

Amro Eltayeb

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SPEAKERS

Moureen Kaki, Amro Eltayeb

M Moureen Kaki 00:02

Okay, so my name is Moureen Kaki, and I'm currently in Boca Raton, Florida on this call. I'm here with Amro elTayeb. Amro, do you want to introduce yourself and tell us where you're on the call from today?

A Amro Eltayeb 00:14

Yeah, I'm Amro elTayeb. I'm Sudanese-American. I am here on this call from Houston, but I'm currently residing in San Antonio.

M Moureen Kaki 00:24

Awesome, awesome. Thank you, can you start by maybe just describing something from your childhood, going as far back - maybe a first memory or just anything from your childhood that stands out to you that you want to start with?

A Amro Eltayeb 00:40

Okay, well one of the memories that does stand out to me in my head is when I was a child. So my dad, he owned a couple of businesses when we were living in Los Angeles at the time. So that's where I was born and where I spent half of my life. His businesses were ninety-nine cent stores around the area in LA County, and he would take me on his trips to the warehouse to stock up on merchandise for the store. And I'd get to see how he conducted his business. And I'd get to see all the toys that were available there, and I would always beg him to buy me one, and he would always end up getting me something. He had this big blue van I remember that I'd always get to ride around in. And that's where he'd stock up the merchandise, and I would help him out. I mean, obviously I couldn't contribute that much, but I'd be excited to carry this little box to the car. I think that's probably one of my standout memories from my time in California.

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Amro Eltayeb 02:05

And then hanging around the store, playing. And they weren't huge stores or anything, but there would be a bunch of customers coming in and I'd just be running around the store. He'd be like, "Calm down." Or I'd play in the back of the store where they keep all the stock, like extra merchandise. And then there's a little office there. So we did a lot of tutoring when I was younger. So my dad, he would pay for us to do tutoring outside of school. And I remember we'd go on premise to Kumon. I don't know if you remember that, and we'd do that. And then also, sometimes I would sit in the back office with my dad, and he would also go over my homework with me, especially the math. I think that's why I'm so strong in math to this day and why I ended up going down the path of engineering is because I spent a lot of time outside of class studying math, and my dad would help me a lot with that, too.

M

Moureen Kaki 02:53

I'm guessing you enjoyed it?

A

Amro Eltayeb 03:18

I did. I mean, I enjoyed it because I think I naturally picked up on things when it came to math. So of course you're gonna like the things that you're kind of good at more so than the things that you struggle with.

M

Moureen Kaki 03:37

Sure, yeah. And what brought your family from from [Los Angeles] to Texas?

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Amro Eltayeb 03:44

Yeah, so we ended up moving around - before the 2009 recession, my dad noticed the economy slowing down and the businesses not generating as much money. So he ended up selling them before the recession hit full swing. And then he was trying to figure out, "Where do I go next?" And then he ended up visiting San Antonio, and his brother was already there, and he had his cousin in San Antonio, and they convinced him to come to San Antonio. And that's how we ended up moving to Texas.

M

Moureen Kaki 04:26

Awesome. And about how old were you then?

A

Amro Eltayeb 04:32

Fourteen. It was 2009. Yeah, so I was fourteen years old when we moved to Texas, and then I was just entering high school. Yeah, I finished eighth grade in California and then started high school. So that's kind of clean. I mean, obviously I missed California a lot, being ten minutes away from the beach and the amazing weather [laughs]. But I mean, as an adult, I look back and I'm like, "It's expensive to live in Cali." And things happen for a reason. But yeah, so I think that because I started high school in Texas, it wasn't as bad of a thing. I had to make new friends, but it wasn't like I moved my last year of high school or something. It wasn't that traumatizing.

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Moureen Kaki 05:32

Yeah, I see. But were there other things that did stand out to you about differences in Texas or something? Any culture shock that you experienced moving here?

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Amro Eltayeb 05:42

Cultural shocks. I mean, there was a lot of things that I had to get used to. I think one of the main things that stands out in my head is using "y'all" instead of "you guys." That was an adjustment. And for the longest time, I was like, "I'm never gonna say 'y'all'." I finally caved.

M

Moureen Kaki 06:06

It's a great word, it's versatile.

A

Amro Eltayeb 06:11

And then also, I think food-wise, breakfast tacos and sweet tea, that wasn't things that I knew existed. And that opened up - I mean, I love those things now. And barbecue. Texas has great barbecue.

M

Moureen Kaki 06:37

I'm sure a lot of Texans would be super proud to hear you say that and agree, including my brother, as we know. That's awesome. So you spent high school here in San Antonio, and after that, it was college, right?

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Amro Eltayeb 06:59

Yes. So I ended up staying in San Antonio for college. I went to UTSA, University of Texas at San Antonio, where I originally - funny thing is I thought that I was gonna end up majoring in English first. There was some resistance from my family, but also I realized, I was like, "Is this the thing that I can be really great at?" I love English. I thought I was going to be an author. But I also thought about, "Okay, what contribution can I make in my zone of talent?" And the more I thought about, it I was like, "Well, I am really good at math, and maybe I should consider

engineering." So then that's what led to that switch. And even then, I thought I was going to do biomedical engineering, then I ended up actually graduating in mechanical engineering. And then I didn't even use my mechanical engineering degree. I ended up teaching myself how to code and becoming a software engineer. So it's funny.

M

Moureen Kaki 08:12

You taught yourself to code.

A

Amro Eltayeb 08:14

Yes. So essentially, I think by my junior year in college, I realized I loved the classes I was taking, but also I took some classes where I learned a little bit of coding and a little bit of electrical engineering concepts, and I realized that I think these things are the things I would enjoy more so in my career. And then I decided I'm gonna start teaching myself how to code. And I started looking for free resources online, and then that's what started my journey into software.

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Moureen Kaki 08:59

That's awesome. Would you mind elaborating more on that? Whether you want to go from the continue from the self taught stuff to what you're doing now? That'd be great.

A

Amro Eltayeb 09:11

Yeah, so my game plan was - I started to see sites like Coursera and Udemy popping up. And also, I noticed that some universities started posting their classes online for free. And so I decided, "You know what? I'm not gonna pay to do a minor, I'm not gonna try to do switch my major. I'm just gonna do it on my own time for free." And so I went on Stanford's website, and I pulled up their computer science degree plan. And then I just started searching for the courses that would match up to the equivalent of a computer science bachelor's, and I started just teaching myself from there, and doing the homeworks, and doing little projects. So I did that for about two years. That was probably around my senior year towards maybe a year after graduation.

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Amro Eltayeb 10:22

And then after graduating, I was looking for work. Since I had my degree in mechanical engineering, I was like, "Oh, I'll try to find a mechanical engineering job then transition into software later." But I never ended up getting an offer in that field. And then around the same time that I started to gain more - doing more advanced stuff with software, I had a good friend of mine, [Name], who is in Florida. She introduced me to a friend of a friend who was a wheelchair user, and he wanted to start a wheelchair company. So basically, the idea was that there's these companies like Lime and Bird popping up, and they have reduced the cost of high

quality motors, and the prices of batteries have been dropping since the whole EV, electric vehicle revolution with Tesla. And we wanted to apply to use that technology and apply it to wheelchairs, since a lot of wheelchair technology hasn't been updated since the 80s.

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Amro Eltayeb 11:46

And so, I met with him, and I told him about the things that I've done and the things that I'm interested in doing and transitioning into software. And this was just an idea at that point, so he was like, "You want to work with me over the summer?" I said, "Sure." At that point I was still looking for work, but I was like, "This could be another cool thing to add onto my resume." He was like, "You can just work as much as you want or as little as you want. I'm just looking for some help to get my feet off the ground with this." I was on board with that. I only saw that as something positive. And knowing your brother Kaki and just the technology that's available and the technology that he had, I was motivated to use my knowledge to progress the field.

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Amro Eltayeb 12:48

So I started with him during the summer, and actually I treated it like an actual job. I would show up at nine, put in eight hours of work, and then just go about my day after that. And he was pretty impressed with my work ethic and the amount of time I was dedicating towards it. So towards the end of the summer, we came out with our first prototype, and we ended up getting our first investment check. And then at that point, he was like, "I've seen the work that you put in and how dedicated you are to this." And he was like, "I want to make you a co-founder in this venture with me moving forward." And at that point, I had to make the decision to continue trying to find a job, or do I ride this wave and see where it takes me?

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Amro Eltayeb 13:42

So I ended up signing on with the company, and then we started to talk about where we saw this company going and what the goals were moving forward. And we decided on applying to these programs called accelerators. Essentially what they do is they take a limited number of startup companies, and they invest money into them, and they bring in mentorship from experienced people, mostly people that ran successful businesses or investors. And they teach you more about the world of startups, how venture capital works, and to help you raise. The goal of the program is to help you get to a point where you can raise your next round of funding. So that was our goal was to spend the next six months on another prototype and to apply to these programs and to get into one of them, which is a pretty ambitious goal, because the most prestigious startup programs, they usually get flooded with applications. I know programs like Y Combinator and Techstars, they probably get around at least a thousand applications per cycle, and they only end up accepting - I know Techstars accepts ten per cycle. Y Combinator will accept probably more than that, I think around fifty. So it's pretty hard to get into them.

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Amro Eltayeb 15:32

But luckily, we did. We got into programming in Boulder, Colorado. And that pretty much set a new level of expectation for the company. We're now, to some degree, competing with other

companies in the cohort, but also just what is expected of you. Because a lot of the people that run this program and the investors that are interested in the companies in these programs, they're expecting you to aim really high, to build your business to \$100 million business or a billion dollar business. So that was very nerve wracking, but also very inspiring, and they inspired me to think bigger. And also the other founders that I've met in the program, they also inspired me to shoot higher and to dream bigger. And I think that's probably one of the most eye opening things that I've experienced in my life, is to be around so many hardworking and ambitious people. And also the culture that they have of helping each other out, even to this day. So what they do is they add you onto Slack groups, and they have channels for people to ask for help, or to recommend things. Even alumni companies, since the inception of this program, are still on that group, and they're offering help to people, which I think is pretty awesome.

M

Moureen Kaki 17:28

Yeah, yeah. What's the status of that now, the project that you were working on in Boulder that you guys got funded for?

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Amro Eltayeb 17:39

Yeah, so that is a funny story. Alright, so pretty much after the program - we set a goal to reach a manufacturing ready design by 2020 and to release our first product by the end of 2020. I mean, we started off pretty strong after the program. So I attended the program at the beginning of 2019, and the program was three months. So coming out of that program, we're around April or May. And so for those first six months, we're working pretty hard and making a lot of progress. And then we were planning on raising our round at the beginning of 2020. And then the pandemic hit. And that changed a lot of things. And that set a different trajectory for the company altogether, which ultimately ended up in my departure from the company.

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Amro Eltayeb 19:00

So with the pandemic, a lot of investors became more conservative with their investment. They didn't stop investing, but they became a lot more choosy with the type of projects that they were willing to put their money towards. And for us, since we were building a physical product, a lot of investors were not ready to invest in a company that wasn't immediately ready to go into production. So they weren't willing to finance our research and development, but they wanted to see a manufacturing ready design. That put us in a difficult place, so now we had to find a way to finance our own research and development that wasn't with investor money.

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Amro Eltayeb 19:53

And so we tried to look for multiple solutions, and then the CEO of the company decided the best path moving forward was to apply for grants with the government. Specifically, he was interested in an Air Force grant that would leverage our battery technology to essentially optimize the loading of missiles onto F-16 fighter jets. Immediately, as soon as he proposed this idea to me, I told him, "No, this is not something I'm comfortable with, and if this is something

that we end up pursuing and getting, it's going to lead to the departure of me from the company. I'm going to leave the company if this is the path that we'd go down." And he told me to keep an open mind, that we'll look into other grants as well, and we'll just continue talking about it, and, "I'll update you on stuff, and then we can come to a decision around October of 2020."

A Amro Eltayeb 21:11

I actually visited an Air Force base with him, and we talked to some of the officers about the type of things that they wanted, and I got to see what they were interested in. And it was what I feared, that was exactly what they were interested in, and that is what we ended up getting funding for. After the conversations we had, and that time passed, I told him, "Well, this is what I told you from the beginning. This is what we ended up getting funded for, and so this is me giving you my notice." So that led to my departure. And so the business is, thankfully it's still running to this day, and they're still working towards the wheelchair. Now, because they're getting funded by the military, they have to split their time between working on the wheelchair and supplying the military with the batteries and stuff and working on that engineering. But I'm no longer involved, I sold off all of my shares in the company. And that was another hurdle that I had to go through, because that took about a year of negotiations. But thankfully, I divested from the company and just no longer part of it.

M Moureen Kaki 22:47

Thanks for sharing that. Do you mind, can I ask you to elaborate more on why that decision was so important to you? Because I mean, a lot of folks would jump at the opportunity to make more money and get their own venture funded. If you're comfortable sharing more about why that decision was important to you on any level, I'd appreciate it.

A Amro Eltayeb 23:08

Yeah, sure. So for me, this was essentially an issue of morality. Being Muslim, and one of the things that I hold most dear to me is I believe that every human life is one of the most important things. Anything that would even slightly contribute to the taking of human life is something that I could not be a part of. And the fact that our technology is pretty directly just essentially optimizing to weapons to be used to kill other people, we're directly working with missile systems. That's not something I would ever want to be a part of, no matter the financial upside. I think essentially my religion played a big part in that decision.

M Moureen Kaki 24:23

Thank you. Thank you for sharing that, again. I mean, I'm sure you know my take on that. [Inaudible] And have your family been supportive in that? Because I mean, it takes a lot of risk to do this kind of work. Nothing is certain, as you've explained to us. How has your family been in terms of responding to what you do now?

A

Amro Eltayeb 24:51

Yeah, they've been incredibly supportive from the beginning. They would always It's helped me, "Just make the decision that you want to do with your life. We're going to support you in terms of your career." And that's been a huge source of comfort for me, especially just wading into these murky waters with the whole startup. It's definitely very uncertain, and you have to do a lot of navigating in this. But it's also really rewarding to be able to work on the projects that you truly care about, and to see just you building something from an idea into something that exists in reality, and it's affecting other people. And hopefully, for the positive, for the better. That's at least my goal is to do more good than harm.

M

Moureen Kaki 26:04

That's awesome. That's really great. I know this because we're friends, but you've started a new project since the one that you just described, right? Would you mind talking a little bit about that?

A

Amro Eltayeb 26:18

Yes. This is actually one of the few times that - I still need to practice the pitch for this company. I will attempt to explain this company. So yeah, I started this around August 2021 with a close friend of mine, with Juan. So we are building a note-taking app, and our take on note-taking is to build a visual-first note-taking up in the sense of that you can essentially draw the equivalent of a hyperlink. So imagine if you had an iPad, and you have an Apple Pencil, for example, you could just draw anywhere on the page. And then that shape would turn into a link that would open up into another page. And so you can connect pages in a way that haven't really existed before.

A

Amro Eltayeb 27:34

So, for example, if you're studying biology or the human body anatomy, import a picture of the human body. And then you could circle those the arm or the bicep, and then open up a different page, and then start taking notes on the bicep. And I think this could greatly help in terms of studying, but also collaborating and ideating on things. And also just helping with the creative process and building templates for things as well. And so that's our hypothesis that we've tested with a beta app that we released, and mostly got positive reviews. And now we're working towards launching the app first on the App Store, primarily for iPads, then we're going to branch out into Android tablets, as well as creating a web app online that you can log into, and create notes there.

M

Moureen Kaki 28:52

That's really awesome. Congratulations on the progress on that. As a former pre-med student, I can absolutely agree that that would have been super useful in undergrad in particular. So yeah, that's awesome. I figured you weren't going to bring it up because you were too humble,

but which one of these ventures landed you on the 30 Under 30 List? We had to ask you about that. That's a pretty huge accomplishment.

A

Amro Eltayeb 29:23

Yeah, so that was the first venture. So, I mean, to this day, I don't know how they got my name, because you have to be nominated to get onto the list, by either an investor, someone else that's previously been on the list. But thankfully, someone looked at me, and they're like, "This guy's going places," and they sent in my nomination. And yeah, so that was with the wheelchair company, I ended up being on the 2020 Forbes Under 30 List.

M

Moureen Kaki 29:57

And how did it feel to land on that list? It's pretty crazy.

A

Amro Eltayeb 30:01

It was such a surreal moment. It didn't even feel real. To this day, I still can't believe that I was on that list. I'm just thankful every day that I get to have experience of things that I have, and I've met the people that I have along the journey that I've been going on. I'm just super grateful.

M

Moureen Kaki 30:32

That's awesome. Can I ask what your inspiration has been for some of the stuff? You talked about the wheelchair stuff, the battery earlier, and my brother Kaki in part of that being an incentive. But overall, what's your inspiration for this kind of work, this kind of engagement?

A

Amro Eltayeb 30:54

That's a good question. So I guess the way that I view my time - I think that we have a limited amount of time on this earth, and we all have our gifts, and we have our intellect. Of course, earning a living is great, and working for a company, I'm sure, is satisfying for a lot of other people. But for me in particular, I try to think of what do I want to leave behind? What do I want to at least attempt to accomplish, if not actually accomplish with my time here? And that's something that I started thinking about in college, how am I going to spend the limited time that I have? And how am I going to maximize it? And do I want to do something that I truly enjoy doing, and to use my talents to actually try to accomplish as much as I can, but also to have as great of an impact as I possibly can? Or do I just want to try to make as much money as I can before I die? What path? That's the question that I still think about. What do I want people to know me for after I'm gone? And those are the types of questions that I ask myself when I try to decide what I want to work on, or how I want to pursue things.

M

Moureen Kaki 33:03

I think that's really awesome and super honorable, also. Are there any people who have inspired you in particular that you call mentors along the way that you've learned from that have made their mark on you? It could be in any capacity, not necessarily a career capacity or education.

A

Amro Eltayeb 33:28

I try not to put people on pedestals just because I think that's a recipe for disappointment. But I would say that some of the people that inspired me with their work and to try to be better - more from a religious perspective, I think it was my Shaykh, Shaykh Omar, as well as your brother Ahmad Kaki. And also from a social justice perspective, you've also been an inspiration for me in that regard.

A

Amro Eltayeb 34:16

But from a career perspective, there's definitely a couple of founders that I've met in Colorado that have inspired me to dream bigger and to try to accomplish more in terms of company building, as well. One of them is Elizabeth Giorgi. She has a company called soona. They have content studios around the country with quick turnaround, like forty-eight hour turnaround to create Instagram, TikTok, or whatever type of content for your business. It's kind of in the middle of having a whole production company that you hire versus you're doing it yourself in house on a shoestring budget. It's the middle affordable option. And she's been doing great things. And then another founder, Colin McIntosh, who has successful bedsheets company that operates - his marketing is great, just a lot of puns in his marketing. And he's built a great community. And he gives a lot back. He gives back to homeless shelters, and he plants a lot of trees, and his whole supply chain is as sustainable as possible. He's also been a big inspiration for me in the business world.

M

Moureen Kaki 35:59

That's awesome, that's really awesome. And thank you for saying that. That was super touching. Gosh, this question slipped my mind. You talked a little bit about this before, but how does your your religion - because you've spoken about it in different capacities - but on a general level, could you speak more to how it informs your future goals, the way you conduct yourself, the way you think about things and all this now, just elaborate more a little bit on them.

A

Amro Eltayeb 36:39

Yeah, so there is this verse that pretty much summarizes my mentality toward how I approach goals and what I try to accomplish, and it's that, "The efforts of the believers are not wasted." So for me, the way that I interpret that is that the outcome is out of my control, but the effort that I put towards the things that I'm trying to accomplish [isn't]. So even if I spend the rest of my life trying to accomplish these things, and I never get anywhere with it, that's enough for me.

M

Moureen Kaki 37:31

I think that's really beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. I think, Amro, that's it. The only thing I'll ask you is if you want to add anything, if you feel like there was something that you wanted me to ask about that I missed, or something that you remember that you wanted to elaborate on, or make any sort of closing statements or anything.

A

Amro Eltayeb 38:04

Well, I think that I should say this more often, and I'm gonna say this because I'm being recorded. But I think that you and your family, the Kaki family, I hold very dear in my heart, and y'all are truly very special to me, and I just want to say that I love y'all very much.

M

Moureen Kaki 38:35

We love you too, we love you too. We've never all universally loved somebody so much as you, honestly. I'll never forget those late nights in the house when everybody would come over, and my brothers invite everybody. And I would honestly get annoyed when it was a lot of people, but when I would peep, and it was you, I was like, "Yeah." You're very dear to our hearts too, and it means the world that you said that. Everybody's always loved you, and for good reason, too. Yeah, but I'm super grateful for you saying that.

A

Amro Eltayeb 39:09

Thank you.

M

Moureen Kaki 39:11

I'm gonna go downstairs and tell my mom, and I'm sure she'll cry about it.

A

Amro Eltayeb 39:16

Tell her that I miss her very much.

M

Moureen Kaki 39:18

We miss you too, but I will definitely let her know. I'm going to go ahead and end the recording unless there's anything else you want to add.

A

Amro Eltayeb 39:25

I think we are good.



Moureen Kaki 39:27

Okay, sweet. Let me go ahead and stop it.