager growing up in Tripoli in the early 00s, Maysa Mourad, today an education specialist at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, felt the energy of the change happening around her. “I was very much aware that there was a renaissance, that Lebanon was growing and improving,” says Maysa. “This country has a lot of layers; the society has layers, people have layers, and it takes a lot to peel those layers back and find out who you are and who others are. It’s like everyday archaeology.”

Persevering in the face of limited funds, Maysa pursued an international education by earning scholarships, first to UWC for her IB, then to Wellesley and Harvard. Returning to Lebanon, she worked for an NGO that teaches literacy to kids and then as a teacher in a school. But as her hands-on experience grew, so did her curiosity for the policy side of things. “I was very curious about the policy-making world. I wanted to understand the key things that you think about when you are doing educational policy. How do you implement pilot programmes? How do you scale them?” Maysa explains.

Maysa has been working as an education specialist for the Ministry of Education and Higher Education since 2015. “I have questions about how policy-making works in general and in Lebanon, but I can’t just call myself a policy-maker. I am too young. I haven’t been in it for long. So I’m learning and observing and doing my work. Also, the country is in crisis, and for me now the key question is how do you move from emergency to stabilisation and development. What do you do when your emergency crisis is moving into a protracted crisis and conditions are changing to stabilisation and development.” Maysa says.

Growing up in a diverse environment that encouraged learning was a formative factor in Maysa’s life, as were the family tensions that saw her grow up learning to deal with her emotions privately and push on. Both shaped the person that she has become and formed the core of her professional interests. “School is not only about learning. It’s also about fostering healthy relationships. It needs to be a place of diversity where you can build safe relationships, learn boundaries and learn to express yourself. Somewhere where you connect to people, to the community.” Maysa says. “We need that connection. You rarely find people talking about feelings. They’re always hidden or kept private. I think, given the many crises we are facing as a nation and in the region, it would be great to have spaces where people can feel. So it’s important to talk about things—not just what’s right or wrong but also about the complexities of emotions. Kids actually grow up with feelings and then forget them at some point,” she elaborates. Her goal is to see a focus on social emotional development in schools, more training for teachers and more space for kids to express themselves and ask for support.

Maysa is committed to inclusion, diversity and creating safe spaces—from mentoring children in New Mexico to co-founding the Empowerment Through Integration summer camp for the blind at just 19. “Open your heart, your eyes and your senses. Be kind,” she quotes her mother, stressing the importance of constructive self-reflection, asking yourself the right questions and connecting with the energy that keeps you going. Perseverance and resilience, skills Maysa herself learned from her mother, are key but so is self-balancing and giving back to society and those around you. “I have been inspired by so many people along the way. I’ve been very lucky to have people, random people, push me, and along the way I felt that life was very giving to me. Maybe that’s why even now when I am not giving, I am sad as a person and why even now when I am not giving, I am sad as a person and when I am giving, I am happy. “It’s not just that I want to be altruistic,” she says with a smile. “Giving makes me feel good. And it’s necessary.”

In Short: Maysa Mourad is a champion of schooling that nurtures diversity and inclusion, creates safe spaces and encourages young people to open not just their minds but also their hearts. Through various initiatives, and through her work at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, she hopes to make this kind of schooling a reality in Lebanon. “Education,” Maysa points out, “is a mission of bringing people together.”
TANIA MOUSSALLEM
Assistant General Manager
BLC Bank

When Tania Moussallem was eighteen years old, the unthinkable happened. She lost her mother to cancer and almost died herself when their apartment was firebombed. “Of course the death of my mother was the toughest challenge, and as a teenager I had to take on all the responsibilities typical of women in my country,” she explains, adding that she had also been studying for the French Baccalaureate at the time and lost all of her books and notes in the fire. She had to resume her studies from scratch. However, Tania refused to let these setbacks defeat her. “These two events gave me the strength to overcome so many challenges and start over on a positive path.”

While these events helped forge the person Tania has become today, it was a piece of her mother’s advice that stuck with her: “My mum told me to always be an independent woman, and this is at the root of what I do now.” In her previous position as assistant general manager at BLC Bank, Tania focused on strategic development and financial management. She has spent much of her career on a mission to help level the playing field between men and women in Lebanon through empowering women with opportunities they’ve never had before. This is the very mission of the Women Empowerment Program, an SME programme that Tania helped launch through BLC Bank in 2012. “I am a very rational person and always try to weigh up the pros and the cons. I knew it had to be a good business opportunity for the bank if it was going to work—but the beauty of it is that it also has a huge social and cultural impact,” she explains, adding that nobody had really looked at the opportunities the women’s market and the SME market posed until then.

Soon after the programme launched, all sorts of initiatives began popping up, each with a different focus yet all still revolving around supporting women in different areas in SMEs. “I believe this is as close as a bank can get to social entrepreneurship,” Tania notes. “This programme actually became a model—not only in Lebanon and the region but also worldwide. It became the subject of several case studies, by World Bank, Global Banking Alliance for Women, Oxford Business School, and more.” The success of the SME programme pushed Tania towards the Global Banking Alliance for Women. Today, she serves as chair of the organisation. “It allows me to have an impact on the different types of financing.”

About 20 million women in 135 countries are supported and empowered through the Global Banking Alliance for Women. However, Tania still finds the time to engage in mentorship, whether it’s working with mentees through the Blessing Foundation or mentoring entire banks around the world. Mentorship between banks, she emphasises, is an essential component of the Global Banking Alliance. “Because they don’t compete in the market, the banks are very transparent in sharing their experiences, which is very powerful. We have several sessions during the year to get together, including our yearly summit.” Tania’s work and life have established the Woman Entrepreneur of the Year and the Business Award of the Year for SMEs. These will help create role models for the young generations. Tania adds that the organisation has also widened its scope to include insurance companies, card companies and more. “Because economic empowerment is not only about finance but also about getting insured and getting access to the different types of financing.”

Our mission is to economically empower women across the world. “They get training, mentoring, expertise,” Tania explains. “In Lebanon, we have established the Woman Entrepreneur of the Year and the Business Award of the Year for SMEs. This will help create role models for the young generations.”

“I am proud to have set in motion a dynamic that will hopefully change the lives of women in Lebanon and in the world,” she says.

IN SHORT

Tania Moussallem faced major tragedy and loss early in life. Instead of letting the setbacks bring her down, however, she allowed them to forge her strength of character, which carries her to this day. Now she is improving the lives of millions of women through financing, training and mentoring. “I am proud to have set in motion a dynamic that will hopefully change the lives of women in Lebanon and in the world,” she says.

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YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

BORN
1972
Dfoun

EDUCATED
MBA
ESSEC

SPEAKS
Arabic,
English,
French,
Spanish

I LIKE
• Travel
• Family time
• Accomplishing

I DON’T LIKE
• Incompetence
• Ungratefulness
• Negativity

TERMS & CONDITIONS

THOSE WHO INSPIRE

LEBANON

Spanish
French, English, Arabic

SPEAKS
ESSEC MBA
EDUCATED
Dfoun
1972

• Negativity
• Ungratefulness
• Incompetence
• Accomplishing
• Travel
I was born in ’69 and the war started in ’75, so I am one of those you call war kids. I always asked myself, ‘What is happening? Why these killings? Who is wrong and who is right?’ Until the point I understood that there is no wrong and no right, that there is a bigger truth and everybody is wrong at the same time,” says Souk El Tayeb founder Kamal Mouzawak. What was clear to him was that the fighting had to end, that the different factions had to find a common ground between all of them. And that was the starting point of Souk El Tayeb. “Our slogan is Make food, not war. It’s not about organising a farmer’s market or starting a restaurant; it is a way to find common ground between people who were killing each other because of their religious or political differences. It’s about finding similarities beyond the differences,” Kamal explains.

Kamal’s approach of focusing on our similarities solidified after the war ended, when he found himself travelling to all corners of the country. Commissioned to write a book about Lebanon, he found himself crossing checkpoints and passing from area to area, researching. “Beyond the wonderful historic sites and natural beauty of this country, what I found the most interesting is that everybody is the same. Whether they are Christians or Muslims, sea people or mountain people… Everybody is absolutely the same,” Kamal says. “It was the most wonderful discovery!” He realised that it was all a matter of approach. “If you come to people with a vindictive attitude, they’ll respond in kind. If you come with open arms, they’ll open their arms even wider.”

Knowing the importance of having a common space to bring people together—and inspired by a previous employer, Lionel Ghorra, who had launched a cultural centre to the same end—Kamal decided to act. “Change is up to us. It is the contribution each and every one of us makes. Each one of us can make a difference and make things better,” he explains. “You have to be the change you want to see.” He founded Souk El Tayeb in 2004 as an experimental farmers’ market. It has since evolved to include regional food festivals, the Tawlet restaurants—run as farmers’ kitchens and shops that feature different cooks from across the country every day—and the Beit guesthouses, which aim to showcase local culinary and architectural traditions of their rural community. In 2012, Souk El Tayeb also launched its Capacity Building Programme, which empowers small-scale farmers, producers, cooks and underprivileged communities by teaching them key skills such as food hygiene, menu design and marketing. Souk El Tayeb has also partnered with key organisations including UNHCR, IRC and Caritas to offer these workshops to refugees, migrants, rural women and vulnerable communities.

Common spaces for people to come together over common ground—that’s what Souk El Tayeb provides: food and the timeless traditions of growing, preparing and sharing it. It brings together people from diverse backgrounds, religions and ethnicities, uniting and empowering communities and providing a platform to showcase and experience local culinary tradition and culture. Kamal is often labelled a food activist. “You know what an activist is?” he asks. “Someone who is doing an action, an action that can make a change. Everyone should be an activist; everyone should make a positive and constructive contribution to life.” He points out that ultimately it’s the human element, our behaviours and attitudes, that is both the source and the solution to so many of our problems. And he doesn’t pull his punches. “It’s our greed that fucks it up. So we need to focus on developing humans—on developing individuals—for each of us to have a better contribution to life and to not want to harm anyone or anything,” Kamal says. “Life is about exchange. Everyone has something to give, so it’s also about knowing oneself, having that awareness. What do I have to give and who needs it? That is the right formula.”

IN SHORT

Food activist and social entrepreneur Kamal Mouzawak is on a mission to unite communities and promote local culinary and cultural heritage through Souk El Tayeb: a family of initiatives that centre on food, from farmers’ market to skills workshops and restaurants. His message is positivity and personal responsibility. “Do what you believe in and what will make a positive and constructive change,” Kamal says. “Don’t just do what must be done.”

I LIKE
• Stars
• Tabbouleh
• Mountains

I DON’T LIKE
• Injustice
• Disrespect
• Ethiopian cuisine

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THOSE WHO INSPIRE

Life is about exchange. What do I have to give and who needs it? That is the right formula.

“Don’t just do what must be done.”

KAMAL MOUZAWAK
Founder
Souk El Tayeb

BORN
1969
Jelita

EDUCATED
BA in Graphic Design
USEK

SPEAKS
Arabic, English, French
FADI NAHAS
Banana Diplomat

belong to the tfadal culture. I belong to any place that says tfadal, says Fadi Nahas, smiling. After all, the word’s unique meaning—at once ‘come inside,’ ‘welcome,’ ‘go ahead’ and ‘please’—is almost a culture unto itself. “It’s when you go somewhere and they say tfadal, sit down’ or ‘tfadal, share our meal.’ That tfadal is where I belong. The concept of tfadal is definitely Lebanese. It is the thing that binds me here, to Lebanon.”

Fadi’s distinctive wit colours the way he perceives and shapes the world around him. “I was born with a wooden spoon in my mouth, so I had to upgrade on my own. There was no money or family business, but my mother gave me good values and unconditional love, which instilled in me a deep self-confidence,” he says. His other great influence was his water polo coach, Hassan Hamade, whose strong sense of ethics inspired the whole team. “He used to tell us that you have to always keep your cool, and always smile. A smile can hide weakness but it can also hide strength. Face your opponent with a smile—it is more powerful than any weapon,” Fadi recalls. Much in his life has come to him through this kind of meeting in the face of adversity, and his relationship with education and the Université Saint-Joseph in particular is just one example. He was a bit of a black sheep in his student years: “The school did not know how to adapt to us; it made us feel guilty instead of trying to seduce us,” he points out. He quit the university when he was asked to choose between his studies and his job. Fadi smiled to the Dean, and left without looking back. Thirty years later, USJ asked him to participate in a committee working on developing the university. “I agreed to join them in order to represent the voice of the marginalised ‘cancre’—the community of black sheep—on the board. And I loved it,” he laughs.

From black sheep to self-made businessman, Fadi insists that success—in business, love and life—is about core attitudes. “Chance never comes by chance. You invite your good and your bad luck. All of life’s biggest turning points occur when you least expect them,” Fadi explains. In his case, they’ve led him to Istanbul, Romania, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, where he leads the fruit distribution sector, having turned the banana into a symbol of the open economy in those countries. He is also the Honorary Consul General of the Republic of Ecuador. He is a board member of the Chimac Foundation and the Beirut International Marathon, and he’s the founder of Act for Lebanon and a founding board member of Endeavour Turkey.

For Fadi, life is about reinvention. “Life is a cycle. It is sweet and sour, up and down. You cannot avoid that. The ability to reinvent and rebound is key,” he says. “There’s no such thing as constant happiness. So, in a way, happiness is selective Alzheimer’s. Forget the bitter and only remember the sweet. That is my key to happiness.” And despite the doom and gloom in which pessimists paint the future, Fadi insists on seeing opportunity in adversity, and can only spot the stars in darkness—a survival instinct and a side effect “of not being born in Disneyland,” he explains. “Who am I to teach lessons? I can only share my mistakes,” he says when asked about his word to the younger generation on preparing for the future. “Today, the world is digital. Don’t waste time on traditional education. You’re better off focusing on the world of technology and AI, which is quickly evolving,” he says. “Opportunity is found where the herd doesn’t go. Essentially, success stories are written on off-road tracks. All sheep in a herd are vying for a tiny slice of the cake. However, when it comes to success, it’s the black sheep that take the risk and go off road that get the whole cake,” exclaims Fadi.

IN SHORT Self-made businessman/diplomat, Fadi Nahas knows a thing or two about facing the odds. His approach is all about smiling, confronting the risk, and always reinventing yourself. “Life is a cycle. Do not celebrate when you are up, and do not cry when you are down. Just persevere, hold your surf, and the wave will come and lift you up again.”

LEBANON

Opportunity is found in perseverance and off-road destinations.

BORN 1957
Beirut

EDUCATED
Cancre master

SPEAKS
Can communicate and appreciate a pizza, a baguette, paella, burger, hummus, and shish kebab

I LIKE
• Cedars
• Bicycles
• Travelling

I DON’T LIKE
• Racism
• Stinginess
• Eating rabbit

CONTACT
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AYAD NASSER
Unpaid self-employed employee
Loft Investments

I LIKE
• Nature
• Greenery
• Animals

I DON'T LIKE
• Ignorance
• Arrogance
• Showing off

BORN
First born
250 BC
Planet Earth

EDUCATED
Three days
in law school
Nice
University

SPEAKS
Arabic,
English,
French,
Italian

THOSE WHO INSPIRE LEBANON

Happiness is the moment you stop searching for happiness.

The little boxes we try to squeeze ourselves into throughout our lives in order to feed that sense of belonging to this or that group are at the very root of the divisions that separate us. And Ayad Nasser—investor, social activist, human—wants nothing to do with these labels that keep us apart. “From the minute we’re born, our parents choose and impose beliefs on us, creating religious, cultural, political and social divisions within us that ultimately lead to jealousy, competition, greed, selfishness, fear and violence in society. The time has come to think as humans only,” he says. “I don’t like to be called Lebanese. Lebanese, Syrian, French… My identity is human. We are one family.”

Growing up in a tough family situation that meant he was denied emotional support throughout much of his formative years forged Ayad into the emotionally open and giving man he is today. “I learned to be prepared to lose in order to win. I don’t want anyone to fight. I’m not a fighter. I’m a peacemaker, a dealmaker,” he explains. “Different groups, different confessions, have made us believe that people can rank as better or worse. My confession is better than yours, my job is better than yours, my parents are better than yours. We become scared, we fear each other, we hate each other, we compete, we become stingy—but the circle needs to stop here. Life is not about taking. Life is about giving. Life is about creating, about going to places where nobody wants to go and giving them life and soul. That is what gives me life.”

From real estate to investment—and with a side gig as a model thrown in for good measure—Ayad built a successful career for himself, and he’s always kept his eyes on the ball: He’d always dreamed of bringing beauty to those areas ravaged and neglected during the war—most so his hometown, Ouzai. Seeing that none of the political parties or other groups in power was willing to do the job, Ayad took it upon himself to get things done. “I said to all my friends that we were going to make art out of garbage. They thought I was crazy,” he laughs. He got to work motivating locals to help clean up the streets and reaching out to artist friends internationally to participate in the project, covering their expenses himself. And so the Ouzville project was born. As it grew, so did interest from foreign artists as well as local artists who would previously not have considered working in the area. Today, Ouzville is an urban tapestry of graffiti and murals in different styles and expressions that bring a once derelict neighbourhood a new breath of life.

So much of what Ayad does is for and inspired by his children, his daughter and his son. “One day, when I was about 33, my son told me that at school they’d asked him what I do. That’s when it hit me. I was a broker, I used to model for ads, I did all kinds of things. But what I enjoyed—and still enjoy—most is creativity; to create, to give beauty to the ugly things humans are doing, to bring humanity into reality,” he says. Today his mission is to give back, to bring beauty into our environments and our lives by spreading a message of positivity and humanity. “We have to live differently. To give back” he says. “I want people to see that the way to success is to count on yourself, be independent and think about the common good first,” Ayad explains. “We cannot talk about success as a personal interest. When we remove our personal interest and start thinking about the country, about giving back to the country, this will be the success.” And while he’s working on giving back to Ouzai, Lebanon and the world, he takes every opportunity to learn from the humanity around him. “We are students, every day. And this is our life. We are here to learn, to experience, to be exposed to the world,” he says. “Somebody asked me what happiness is. And it’s just this: Happiness in the moment you stop searching for happiness.”

IN SHORT “I realised early on that I have succeeded because I didn’t have anything easy. So now I love impossible missions,” says Ayad Nasser, whose work—be it investment, real estate or social activism—aims to restore beauty to the world. “I’ve always felt different. And that’s good. I don’t need to be the best, and I’m not afraid to lose in order to win,” he says. “What I want is to beautify the world and to unify people. This is my mission.”

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YES TO Mentoring Talks
LOFT INVESTMENTS

“You don’t have to be the best, and you’re not afraid to lose in order to win.”

Mentoring
Talks
Family physician Hibah Osman has set out to address one of the major gaps in healthcare in Lebanon: palliative care. Through Balsam – the Lebanese Center for Palliative Care, the NGO which she founded in 2010, she works to change mentalities around palliative care, and promote accessible, quality care and the policies needed for making this a reality. “The secret to caring for a patient,” she quotes, “is caring for the patient.”

Following your passion in everything you do makes for a happier you, and for a happier world.

“I never imagined I would be a physician,” Hibah says. Initially planning to study and work in international development, she soon realised that her undergraduate training had taught her nothing but theory, while what she wanted was practical skills. Between documentary filmmaking and medicine, she chose the latter. “Medicine struck me as the easier choice. It’s very demanding but it’s very clear in what you have to do,” she laughs. Over the next nine years, she studied medicine, family medicine and public health. “It was because of my commitment to social justice that family medicine made the most sense for me; I could have a bigger impact. I also wanted lots of patient contact. I never thought that I’d be taking care of the dying or the elderly, because I thought that would bring me down since I connect with my patients a lot. But the opposite happened. I find my work extremely rewarding,” Hibah explains.

Hibah’s inspiration to go into palliative care came from one patient’s battle with cancer. “She was a cancer patient in her mid-90s. In the process of taking care of her, I realised that we didn’t have the training or a system in place for taking care of seriously ill people and managing their pain at home if that’s what they wanted.” Hibah admits that this patient’s story changed her life. “I realised that we need a palliative care system in the country, and I saw how gratifying it can be to provide this care, to make people comfortable, to make sure their needs are being met when they are very sick. That experience turned everything around for me.”

In 2010, Hibah founded Balsam – the Lebanese Center for Palliative Care, whose mission is to relieve suffering and improve the quality of life of people facing life-threatening illness through patient care, advocacy, capacity building and research. “When we started, it was me and two nurses, all part-time. I was a single mother of three young kids and for the first couple of years I was on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. There was a lot of hard work,” she recalls. Hibah played a key role in promoting palliative care in Lebanon over the coming years, successfully getting it listed as a medical specialisation and working on establishing a national policy and integration into insurance. But to start Balsam, she left her faculty job as assistant professor at AUB. “It was a change that some feel was daring or even stupid, but I always pursue my passion,” Hibah says, unapologetically. “If you do that, everything else will work out. Following your passion in everything that you do makes for a happier you, and for a happier world.”

Believing in human connection extends beyond Hibah’s capacity as a physician and provider of palliative care. In addition to taking care of people, she believes in giving back by passing on knowledge. “I do it in our team and with our staff. I feel less like the boss and more like the mentor — also a little bit like the mother hen of my staff,” Hibah laughs. “People also reach out nationally and internationally, from schools and universities, and I make time to sit down and support them and link them with other people because I have a sense of responsibility to them. I believe that my experiences require me to share them, so mentoring is something that I do in my daily life. And I always make time for it,” she says. “I believe that we need to be giving something back every day.”
I LIKE
• Music
• Seduction
• Nothingness

I DON’T LIKE
• Stupidity
• Aggressiveness
• Activists who do not offer solutions

THOSE WHO INSPIRE LEBANON

President
Cavalier Holding

ARMAND PHARÈS

It’s a long story with a lot of emotion,” Armand Pharès begins. He wasn’t even ten years old when, in 1958, the Lebanese crisis broke out and the social uprising boiled over into his quarter. The café on Gemmayze Street once filled with the noise of people playing backgammon from early morning till late into the evening transformed into a barricade. “And we discovered that Muslims and Christians can kill each other,” he says. Several months later the conflict was resolved, Lebanon eventually got a new president and, for Armand, a good era had begun. During the elections of 1960, he watched as his parents transformed their apartment into a reception venue for the candidates, where they could speak to all of the neighbourhood.

In Lebanon, Armand would carry on the family tradition in the pharmacy sector. “My sister was a pharmacist, my father was a pharmacist, and my grandfather was a pharmacist, educated in Istanbul because it was the time of the Ottoman Empire,” Armand notes. He went on to become chairman and managing director of the Pharaon Healthcare Group of Companies, with businesses responsible for sales in pharmaceuticals, consumer products, and medical supplies throughout Lebanon and sub-Saharan Africa. And while Armand has done a lot of pioneering in the pharmaceutical industry over the past forty years and has established himself as one of Lebanon’s top business leaders, he actually started as a member of the Jesuit order—where he lived, studied, worked, and trained for almost a decade. Some of his friends today don’t believe it, but it’s true.

He decided to become a Jesuit after studying for his baccalaureate at the College Notre Dame de Janvry. “So, I entered the Jesuit order, and I pronounced three vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience,” he explains. “This was a religious order with all the spirituality that comes with it—which I believe is still now an essential part of my actions.” However, after nine years Armand needed a change and decided to ask his superiors to free him of his vows. “I was not a priest yet, but I had studied spirituality, philosophy and theology. At the same time, I was very good at mathematics, so they encouraged me to get a PhD in Mathematics in Paris, and then I left.”

By the time he finished his doctorate, the Lebanese Civil War had already broken out. Armand didn’t know what to do. With nine years in the Jesuit order and a PhD in Mathematics, he was not sure what opportunities were available to him. “Nobody needs me,” he thought. That was when his brother Adrien encouraged him to go to INSEAD—one of the world’s largest business schools. When Armand applied, they doubted he’d be able to follow the courses. In fact, his application was so bizarre to them that it raised suspicion. Once Armand was able to assure the school he wasn’t a “communist spy” and that he indeed shared the interest of making profits, they allowed him to enrol. Business school was a challenging shift for Armand. However, this experience taught him something big: “I had to change completely, to shift from thinking to acting. It was a revolution,” he remarks. “This is why I think INSEAD made me myself.”

This balance between thinking and acting was not easy to reach for Armand, who had to slowly learn how to accept the limits of his knowledge and spring into action. He remembers being given ten kilos’ worth of reading material on his first day. He was flabbergasted, wondering how students could participate in class if they hadn’t read everything.

“But then I understood,” explains Armand. “It is not about knowledge. It is about what you do when you don’t know.” In fact, coming full circle is a recurring theme in his life. His advice to the youth echoes it too. “You need to take care of yourself. Don’t be afraid to take. If you want to give, you have to take too,” he says, before explaining once again that balance is essential: “My happiness today comes from the fact that I have learned to join action with thinking.”

IN SHORT

After spending years in the Jesuit order and acquiring a PhD in Mathematics, Armand Pharès found his country broken in civil war and had no idea what to do next. He eventually enrolled at INSEAD business school—and although it was a jarring shift, it forever changed the course of his life. “You have two forces in life,” he says. “Gravity, which you can’t do anything about. And grace. Grace is the belief that gravity doesn’t have the last word.”
THOSE WHO INSPIRE

Fouad Rahme
President
Lebanese Businessmen Association (RDCL)

I DON'T LIKE
• Lies
• Avarice
• Radicalism

I LIKE
• Skiing
• Being kind
• Making the most of life

EDUCATED
MBA
HEC Paris

BORN
1961
Beirut

SPEAKS
French, English, Arabic

YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

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THOSE WHO INSPIRE LEBANON

You have to be open. Listen. And work on loving yourself.

Fouad leaves no doubt that education is crucial—a belief he was raised with and still holds. He remembers how, even whilst volunteering for his country during the war, his parents insisted that he and his brothers continue pursuing their education. “It was a priority,” Fouad explains. “Lebanon needs good, educated people.” At every step, his life story and the way he frames his experiences come down to the very values he admires in the Templars, and accepting one’s mistakes and working on continuous self-improvement is right up there with them. “It’s a learning curve. A problem is a solution that hasn’t been discovered yet,” he explains. “It took a lot of effort, but I now understand that failure is part of life. What matters is the lesson taken from it. You have to be open. Listen. And work on loving yourself.”

Loving yourself and being open to listening and to learning is key to success in the jobs of tomorrow. “The qualities of the future are flexibility, agility, and adaptability,” Fouad says. “We are in the age of the think tank. This age needs people who are brave and daring, and push the envelope,” he continues, painting a clear picture of a future in which the willingness to try new things and keep learning and adapting are essential. “In today’s business environment, we need entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs,” he continues, asserting that there are three key elements to entrepreneurial success: You have to love and believe in yourself; you have to love knowledge and understand that it comes from failure; and you have to think creatively and embrace innovation.

“An entrepreneur has two options: Option one is to succeed and option two is no option,” Fouad laughs—but he is deadly serious about what he’s set out to do. “I believe in what I am doing. I want to succeed because I want young Lebanese to come back to Lebanon, to have options and prospects. We have to create jobs, create the means for Lebanese companies to become competitive,” he adds. His method, pairing financing with mentoring, reflects the approach he’s taken throughout his professional career: “To get ahead, you need your entire team to get ahead. They push you up. And the best way to achieve this is through mentoring them,” he says. “My advice to young people is this: If you’re not ready to think out of the box, accept failure and love yourself, you will not make it. It’s more about attitude than knowledge,” Fouad’s voice resonates with that telling vim and vigour of entrepreneurial drive. “Le savoir—knowing—is generic. Everybody has access to knowledge. But le savoir faire—knowing how to use that knowledge, how to do—is a completely different thing.”

IN SHORT
With his sights to the future and his roots in the time-honoured values of his people, Fouad Rahme turned to entrepreneurship aiming to contribute to the Lebanese economy through equity financing and capital growth with a focus on SMEs and family businesses, the backbone of the country. “We have to create jobs, create the means for Lebanese companies to become competitive,” Fouad says. “I will work hard for this cause. There is no plan B.”
For Jean Riachi—founder, chairman and CEO of FFA Private Bank—success is defined by the core values of honesty, integrity and hard work; values that we learn in childhood and use as foundations on which we build our careers, businesses, families and nations. It’s no wonder that his greatest inspiration is his father. “He had a rare standard of moral values. He was very successful, he loved to help people and he was very generous, but he had his feet on the ground. He disliked arrogance,” Jean says. “I learned from him not to be impressed by people just because they think they are important. Whatever they have achieved, nobody is better than another person—unless their achievements are related to the way they have helped others, the way they have contributed to their community.”

Jean founded FFA Private Bank, then Financial Funds Advisors, in 1994. “When you start a company, the money you find, they call it the three Fs: family, friends, and fools. I had the family and friends—and I was the fool,” Jean laughs about getting together the friends—and I was the fool,” Jean says. “I learned from him not to be impressed by people just because they think they are important. Whatever they have achieved, nobody is better than another person—unless their achievements are related to the way they have helped others, the way they have contributed to their community.”

Jean Riachi knows that true achievement is defined by the values that shape it and the impact it makes towards improving people’s lives. Building on integrity and fairness, he continues to grow his business and his work to improve the lives—and rights—of Lebanon’s diverse communities. “I don’t aspire to be a billionaire,” he says. “I don’t care for luxury. What I want is to see people around me be happy.”

The culture of merit, the culture of honesty, the culture of integrity; this is our DNA.

But giving back is also personal to Jean. He financially supports a number of NGOs that work with some of society’s most underprivileged groups, including orphans, disabled people and addicts. He always requests that his name isn’t mentioned in acknowledgements or lists of sponsors. “It’s about helping, not publicity,” he says, shrugging it off as if there’s no other way to go about it. Involved with a number of organisations, he’s also a member of the Beirut committee of Human Rights Watch. “We have done a lot of work to improve the lives of refugees, domestic workers and the LGBTQ community. The Lebanese society is generally very protective, but for these people there is no public support whatsoever. If you’re a thief or a murderer, people will support you, even campaign for you, but if you are a domestic migrant worker or a homosexual, nobody wants to help. Society behaves like you are outside of it. You’re not considered a human being,” he says. “I’m very much involved with Human Rights Watch. This is important work that they’re doing—and for me, it is important to try to help them as best as I can.”

Jean also sponsors a number of NGOs that work with some of society’s most underprivileged groups, including orphans, disabled people and addicts. He always requests that his name isn’t mentioned in acknowledgements or lists of sponsors. “It’s about helping, not publicity,” he says, shrugging it off as if there’s no other way to go about it. Involved with a number of organisations, he’s also a member of the Beirut committee of Human Rights Watch. “We have done a lot of work to improve the lives of refugees, domestic workers and the LGBTQ community. The Lebanese society is generally very protective, but for these people there is no public support whatsoever. If you’re a thief or a murderer, people will support you, even campaign for you, but if you are a domestic migrant worker or a homosexual, nobody wants to help. Society behaves like you are outside of it. You’re not considered a human being,” he says. “I’m very much involved with Human Rights Watch. This is important work that they’re doing—and for me, it is important to try to help them as best as I can.”
Silence does not solve problems.

L

women which was held in Beijing

Women's Rights since the

Zoya had her pivotal

Voluntary, Zoya developed an

international focus was being put on the

many positive values, behaviours

and experiences that bridge the
differences and bring these
groups together, it is crucial to
also acknowledge the shared
shortcomings, the outdated
perceptions and often overlooked
transgressions that hold them
all—regardless of creed,
language or race—back. Hold the
country back. For Zoya Rouhana,
founder and director of
KAFA, seeing these and standing up
against them started when
she was very young. She realised
early on that across communities,
girls were somehow treated as
lesser. “Thanks to my family, I
didn’t experience discrimination to
the degree that other girls did, but
I still witnessed it all around me,
seen how boys and girls were
treated differently,” she says, and
I still witnessed it all around me,
I saw how boys and girls were
I still witnessed it all around me,
I saw how boys and girls were
treated differently,” she says, and
she recalls. “These
were real women who came and testified. It wasn’t abstract
anymore. These things were
happening to our neighbours. And
that really pushed things to move
forward. It drove the point home
that it was all around us. The roots of discrimination in society
became very clear.”

In 2005, Zoya became one
of the founding members of
KAFA (Enough) Violence and
Exploitation, a feminist and
secular Lebanese non-profit
NGO whose goal is to free
society of social, economic and
legal structures that discriminate
against women and enable
violence against women and
children. And the mission is
much, much tougher than it
sounds. KAFA supports women’s
rights on multiple fronts, working
directly with victims of violence,
raising public awareness, and
campaigning for structural and
legislative reform. KAFA was the
driving force behind the 2014
Law on Protection of Women and
Family Members from Domestic
Violence, which was initially put
out to the Council of Ministers in
2010. “It took all these years for
them to adopt it, and even though
it doesn’t go as far as we wanted,
it’s a start,” says Zoya of the
extensive obstacles brought by
various parties opposing the law,
some even wanting to remove
the word woman from its name.
“But we fought and now it’s there,
and the majority of Lebanese
now know there’s a law to protect
them from domestic violence.”

KAFA continues to fight
for the rights of women
and children and to support
survivors of abuse. It runs
shelters and hotlines, trains
a host of intermediaries and
organises media campaigns
to drive change in key areas
including child marriage, sexual
abuse of children, jurisdiction of
personal status, trafficking and
forced labour. “Silence does
not solve problems,” Zoya says
emphatically. “Young people
should educate themselves on
social issues. Many laws that
affect their lives are ancient and
discriminate against women, so
they should be looked at more
seriously,” she explains, pointing
out that there is still much
resistance to enshrining personal
status in civil law from across the
spectrum of sects. “There are
those who don’t want things to
change, but we keep trying and
attitudes are changing,” Zoya
says. “We’ll keep fighting.”

IN SHORT Activist and women’s rights champion
Zoya Rouhana is a founding member and director of
KAFA (Enough) Violence and Exploitation,
which supports survivors of gender-based
violence and campaigns for legal reform. Her
work has been instrumental in criminalising
violence against women in Lebanon. “That’s my
cause in life,” Zoya says, with the unassuming
assuredness of someone who’s long been at it.
“To bring justice to people, especially women.”

THOSE WHO INSPIRE LEBANON
ZOYA ROUHANA
Foundation Member and Director
KAFA (Enough) Violence & Exploitation

I LIKE
• Sunsets
• Tabbouleh
• Children

I DON’T LIKE
• Abuse
• Winter
• Poverty

BORN 1955 Choueifat
EDUCATED BA in Business Administration AUB
SPEAKS Arabic, English

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YES TO Mentoring Talks

THROUGHT OF THE DAY
Silence does not solve problems.
From an early age, Wafa Saab discovered her passion for volunteer work. “I was always joining committees and volunteering at school. And then I started on cultural events and festivals like the Baalbeck festival, and humanitarian efforts like the Red Cross,” she recalls. “This was where I excelled and found myself.” To Wafa, this work was a means to get involved and engage with the world around her. In the process, she met mentors and made lifelong friends. “When I was volunteering at the Baalbeck festival, I met Madeleine Helou. She took me by the hand and insisted on mentoring me,” Wafa remembers. “Those are the relationships, the contacts and the network of friends that I have kept all along. This bond is very important.”

Whilst all this volunteering was going on, Wafa fell in love and got married by the age of nineteen. And then, all of a sudden, the Civil War broke out. Wafa and her husband decided to move their young family to France. “It was a very perturbed period of my life. But there was always an anchor—the will to come back and to go on living in Lebanon,” she explains. “And it wasn’t just us. There were a lot of Lebanese in our shoes.”

During the great exodus, the family had everything they could to maintain their connection to their country, hoping to move back permanently. Despite it all, Wafa continued to persevere. “I was pursuing my education. I acquired a BA in Human Development and an OD in Education, and I developed a lot of skills. It was a continuous learning process,” she notes. “Of course, there was a lot of emotional disturbance, not knowing where my parents or my sisters were, but I had my three kids and my husband, my small nucleus, with me.” Eventually, they returned.

It wasn’t until after the war, at the age of forty-five, that Wafa decided to take the reins of the family business, Tinol Paints International, a paint manufacturing company which was established in 1956. Although the main focus of her new duties was on Tinol’s growth, Wafa endeavoured to also strengthen the company’s social and environmental responsibility, integrating them into its culture. It might have been challenging at first, but “It was an education I chose to inflict on myself. I did it for myself—same as all the work I’ve done for different entities.”

Same as her continued pursuit of education, which led her to acquire an Executive MBA from AUB, Wafa continued to persevere. “I was doubt save lives, and—like her other efforts—it was also an opportunity for Wafa to learn just a little more about herself and about the world around her; to look that world directly in the eyes and say, I’m here to help. “This is part of my commitment to education. Education is the only path that will get us through.” This momentum has created a lifetime of contribution. “Lebanon is part of a bigger space that we need to contribute toward. My contribution in Lebanon is a contribution to the Middle East and the whole region,” she explains. “You have to start by contributing in your smaller areas, in your immediate environment.” And, once again, she stresses the importance of education. “Focus on education, innovation and resilience.”

Education is the only path that will get us through.
Growing up, I was fortunate to learn respect and diversity. I went to multicultural and multi-confessional schools where we learned acceptance of cultures, religions and races. And that is a very good quality, because it brings adaptability,” says Nadim Saikali, president of the Debbane Saikali Group Holding. He points out that despite the tremendous challenges the civil war brought, the Lebanese still pulled through. “We never stopped fighting back against the destruction. In every business, employers and employees alike never stopped looking for solutions. They got up every morning to repair damages and to ensure things kept on functioning,” he says, and he wants to see that spirit in the younger generations. “Persevere, carry forward the Lebanese flame, and don’t give in to difficulties,” Nadim stresses. “Make it happen! That’s my motto and my philosophy.”

Nadim joined the Debbane Group in 1980, bringing new perspectives and attitudes that he’d picked up over 15 years working for a US firm. His role was to diversify this agriculture-focused family business horizontally and vertically, taking it into new sectors and new markets. Among the new ventures he introduced was the manufacture of construction chemicals. Starting with small capital and hand-picking a team of highly educated young engineers who became the nucleus that powered it, the business grew steadily. With the end of the civil war, the company really took off, expanding abroad and attracting the attention of major multinational players like Saint Gobain, which acquired it partly in 2009 and totally in 2012. When Nadim asked Saint Gobain’s president what had inspired them to buy the company, the answer was simple: “The people. The culture.” This brings Nadim some well-deserved satisfaction. “I always counted on the quality of the people we hired,” he says.

An encounter with a sales executive he’d hired, trained and mentored was to prove particularly fateful. “An outstanding young employee came to me and said, ‘My dream is to be sitting in your place, one day,’” he says and laughs. Today, the entire Group is a family-owned but not family-run enterprise. “That’s very important,” he insists, and recounting that the incident moved him to open up senior positions to non-family members and pursue a transformation of the Group. The executive became managing director and later went on to become a leading executive with Saint Gobain Group. “He always said I inspired him, but the student has overcome the teacher,” Nadim says and laughs. Today, the entire Group is a family-owned but not family-run enterprise. “That’s very important, because family businesses in the Middle East and Lebanon often do not survive the second or third generation,” Nadim explains, adding that they’ve even installed an independent committee to vet, interview and hire family members based solely on competence.

Over the years, Nadim has inspired countless co-workers, business partners and employees and has remained open to inspiration too. Chief amongst those who have inspired him are the five Debbane brothers, whose exceptional unity and respect for one another have been the key force that has made success possible. “Unity is precious. It is an element of strength. Especially during challenging times, unity is essential,” Nadim says. And indeed, it is one of the six values that have become the Group’s core ethos: team unity, integrity, perseverance, respect, excellence and generosity. “The latter is very important,” he insists, and he practises what he preaches, working with a number of philanthropic organisations, and with a Lebanese school for the blind and deaf that is particularly close to his heart. In addition to continuing his charitable work, his aspiration is to enjoy a pleasant retirement with his children and grandchildren when he does decide to quit—but for now, there’s still a flame in him for work, a vitality that he attributes to the Lebanese spirit. “Every morning I say to myself: You’ve lived through so many hard times and you’ve come out of it,” Nadim says. “So what are the small difficulties of today?”

IN SHORT
Combining a keen business acumen with solid values, Nadim Saikali, president of the Debbane Saikali Group Holding, has driven its transformation into a diversified business by integrating family values and professional management. He attributes many of the qualities that drive him to the nation’s unique character and heritage. “Lebanon is the roots that keep us strong,” he says. “It is inspiration and feeling—the Lebanese spirit.”
When Joumana Salame and her father, Nouhad Dammous, founded Hospitality Services in 1993, they set out to showcase and transform Lebanon’s hospitality industry. Over the years, the Beirut-based event management and publishing company has established a number of leading events, publications and online platforms that have become industry staples and points of reference both in Lebanon and across the Middle East.

And the company’s pioneering work is something of a family tradition. Since the 1950s, Nouhad has been heavily involved in the hospitality industry. He even served as dean of the country’s only hospitality school. Joumana grew up surrounded by those ideas and raised on the values of honesty, integrity, hard work and continuous learning. “My sisters and I had a beautiful childhood with an emphasis on reading and sports,” Joumana explains. “My father used to say that he’d spend his last penny on our reading and our sports, because learning and exercising are things you have to keep on doing all your life.” She got her first job at the same time she enrolled in university. “I was barely 18 when I got my first job with ABN Amro and became independent—and this was very unusual for Lebanon at the time. People wondered why my father was making me work,” she laughs.

But whilst she loved the challenging environment, she soon realised that banking wasn’t for her. Her passion was in hospitality.

Hospitality Services shines a bright light on hospitality, tourism and F&B in Lebanon, and Joumana has been leading the company for 25 years. Their longest-running and most prestigious event is the HORECA tradeshow, which brings together Lebanon’s major players in hospitality and foodservice. The success of HORECA over the years has led to franchises in Jordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. “We are proud to offer a platform where professionals can discover the latest products, innovations and services that will shape their business and where we can celebrate the achievements of the people working in hospitality in Lebanon,” says Joumana. “This is a volatile industry that’s very susceptible to political instability and unrest, and we have managed to keep it going—and growing—for over twenty years now.” Pointing out that you need to be able to adapt and remain calm to navigate the ups and downs, she warns against the swipe culture that promotes short attention spans and instant gratification amongst youth. “You need to take it slower. As an adult you cannot swipe everything in your personal life or your business,” she counsels. “Everything needs time, needs consistency. You need to persevere. Things are not just a click away.”

Grateful for her success, Joumana wants to share it with the next generation of industry professionals and with Lebanon in general. “I have been lucky enough to work closely with my father. Many key decisions that have helped our business grow were taken with his guidance,” says Joumana, admitting that her father is one of her biggest inspirations in life, along with all the women who have fought for women’s rights and overcome adversity to become successful in their own right. “My goal is to share what I have learned and I especially want to support women. We have many things to fight for, essential things for our future, for our children and for future generations,” she continues, adding that she’s an active member of the Lebanese League for Business Women and many other associations.

Joumana is also committed to promoting sustainable development in Lebanon’s countryside. Through Lebanon Traveler, the company’s tourism website and publication, she works to promote the country’s rural areas, encouraging the Lebanese locally and abroad to reconnect and rediscover their homeland. “We are truly blessed to live in such a beautiful country. Lebanon Traveler has allowed us to highlight all the wonderful places to visit and activities to enjoy here—not to mention all the brilliant people who are supporting sustainable tourism.”

IN SHORT Joumana Salame is co-founder of Hospitality Services, an events management and publishing company, specialising in the F&B, hospitality and tourism sectors in Lebanon and the region. “My mantra is a bit of a cliché but I love it,” she says. “Beliefs become thoughts, thoughts become words, words become actions, actions become habits, and habits become destiny.”

THOSE WHO INSPIRE

You need to persevere.
Things are not just a click away.

W

You need to persevere.
Things are not just a click away.
JOANNE SARRAF CHEHAB
CEO
Malia Group

"Believe in yourself. Above all, be resilient. To keep on rising, you can never give up." 

Many assume that being brought up in a family business, the next generation is just handed over the reins. But Joanne Chehab laughs as she recalls her first steps in the family business, Malia Group. "My father had me working on the production line," she says. "I had my economics degree, I felt I owned the world, and then there I was: filling shampoo bottles from 07:30 to 17:00. I'll never forget that first experience. It was as once humbling as it was informative. It was then that I realized that for me to fulfil my dream of running the business, I had to know and understand its every fibre. This helps inform your decisions and gives you credibility moving forward." By the time she was made CEO in 2016, she had put in 20 years with the company. Today, she manages the Group, which has grown to comprise 27 companies operating in six sectors across seven markets with a portfolio of over 60 brands and dozens of alliances with top multinationals.

Family is at the core of Malia Group, which began as a pharmacy founded in 1936 by Joanne's grandfather, Dr Jean Michel Sarraf. Starting from scratch, he and his wife built up the pharmacy into a successful company. Along the way, their two sons—Joanne's father and uncle—joined the business. They were the ones who mentored Joanne along her long journey. "You couldn't get more different perspectives," Joanne explains. "One is the consummate businessman, focused on the big picture with an innate talent for connecting with people. The other is detail-oriented, driven by rationale and logic." Did she find it confusing? "Not at all! I quickly understood that innovation lies where these two different approaches clash. That's the happy medium," she explains. "We're a very close family, and this helps in such a very difficult business environment. You are much stronger when you are together," she says about working alongside her uncle as well as her sisters and two cousins.

Taking every opportunity to learn, Joanne pursued a master's in France and further training with the International Labour Organisation in Italy, bringing back her new knowledge and applying it to improve the prospects of the company and its approximately 1800 employees. "Many view a successful business in terms of profits. That's well and true. But having also set up the Group's HR department, I believe that employee unity of purpose and dedication is an essential ingredient in the magic formula. As upper management, you have the responsibility to deliver to your employees as much as you do to your stakeholders. It's a delicate but necessary balance. At the end of the day, you can only expect from others what you are willing to give yourself," she asserts.

In addition to Malia Group's CSR efforts and contributions, Joanne established the Jean and Charlotte Sarraf Foundation in 2006 to carry forth the torch of hope and healing as advocated by Malia Group's founders. The foundation works to enhance the lives of candidates through dedicated education programmes and healthcare initiatives. "As Pharmacy Sarraf, we were founded on the principle of giving back," says Joanne. "It's very much in our DNA and we're always looking for ways to continue in this vein, to provide people with every opportunity to thrive."

Beyond her CSR and Foundation work, she also works directly to empower women, both in the community and within the company, to enter the world of business and stay the course through the challenging periods and family dynamics of marriage and children. "I try to help women who have not had the opportunity to build their self-confidence and to make a difference. There are many women out there who are often very talented but need that extra push," she explains. "You have to decide what your purpose is in life. Never let go of this belief. Be creative. And be hungry. Believe in yourself. Above all, be resilient. To keep on rising, you can never give up."
Born in Beirut to Palestinian parents, Mariam Shaar calls both Palestine and Lebanon her “homeland”—but the relationship with the latter hasn’t always been so easy. Growing up in the Bourj el-Barajneh refugee camp in the southern outskirts of Beirut, one of six sisters, Mariam experienced the many ways in which poor living conditions, outdated mentalities and even legislation can hold back refugees for generations. In her case, like so many others, the war compounded the difficulties. “I hate the war. When people ask me what I remember about my childhood, I remember war,” Mariam says. “When I was a child, I was very clever in school. I had good grades and won many prizes, but it wasn’t to be. I used to feel sad because I could not continue my education— for many reasons, because of the war, because I had to work to support my family. But through my work, I think I am achieving my dreams. We are helping more families, more girls, women and children. So now I feel proud, happy even.”

Mariam joined the Women’s Program Association (WPA) in 1997. Founded in 1970 as a series of sewing centres created by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the organisation was established as an independent non-governmental non-profit in Lebanon in 2008. Today, it is one of the fastest growing operations in Lebanon, serving nine of the twelve Palestinian refugee camps in the country. For the past ten years, Mariam has served as director of the WPA based out of Bourj el-Barajneh. “Since we came here, I started reaching out more, doing more networking, trying to find ways to grow the centres and help more people,” she says. The organisation’s goal is to promote empowerment, independence and increased livelihoods, and to improve the quality of life of families throughout the camps. Its initiatives include language training and education workshops, professional and vocational training programmes, career guidance, entrepreneurship skill-building activities, and micro-loans.

One of WPA’s most successful initiatives is Soufra. Arabic for “feast” and created with the support of Alfanar, Soufra is a social enterprise that employs women from the Bourj el-Barajneh camp to prepare and sell Palestinian food. For many of the women involved, this signalled their first opportunity to reliably provide for their families. However, working out of a small kitchen in the camp poses limitations on their ability to sustain their business. The solution came in the form of a food truck. “When we first started talking about a food truck, no one had heard of the concept,” Mariam says, laughing as she recalls how a screening of the film Chef helped herself and the women understand what it involved. Following a successful crowdfunding campaign in December 2015, Soufra’s food truck finally hit the roads in 2018. “It was a very long trip. It took us two years to get the permits and approvals. We had to go through so many steps to start it, but now we have it,” Mariam beams with pride.

The future is full of opportunities to start more initiatives for the communities in the camps, as well as strengthen new ones. From nurseries to give children a head start in early education, to a local café and gym to cater to women who currently have no such options, and from a Palestinian restaurant to attract both residents and visitors, to parenting workshops for new families and psychological support for refugee children, Mariam and the WPA are looking at diverse options for supporting and empowering these communities. “The camp needs our efforts. We have to support women—not just with words, but with actions,” Mariam says. “The younger generation especially should have opportunities to continue their education and to work. Both of these things are very important in life. Don’t take no for an answer. Be stubborn. Be determined. And have dreams. You can’t live without hope.”

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We have to support women—not just with words, but with actions.
For Sara Sibai, Lebanon is a place of contradictions and diversity. There may be problems with water supply, electricity shortages and public transportation, but there is also a strong sense of community, which she loves. It makes up for the infrastructure struggles, she says. “You go to a lot of more developed countries and it’s always work, home, work, home,” she explains. “I could never live like that. My life is very much about connecting, collaborating on projects, bringing people together around meaningful conversations and story sharing. This is what Lebanon is to me.”

When she compares Lebanon with other countries, she speaks from experience. After spending much of her childhood in Canada, she continued her schooling in Lebanon and studied at the Lebanese American University. “As an undergrad, I was part of the Global Classrooms Model United Nations (GC-MUN) programme, training students in public speaking and communication skills. I also volunteered with an NGO called Injaz. We worked on personal leadership and helped run youth NGO Aie Serve,” she recalls. After graduating, Sara built on this experience, working with an NGO as a youth programme coordinator.

When Sara moved to Oxford for her master’s, the most challenging part was giving up volunteering. “It was a very intense one-year programme, and it was the first time I could not volunteer actively and give back to the community,” she notes, explaining that she views volunteering as long-term commitments, and being at Oxford for only a couple of semesters made that difficult. “I actually went to volunteer a bit with every student organisation there was. I wanted to get a general sense of how things worked and what we could do better back in Lebanon.” It wasn’t until Sara finished up at Oxford that she made the conscious decision to return to Lebanon and build her life there.

One of the first things she did upon returning was to become a TEDx organiser, which has played a huge role in her life. She helped organise TEDxBeirut in 2011, 2013, and 2014 as well as hosted monthly TEDx Salons—smaller, unrecorded conversations where people can engage in critical dialogues without the standard eight-month preparation required for a main TEDx event. Around this time, she was also gaining immense experience as a service learning coordinator for an International Baccalaureate world school called Wellspring Learning Community. “I worked on connecting the curriculum to community service projects, bridging the school with NGOs in order for the kids to meaningfully engage in projects that were relevant to the community,” she notes. “For me, what’s really important about any community service is to spend time learning. Once you have in-depth knowledge of the issue, or the people, or the context that you want to serve, then you can act.”

Much of Sara’s experience has culminated in her co-founding L3b-PLAY, a company dedicated to leveraging the power of play to help people, businesses and organisations unlock their potential and enhance communication dynamics, decision making, stress reduction, and creativity through play. Sara’s position on the team? She’s the “Weaver,” making unlikely connections to create meaning—something she’s been doing her whole life, like that time she helped organise the Middle East’s first ever spoken word poetry slam, or when she started a performance collective or even a hackerspace. All context aside, what’s essential to Sara is committing to action and truly engaging with the community. “It’s really important to just do things. What are you excited about? Cars? Volunteer or start a project around cars. Kids? Find creative ways to engage with kids. Because the best way to develop skills is by doing, constantly. Skills don’t come from sitting in a classroom or in front of a screen. They may give you some knowledge here and there, but skills? You get that from pushing yourself to experience. If you want to develop a well-rounded life, you need to start doing.”

THOSE WHO INSPIRE LEBANON

SARA SIBAI
Co-Founder
L3b-PLAY

I LIKE
• Movement
• Authenticity
• The sea

I DON’T LIKE
• Noise pollution
• Ill intentions
• Corruption

BORN
1987
Tripoli

EDUCATED
MSc in Comparative & International Education
University of Oxford

SPEAKS
Arabic, English

IN SHORT Sara Sibai thrives on community engagement and doesn’t hesitate to push beyond her comfort zone. Whether working on youth programmes, organising TEDx and spoken word events, volunteering or starting new businesses, she continues to inspire the people around her in meaningful ways. “If you really want to develop your skills,” she says, “figure out how you want to engage with the world around you, get out there and get involved.”

YES TO
Mentoring
Talks

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OSMAN SULTAN
CEO
Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company (du)

BORN
1958
Beirut

EDUCATED
MSc in Engineering
Institut Galilée

SPEAKS
Arabic, English, French

IN SHORT
Always up for a challenge, du CEO Osman Sultan has worked in connectivity since before the internet and mobile technologies widely entered the public sphere and has founded two of the Arab world’s leading telecom operators. “It’s this link from human to automated, from automated to connected, from connected to digital, from digital to smart. Smart phones, smart homes,” Osman says and smiles mischievously. “Maybe, one day, smart humans too.”

You have to be stubborn on the vision, flexible on the execution.

My journey is rooted in four cities: Beirut, Paris, Cairo, and Dubai, in that order. I’m privileged because each has a unique soul, a unique face, a unique way of life,” says du CEO Osman Sultan. But his heart belongs to Beirut, the city where he was born and grew up. Coming from a family from the north, he attended a secular French school but was also part of a Jesuit-run Scout troop. Yet, when the war came, Osman saw how it pitched former friends on opposite camps. “If there is one takeaway, it’s this devastating mentality and how it can misuse something that is strong in the life of everyone—religion,” he says. “Clannish belonging is the main obstacle to development in this country.”

After attending university in Paris, Osman, now a young engineer, found himself working on the precursor of the internet, the Minitel, within the France Télécom Group. “I was fascinated. I joined one of the largest divisions that worked on online content and networks before most people were even aware the internet existed. Years later, that got me into telecom, and specifically mobile telecommunications,” he recalls. While managing a subsidiary in the US, he soon found he missed the Arab world. “I feel a citizen of the Arab world,” Osman says. “Unfortunately, today we live in one of the darkest times in Arab history, but when I look at the contribution the Arab civilisation has made in the past to all kinds of science, ideas, philosophy, mythology, art and tolerance, I have hope that it is a mindset we could recreate. I hope that this digital world, this brave new world that we are promised, is an opportunity for this part of the world to reconnect its components, to reconnect with that mindset,” he shares. “But that would require people to first open their eyes, their minds and their hearts, to open their arms to embrace all this and make it happen.”

Returning to the Arab world, Osman was given the mandate to become the founding CEO of Mobinil (now Orange Egypt), the country’s first mobile network operator, on behalf of France Télécom. Straight off the bat, he had a vision: A mobile phone in everyone’s hand. This was 1998 in Cairo. To many, the idea seemed implausible, but Osman’s foresight allowed him to see that mobile communications would completely change human behaviour, in turn transforming the social and business landscape. Now CEO of Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company (du), the UAE’s second telecom operator, he maintains that would completely change human behaviour, in turn transforming the social and business landscape. Now CEO of Emirates Integrated Telecommunications Company (du), the UAE’s second telecom operator, he maintains that mindset,” he shares. “But that would require people to first open their eyes, their minds and their hearts, to open their arms to embrace all this and make it happen.”

Osman has mentored dozens of people, including 18 executives who later became CEOs. Next to his family, this is what he’s proudest of. “When people tell me I’ve transformed their lives, I feel humbled and privileged. It is the best form of recognition,” he says, wholeheartedly committed to paying forward the opportunity and success he has enjoyed. “Volunteering—these links with the community and the social fabric—is part of the social journey,” he points out. And as he’s mentored business leaders, he offers a piece of advice for Lebanon. “I want to see the end of this clannish belonging that is eating away at everything good in this country, starting with the great human potential we have. It is preventing everything good from happening. We need to move from that mentality to a logic of coming together, a momentum of development,” Osman says. “To do this, we must put competency before affiliations.”

I LIKE
• People
• To think
• The Arabic language

I DON’T LIKE
• Stupidity
• Stinginess of heart
• Narrow mindsets

“Maybe, one day, smart humans too.”

CONTACT
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JOBS
Talks

YOU TUBE
anaosmandigital
FADI YARAK
Director General Ministry of Education and Higher Education

I LIKE
• Ski
• Mountains
• Gastronomy

I DON’T LIKE
• Heat
• Pollution
• Undemocratic people

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE
I grew up in a village in northern Lebanon, studied in Lebanon’s second largest city, Tripoli, and then pursued my higher education in Beirut. It was a long and unique journey between the different regions of Lebanon, from rural to urban areas and then to the capital. It made me discover and value the rich culture of our country and practically celebrate the diversity we have. It was amazing!”

Now based with his family in Beirut and Director General of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Fadi is working to promote tolerance and inclusion, and ensure that Lebanon’s children form strong functional bonds with their local communities while embracing their role as citizens. “Relationships matter,” he emphasises. “We need to invest in our young people. By empowering our children, by educating their minds while nurturing their hearts we will be able to rebuild the Lebanon that we want and they deserve.”

Fadi sees his job as an opportunity to give back to the Lebanon of the present and the future. Far from taking a bureaucratic approach and crunching numbers behind a desk, he makes sure to roll up his sleeves and learn from the students, much as he does in his own family. “My children challenge me; they challenge my beliefs and viewpoints, so I try to do that with other children too. At least once a month, I spend a full day in one or two schools with students in an attempt to better understand their needs and hear their insights. They are a great source of inspiration.” Fadi says. “They act spontaneously. They see things in a different, clearer way. Adults calculate a lot.” Whilst learning from the students, he also works to ensure that their learning experience transcends the purely academic. “Sure, it is scientifically possible to measure how students do in exams, but how they do in life is another matter,” he points out. In addition to pushing initiatives in schools that range from sports to cultural events to robotics competitions, Fadi also works to help Lebanese children build their sense of responsibility towards the community through community service programmes, reforestation initiatives, and scouting groups.

In addition to his efforts to ensure that almost a quarter million Syrian children refugees access education through the Lebanese school system and get equal learning opportunities, Fadi works with Education Cannot Wait, a global initiative that brings together governments, NGOs and educators to provide a rapid response to the educational needs of children affected by emergencies and protracted crises. Education gives crisis-affected children a sense of hope and stability, and also contributes to stemming violent extremism. “Education is the key.” The extraordinary mission of education and the mandate of MEHE is more important than ever,” he says. “Fundamentally, education nowadays must be about laying the foundations for peace, and this is all I hope for Lebanon and the world.”

Contact Information
fyarak@mehe.gov.lb

In Short
Director General of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education Fadi Yarak is committed to contributing to a better future for the children and young people of Lebanon who will carry the country forward. “The extraordinary mission of education and the mandate of MEHE is more important than ever,” he says. “Fundamentally, education nowadays must be about laying the foundations for peace, and this is all I hope for Lebanon and the world.”

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Contact Information
fyarak@mehe.gov.lb
From overcoming poverty to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor and helping others, to persevering and staying true to his calling through some of the toughest circumstances imaginable, Dr Jamil Zogheib listens to his heart, sets his mind to it and doesn’t let anything buckle his resolve. More than just his job, paediatric medicine was Jamil’s calling, and he became one of the country’s leading paediatricians, contributing to the development of two neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) in the cities of Jounieh and Ajaltoun. Then, in 2008, he got sick. The diagnosis was dire: Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord, rendering the brain unable to communicate with and control muscles. Eventually, people with ALS lose the ability to move, speak, eat, and even breathe on their own.

As a doctor, Jamil understood all too well what this diagnosis meant—and as a doctor sworn to heal and to celebrate life, he wasn’t about to let it beat him. Starting with the paralysis of his right hand, but eventually I had to stop and stay permanently in bed,” Jamil explains. Thanks to his faith and the love and support of his wife and family, Jamil overcame his initial anger and allowed himself to find hope and even joy in the things he is still able to do. “I decided I was going to live with dignity, without shame. Every time life showed me one reason to quit, I showed it a thousand reasons to go forward and continue. My disease stole my movements, so I used my mind and technology. My disease stole my speech and my smile, so I’m communicating and smiling through my eyes.”

Using a computer that he operates with his eye movements, Jamil has written ten books, delivered dozens of lectures, provided online consultations, created a strong online presence, and spearheaded the creation of an hour-long documentary on his story. In 2014, he founded the Lebanese ALS Association, the first in the Arab world, to support and inform ALS patients and their families, spread hope and promote research on the disease. “People often expect someone with a severe disability to be inactive, maybe even angry and withdrawn. I like to surprise them by showing that I lead a very adventurous and fulfilling existence... It’s a life beyond borders. Life is beautiful even under such dark conditions. There is always something to do and succeed in, and I haven’t done badly!” Jamil says. “The world ages us too fast, we grow up too quickly, we stop dreaming too early, and we develop the ability to worry too young. There’s a wonderful truth that’s so central to living: Each of us has some gift; a talent, a skill, a craft or a knowledge that gives us pleasure and engages us—and the path to our happiness often lies within that gift.”

Through his online activity, Jamil continues to help others to find strength, to heal and celebrate themselves and their lives. “We all have our insecurities,” he explains, “but when we trust that we have blessings—talents, knowledge, and love to share with others, we begin the journey to self-acceptance. And once we begin that walk, others will find us and walk with us.” Jamil might not be able to speak, but his message is clear. It lies in faith, belief, and self-motivation. “You can wish. You can dream. You can hope. Because life ends when you stop worrying too early, and we develop the ability to worry too young.” Jamil says. “The world ages us too fast, we grow up too quickly, we stop dreaming too early, and we develop the ability to worry too young. There’s a wonderful truth that’s so central to living: Each of us has some gift; a talent, a skill, a craft or a knowledge that gives us pleasure and engages us—and the path to our happiness often lies within that gift.”

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Michel Zoghzoghi isn’t shy about sharing his love story. It happened when he was 40. “I call everyone,” he says. “I was on my way to London to a polo tournament. The plane was late, and I bought a camera at the airport. I had fun with that camera the whole tournament, and that was it. I became obsessed with it.” Falling in love with photography was one of the major turning points in Michel’s life. Growing up in a family of entrepreneurs, his path had always been pretty straightforward: bachelor’s, work experience, MBA, business. Indeed, Michel is CEO of Dima Healthcare, one of Lebanon’s leading healthcare companies and a major distributor of medical equipment, hospital supplies, and pharmaceutical products. “The business I’m in has shaped my life. It has made me realise how lucky I am to be healthy and to be able to afford treatment for myself and my family if we need it,” he explains. “I enjoy managing and growing my company, and I try to do it as well and as ethically as I can. And I know I can help other people through this. It’s not a matter of making money. It’s the pleasure of building an organisation that can afford treatment for myself and my family if we need it,” he explains.

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Photography has given Michel a focus and an objective that allows him to spend days and weeks in the wilderness capturing stunning images of the natural environment and the animals that inhabit it, both of which he cares about deeply. “As a wildlife photographer, I often return to the same place many times. And over the span of twelve years—which is nothing!—I have seen the decline of a number of species. I’ve been to India four times to photograph tigers. I go to Kenya every year. It’s shocking that in just twelve years there is such a huge difference,” he says. “We’ve brought the planet to a terrible state. The most important thing now is for us to realise that we’re just a species ourselves, no more and no less important than any other. We need, for our own survival, to realise that today the most important goal that every single entrepreneur must work towards is making this planet sustainable.”

All the revenue from Michel’s photography goes to charity. Currently, about 70% goes to animal welfare and wildlife conservation charities—and that number is still rising. But Michel’s commitment isn’t just monetary. He sits on the board of Animals Lebanon, an NGO that campaigns for comprehensive national animal protection and welfare legislation in the country, works to address the issue of captive endangered wildlife, and runs educational programmes to teach children about animal welfare. “I don’t believe in legacies. What I want to do is to do good during my lifetime,” he says. “Of course I’m proud of the way I have set up my business, proud to have built an organisation that is ethical and respects clients. But what I’m proudest of is my photography,” he adds, explaining that he believes in the power of images to transform the way we see the world. After all, don’t they say that an image is worth a thousand words? “There are photos that can change people’s perspectives. My ultimate goal would be to take a photograph that would change people’s perception of nature.” Michel says, and then drives the point home. “We need to spread the word about how important nature is.”

Making that effort to protect the planet is crucial. “Ever since I was about ten years old, I’ve always told myself that whether I fail or succeed is not important. It doesn’t mean I don’t try. I basically take the pressure off,” says Michel. “I do my best, and usually it works.” Perhaps the message is that we need to stop letting the scale of the problem and our fear of failure get the best of us, and we should just do what we can—here, now—for animals and for the environment. “And we need to stop taking ourselves so seriously,” Michel adds. “We should stop thinking we’re so important. In the grand scheme of things, we’re not.”
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