

The Voice for Muslim Women

AZIZAH®

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FOLIO EDDIE
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WINNER

Azra and Shirin Khalfan
Founder and CEO
of Plaques by Azra

Secrets of Success

What Businesswomen
Know About Adversity
and Prosperity

Blended Families

Harmony Beyond the Nuclear Family

Through the Artist's Eye

Serving Around the World

Providing Disaster Relief

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Azra Khalfan has business in her blood. Born and raised in New York, she grew up watching her entrepreneur parents succeed. Her father, Aunali Khalfan, started a sign company in Tanzania and continued after moving to the US in the '70s. He also runs a non-profit organization that publishes and distributes Qur'ans. Her mother, Shirin Khalfan, created a company that makes medals, trophies, plaques and awards – Plaques by Azra, named after her daughter (www.azra.com). The couple worked together and invested in real estate properties as another business.

Shirin Khalfan, who also had entrepreneur parents, noticed her daughter's aptitude for business early. "Since her childhood, Azra spent hours doing her homework at

our office after school and other activities. She accompanied us on our business trips and was able to grasp our business ethics from a very young age, even before her college years," she says. "We have been able to hand down most of our business and property management into her good hands. She has always been passionate about our business and makes us proud. How ironic, her father named the business after her!"

However, it is the daughter who is most proud of her mother. "She deserves all the credit. At one point she was running two businesses

and raising three children!" Ms. Khalfan says. When her mother retired in 2009, Ms. Khalfan moved from her position of Managing Director to Chief Operating Officer of the 37-year-old company, while also running the family's property management and acquisitions company.

She expresses awe of both her parents. "My parents are my motivation. These are the two best bosses in the world – the best role models in the world. My father has run his dawah organization for 30 years. His passion is to share the word of Allah on a daily basis. Everything goes back to the Qur'an and Allah with my father."

Indeed, Aunali Khalfan has provided emotional and spiritual support to both his wife and daughter. He urges them to capitalize on the opportunities. "In America women are encouraged



Azra expresses awe of both her father, Aunali Khalfan, above, and her mother, Shirin Khalfan, below. "My parents are my motivation. These are the two best bosses in the world – the best role models in the world."

SPECIAL REPORT

RIGHT: Plaques being prepared. BELOW: Azra Khalfan working with her sister Zainab.

to run their own business, and the government gives incentives by establishing the Minority Women's Business Enterprise. Fortune 500 companies across the US are required to engage in a business relationship with such enterprises."

Ms. Khalfan shares that her father taught her to be discerning about the standard of the company's products, to make sure the designs and materials are top quality and never to settle for imperfection. Noting that anything with Allah's name on it should not be made of inferior quality and left to tarnish, she points out the medallions her company creates for Islamic organizations keep their shine.

One satisfied customer is Women in Islam, Inc. "We've worked with Plaques by Azra for the past 10 years, since we started our annual Dr. Betty Shabazz Awards Ceremony," say Aisha alAdawiya and Sarah Sayeed. "Ms. Khalfan and her team have always served us professionally and efficiently. It has been a tremendous joy to know her and her business. And to top it off, as a Muslim women's organization, we value the partnership we have established with one of the leading Muslim women entrepreneurs of our city: Azra Khalfan!"

Acknowledging that her clientele has grown, Ms. Khalfan credits the growth of the community as well as her company's business practices of giving great service, quality products, price matching and gifts incentives. Plaques by Azra also produces awards for banks, hospitals, government agencies and corporations around the country, most of which don't know they are dealing with a Muslim company until delivery time. At that point she has experienced both positive and negative reactions, but



she stays focused on quality.

With the downturn in the economy and market share decreasing, Ms. Khalfan reports business has become very competitive and her company has become more creative. They deal with organizations balancing shrinking budgets and they find ways to fulfill their needs in order not to lose clients. "The economy has been bad, but you can't allow that to make you bitter. It is challenging, but I rely on positive thinking and I focus on my prayers. When I have been down, my mother has been the one to encourage me. When parents pray for us, they are the best prayers."

Along with prayers, Ms. Khalfan runs a lean operation, thinking carefully about what they spend and use. She says while the green movement is now popular, the company has always valued conservation and lean manufacturing

processes. She experienced the green values her parents taught when she lived for six years in Tanzania, the country of her parents' birth. Sometimes there was no water or electricity; though faced with culture shock and health issues, the experience made Ms. Khalfan realize the many things we take for granted.

Not only does she not take things for granted, she does not allow herself to be taken for granted. "Unfortunately there is a small number of Muslim men who take Muslim women for granted; a lot of this has to do with culture and men not thinking women can be savvy in business. I have been running this company for 14 years – I know what I am doing. I don't like to take anyone stepping over me because I am a woman!"

Despite the many challenges, Ms. Khalfan encourages other women to become entrepreneurs and declares running your own business is one of the most liberating experiences. She enjoys the autonomy, the flexibility and being able to travel frequently. The latter she considers like food and a spiritual boost. "Sometimes, when I need to get away, I end up working remotely. With technology and Zainab, the best assistant ever, things run smoothly."

With the freedom her businesses afford her, Ms. Khalfan volunteers

Continued on page 38.



SPECIAL REPORT

Continued from page 34.

frequently with battered women and sponsors orphans all over the world. Recently she returned from a fundraiser in Iraq for Child Aid International where a three-day walkathon took participants to the towns of Najaf and Karbala. On other volunteer trips, Ms. Khalfan has stocked hospital inventory, outfitted orphanages with bed linens, helped to build wells and educational facilities and spent time with children who lost their parents to AIDS.

She credits her love of service to her parents who taught her to serve her community at a very young age – she was responsible for keeping the masjid clean. She also acknowledges another role model. “Sayyidah Khadijah set an example for every woman who wants to open her own business. She set a beautiful example and put money towards the work of Allah. Everything needs balance: faith, family and business,” she says.

Ms. Khalfan seems to have struck that balance. Recently while reading

her son’s college entrance essay, she realized the impact her humanitarian activities had on him. “My heart stopped when I read what he wrote about how my volunteer work has influenced his selection of a major.”

Ms. Khalfan also enjoys the respect and support of her younger sister, Sajida and her older brother

Sajjad, who runs a separate real estate business nearby. “He is basically my competition, but every night by the Grace of Almighty Allah, we are able to share a laugh, story or even our troubles over dinner. If there is one person who has taught me the art of great customer service and perfection, it has to be my brother

Azra Khalfan and the children of Iraq



Continued from page 36.

considering starting a business?

HS: Always lean on your Deen and maintain your character of purpose. Create a strong brand and presence. When you want to start a business never let anyone tell you what they did to make money because it either will not work for you or will not work the same way. Now I’m not saying not to use some of the shared knowledge – I’m saying you have to create your own pathway, your own energy, your own brand. The best thing to do is what you do best – whatever that may be. Take a self-assessment of you and your skills and say “Hey – I’m great at doing this”, and then make it a product to sell to those who need it. Always remember that no one can sell You better than you.

Continued from page 37.

Noting that self knowledge is important, Ms. Mirza cautions budding entrepreneurs to know not only themselves, but also the market and their plan before beginning to sell. She felt so passionate about this she wrote a guide for businesses that walks entrepreneurs through critical steps. She also created a professional networking event and has begun to offer coaching, sharing her sound advice with new business owners. “No matter what your profession or expertise, no matter your product or service – first and foremost you, as the founder, visionary, and leader are the primary sales person. So get good at sales and you’ll be set.”

When reflecting on her success and accomplishments, Ms. Mirza is most proud of the business and brand strategy work she has done for her clients. When she reviews her files, the high quality of the work and the authenticity with which it was done pleases her. She believes strongly that to succeed and to attract ideal customers, one must be authentic – whether as a company or an individual.

She also enjoys the autonomy, creativity and the freedom of being her own boss, and regardless of the challenges, Romana Mirza knows running her own business is exactly what she wants. She says: “I’ve confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt that although the life of an entrepreneur is unstable and scary, I would have it no other way.” 🌿