

Embracing the spirit of free enterprise

Jinanne Tabra, a Business Administration graduate of Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, has drawn on her experience of growing up as an Arab in the West to inspire her innovative new start-up, selling Arabic children's books and learning materials across the world. The Foundation caught up with her to find out how she did it.

The Foundation What prompted you to start your business, Araboh.com?

Jinanne Tabra I was born and raised in Scotland, where I lived until I was about 11 or 12 years old. My mum is Scottish and my dad is Iraqi, and it would have been quite easy for me to grow up knowing only English and nothing of my Arabic heritage. However, my parents insisted I learn Arabic language and culture, and looking back I'm very glad they did. But at the time I hated being sent off to Arabic school at the weekends and I found that the books we learned from were dull and uninspiring, without the colors and pictures you find in books for children in the West. The situation hadn't changed much by the time I graduated in 2008, so I decided to do something about it.

The Foundation Can you explain the fundamental principle behind the business?

Jinanne Tabra Well, after such an uninspiring introduction to Arabic, it took me many years to get to the point where I could read and write to a good standard. I don't think it should be this way for children, whether they live in an Arabic-speaking country or outside the Arab world. Learning to read and write and about your culture and heritage should be fun, and the idea of Arabic children being alienated from their culture, as I was, is very sad.

The Foundation The business was established in December 2007, a year before you graduated. Did you have difficulty juggling your work and study commitments?

Jinanne Tabra The reason the business was set up so quickly is that the idea suddenly came to me over dinner. As soon as I got home I bought the web domain name for it and as soon as I saw my dad I pitched the idea to him. Because it is a very underdeveloped industry the business took off

quickly, so it has been hard work, but I have had amazing guidance and support from my parents, which has made the whole venture possible.

The Foundation What challenges and obstacles faced the business as you were trying to get it started?

Jinanne Tabra Doing business in the Arab world is still quite problematic. In some countries it takes only 10 minutes to set up a business, but in our region it can take months and that is off-putting for young entrepreneurs. Also, going through university I didn't really know anyone older than me who I could ask advice of. Because there has not been a well-developed culture of entrepreneurship here before, there are few mentors to ask for guidance. But it has worked out well as we are now doing good business and employ a staff of 13 people.

The Foundation How do you plan to take the business forwards in the future?

Jinanne Tabra One day I would like to see Araboh branch out and become a small publishing company creating original works for children. One of the problems with Arabic-language children's books is that the majority of them are simply English or American works that have been translated into Arabic, so they lack cultural relevance for Arab children. One of the key things we have done is to source original Arabic works featuring real, authentic Arabic characters that children in the region can recognize themselves in and identify with. Finding Arabic authors and publishing their work would be a logical step for us because we now have an understanding of what readers want. We are not ready to get into that just yet, but in the long term I can see us moving in that direction.



