

Ep.2.51 - Faris Alami

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Faris Alami

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm your host today Ed Clemente. And we're fortunate to have a friend of mine as well as a very interesting person. Faris Alami, he's the founder and CEO of International Strategic Management. And with that, welcome to the show Faris.
- F** Faris Alami 00:43
Ed, thank you so much for having me much. Much appreciated.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:46
Yeah, we've known each other a while but I think it's pretty interesting everything you do. Why don't you tell people when you first meet him, and it's at an event, they don't know anything about you, what do you sort of tell them to do?
- F** Faris Alami 00:59
Thank you for the question. I usually start with some jargon and then I explain, but because I mean, it might sound foreign to some people. You know, I run an organization that supports

entrepreneurship and small business development, mainly in creating activities in the communities with a specific focus on underserved, underrepresented or under-resourced communities. So think about like government agencies. Think about, you know, community organizers. Think about sometimes universities, we basically go in and help support the establishment of entrepreneurship activities, or small business development activities within that community.

E Ed Clemente 01:39

And it's actually, I know, you can unpack some of that as we get through this. But you weren't born in United States, right? You have a slight accent. But I know you've told me a couple of times, but like, what's your story? How did you get here to Detroit?

F Faris Alami 01:56

Yeah, Ed well, thank you. I mean, you know, so initially, I'm originally from Palestine, and from Gaza Strip, I lived in Kuwait, most of my life till the first Gulf War happened. And then when the first Gulf War happened, I came to the US initially to go to school with a goal to go back to Kuwait, and, or Canada. Actually, that was the plan. But when Kuwait got liberated, I, you know, learned that they were deporting all the Palestinians in Kuwait. So I applied for political asylum. And then, you know, that took us on a journey about 20 years. And then I became a citizen, actually, only in 2012. You know, 10 years, in 2022, it'll be you know, it's actually 10 years. And as you know, so it's been 10 years for that citizenship. But that's how I got here, we moved to Michigan initially, because when we were going to get married, I wanted to be closer to some family, because I couldn't be close to my family. So I told my wife, it would be nice if we were closer to your family at least. So therefore, we just have some family support. You know, a cup of coffee, or a cup of tea with family members is always just nice to have.

E Ed Clemente 03:00

And we should put a plug in for your wife. Why don't you say what she does uniquely?

F Faris Alami 03:04

Oh, you're very kind. So she's a professional singer, as you know, she does opera and jazz. And she gets to travel the country to sing, actually the world to sing with her voice. So I'm very fortunate, very lucky, man.

E Ed Clemente 03:17

Yeah, yes. I imagine she's lucky with you, too. So let's talk a little bit more about the different things you're involved with. But you're on quite a few different boards. But why don't you mention how you're tied in with Automation Alley a little bit.

F

Faris Alami 03:38

So Automation Alley, I've been fortunate to have been a member since I think 2004 or five, something like that. And initially volunteering and many of the committees initially when they used to have Workforce Development Committee, Market Diversification Committee, Manufacturing Diversification Committee, and I chaired a few different committees. And then of course, just volunteered whenever it's needed, as needed. And for the past, maybe 10 years, or maybe 12. Since the launch of the Automation Alley International Center, I've been lucky and fortunate to be part of their advisory board, just you know, being there as a sounding board for Nolan and Lisa and team to make sure that they're getting whatever they need support from members to ensure that their international effort is going really well. And as you know, I'm very proud of that because Nolan team, they've done amazing work. They've got an export award for almost every president, regardless of the party for the last couple of presidencies. So it's kind of a really nice honor for me to be just part of the journey. Yeah, you're actually following we had Tom Kelly on a podcast at one point, too. And I know it's really grown, especially in the area of like Industry 4.0 and just some work they're doing now with the World Economic Forum. I don't know if you're engaged with some of those projects. Cynthia is an amazing lady who went to Switzerland for six months. And now she's really heading that off here in Michigan. I think she's gonna do amazing work for bringing attention to Southeast Michigan in specific, but Michigan in general, about automation and manufacturing, I think it's going to be a great spot and collaboration effort between the Alley and the economic world.

E

Ed Clemente 05:22

And we should mention Cynthia Hutchison, because she was there for a while. And eventually we'll get her on the show one day, but I've only met her once. So let's get back again to, because you told me an interesting story in the pre-call a little bit that you have had some engagement with the MEDC, too, before on some projects, why don't you talk about that somemore?

F

Faris Alami 05:42

Yeah, I mean, the MEDC has been very kind to us for a long time as a matter of fact, probably since 2008, 2006, something like that. And initially allowing me to speak at some other opportunities that they had, specifically about cultural leadership, communications, and things of that nature, when they were debriefing before they went on a mission for their executive team. And sometimes for the companies that they take. And the Automation Alley always usually engaged me for that kind of speaking engagement. But also, the MEDC really took us this last year, in January of 2022, they allowed us to go on a trade mission with them, we were selected one of the companies and because of that we were actually lucky to get a small contract from Saudi Arabia and a few other countries in the region. And in 2020, actually, they also gave us a small microloan that allowed us to, you know, weather the storm in 2020 and keep going. So I'm very thankful for what MEDC has done. I've always referred people to MEDC, as an advisor, but it was, you know, and I've been doing that for almost 20 years before that, then it was really humbling to be able to leverage that kind of knowledge, to be able to tap into it and be able to receive it as well, because I know it's a very competitive spot. So I was, I feel very lucky and fortunate to have the interaction with MEDC.

E

Ed Clemente 07:07

Yeah, that's a couple different things. But let's talk first a little bit about how you do help small businesses and how they get started. Because I know you did something, did you participate with the Goldman Sachs? And could you explain what the Goldman Sachs program is first?

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Faris Alami 07:23

Sure. Yeah. So that's out of my personal hat, which is I work with the Goldman Sachs 10,000 small business program as part of their nonprofit philanthropical work. And basically, the goal was to support 10,000 small businesses in the US, you know, thrive. And it was really built on a program that they have done internationally initially, that did really well, which was 10,000 Women program, so the idea was what not do something for the people in the US. And this was really the birth of it came in 2008, after the crash of the economy of 2008. I've been involved with them since the launch here in Detroit, and I've been fortunate enough to be involved in some of the launch that they have done out of Boston, Babson College for nationwide enrollment. And it's a great program. So anyone who is looking, you know, who's having some revenue in their business, and they have a couple employees, they should apply for the program. And they receive basically, what equal you know, probably what equals about \$50,000 scholarship, basically they'll go through the training for four months with individuals that will advise them, and then different modules, training modules that people will come speak on. And that's very powerful. You know, there are lots of people who probably could speak a lot more on that as well. I'm one of the advisors for the program.

E

Ed Clemente 08:38

Yeah, we've actually had two previous guests that have gone through that program, because they readily list that sort of as like almost like another college or an educational program after they've participated through that. And it's a, it's must really make a good impression a lot of folks because everyone I know it talks about it, speaks highlight the program.

F

Faris Alami 08:57

Well, it's 100 hours of education. So it's 100 hours in classrooms and about another 100 hours of you know, of private work. So it's 200 hours, maybe 250 hours. So it's a lot of hours that is focused on their education, and usually the elevates the entrepreneur language and the small business owner language in the way that they communicate with other businesses of sophistication that they can articulate their story to the world, leveraging the knowledge that they may gain from interacting with such program.

E

Ed Clemente 09:29

I always like also the angle of the symposium part of it, where they bring in professionals to come in and talk to small business or people starting up too. And I think that's one of the best ways for people to learn how to do stuff when they hear other people who have gone through the struggles of getting started.

F

Faris Alami 09:45

Yeah, peer-to-peer learning is the best way to do it. I agree. Absolutely.

E

Ed Clemente 09:51

And you also touched on something kind of briefly there but you do a ton of international. I mean, I say it jokingly but I think you spend more time out of Michigan, then you do in Michigan, but like how many different countries have you worked with I mean? It's got to be up there, I'm guessing.

F

Faris Alami 10:08

Yeah. I've been lucky. We've touched, I think right now we're at 100 exact, 100 countries that we've touched working with. And when I say that we're usually working with institutions launching programs in those countries, usually strategy wise for the country, on how to deploy a program, what kind of program? What segment of entrepreneurs do we focus on? How long is the program? Who should we get involved? What companies should we have them do the training, that can add level of sophistication, I'm lucky to be part of that, but also been lucky because a lot of times, they've allowed me to interact with entrepreneurs and programs that we might have agreed to deploy as a test for the market or as a feeder, or as a train the trainer where we took some other local companies and train them on delivering some of our methodology or our work. So it's been very humbling. And I've been lucky to have touched 100 countries as of today. [Wow] You know, over the years, but I'm sure it'll change. And yeah, I when you joke about miles, you know, I am a million-mile clubber, meaning that I've spent one million miles on air in the last 10 years, probably an average of 200 to 300,000 miles a year on a plane. And usually, you know, for those who are listening, and they enjoy flying, that's usually within seven to 10 days flight within a month. So it's only seven to 10 days within a month. And you can imagine how much flying that is. I just came on a trip and use it as example. I was in Saudi for two days, Kuwait for one day, Amsterdam for one day, France for one day. I left on a Saturday and I came back on Wednesday. So you know, you just go in for a meeting, you do your thing, and then you move on.

E

Ed Clemente 11:56

Now, and I imagine in the era of the pandemic, that had to be so much harder to with all the testing and all that you had to do.

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Faris Alami 12:03

Yeah, I mean, it slowed down. And between March of 2020, till probably October 2021, there was almost no flying for me. And then after that it really started taking off about now, maybe 50% of the time that I was spending, flying is about about 50% of what was in 2020. And there

are there are definitely trends to be back to the level of travel probably in the next few years between 2023 to 2024. I can see that that's gonna come around.

E

Ed Clemente 12:39

And you also, you know, there's that many people we have on the show, but I know a lot of them have probably been through programs. But you're also involved with Leadership Oakland County, too, aren't you?

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Faris Alami 12:50

Yeah, I'm also lucky to be on the Leadership Oakland board. Actually, I love Leadership Oakland, one of the things that I mentioned about Leadership Oakland, as well, as you know, Global Ties Detroit, you and I serve on that board as well. There are lots of boards that I'm involved in. And I'm very lucky to be part of such groups because you learn much more than you they think that you're giving. And I'm always honored and humbled to being part of such a group. But these kinds of programs I think are powerful, impactful. And every community has one and I encourage people to visit their own community and learn about their own programs like that.

A

Announcer 13:26

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E

Ed Clemente 13:42

Let's get a little bit into what are some of the challenges and sort of things you see or disruptors you see on the rise, and that might affect either for small business or your own business? Or I know you also run a youth group, too, youth foundation, too, right.

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Faris Alami 13:57

Yes, thank you so much. And you've done a lot of homework. I appreciate you. So Connecting Dots Globally is a nonprofit that I established a couple of years ago, the goal was from this, I've been running a program actually for years for almost 20 years, teaching high school and college students entrepreneurship and STEM and global trade in a fun way in a boot camp style and, you know, couple of weeks style. So there we have different tracks as you can imagine. And you know, I'm very fortunate to be doing that because I really believe the more we exposed youth for such ideas about STEM, about entrepreneurship, about global, about culture, the better the world I feel that we could live in because at the end of the day, the more you learn about something, or about a person, the more likely you might be intrigued to learn more about them or be interested in them versus trying to hurt them.

E

Ed Clemente 14:50

Yeah, and I would imagine because of your international background, I didn't get the exposure but I'm sure a lot of them are getting international exposure just by meeting you and you know not not a lot of people meet whatever high schools, you're going to really have that many unless their parents are in it. But otherwise, you really don't get exposed to it to go to college for most kids, I'm guessing.

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Faris Alami 15:09

For sure, for sure. And that program, I don't how much you got read about it. Basically, we bring about five to 15 different country representatives to speak about their country within the program. We bring five to 15 entrepreneurs to speak about their startups and their business. And then they will bring about five to 15 other volunteers, business coaches, business trainers to talk about how do you put a presentation together? How do you come up with an idea together? How do you come up with financing is offered together? How do you make money on it, and you know, pulling it together, it's very powerful to really watch youth, the minute you unleash, I usually say just exposing them to some ideas, and just watching them unleash the talent that they have. That's just most of the time is hidden or just, you know, suppressed because of the structure that we have built around to force them to behave in a way or another.

E

Ed Clemente 16:02

Yeah, it's funny, we had that there was a group in recently, you know, from Kazakhstan are all like under I think they're all under 19 years old. But I gave them a tour of Henry Ford, the museum. And it was almost like a totally different tour, just because they saw a ton of things that I probably saw all the time. But they saw it so much differently through international eyes, as well as you know, younger eyes who maybe didn't have baggage, you know, to get rid of to see something. And that's obvious. Are there any other disruptors you want to mention before he shifted the last couple of questions?

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Faris Alami 16:38

Yeah, one of the things that we you know, I'm seeing in my business, we do a lot of what's called capacity building tour. And I've seen a big, you know, ask from the globe on it. And basically what it is, is we bring people to the US or other countries, and we basically, for about a week to 10 days, depending on the program, we have gone a little longer, but usually a week or 10 days, we do half-day training with them about the topic. And then we do half-day touring, with connecting them with other resources. And my uniqueness, I think that I've been lucky enough to see, and I think there are lots of things are bubbling up around the world, what I call regionalism, and localism is even becoming bigger, because of what happened with COVID, a couple of years ago, and it's really bubbling up everywhere. And I'm seeing it everywhere, because I get to see all these people come here and work with us. And as we unfold the discussions, you're learning so much about how they're thinking, how they're focusing on ideas. As a matter of fact, I just had a Kazakhstan group, half angel investors and half

entrepreneurship, ecosystem builders, incubators, accelerators, head SME development centers, managers, they spent 10 days with us in San Francisco being exposed to some of the ideas that they may have there, as well as a little bit of our training of how we approach such economic development, ideas for that specific small business entrepreneurship space. And it was really fascinating to see how there is a really big sense of, you know, not necessarily nationalism, but I think more of regionalism approach to their challenges, as well as the opportunity that they have. And as well as I call it, building bridges between the their nation, other nations, there's a really eager sense of, or sense of eagerness to build bridges between their nation and the US or other nations.

E

Ed Clemente 18:26

And you kind of this might be a little redundant, because you sort of hit on these two points a little bit. But you had such a unique life to come to America and challenging I would imagine as well, to get here because you never I'm sure there were times you didn't know what your path was going to be. What advice would you give your high school self? Now knowing what you know, now, would you have told yourself anything different about how to progress in life,

F

Faris Alami 18:53

I think one of the things I would reflect back telling myself which I tell you today, is don't be sad with the way that you think you want to be. Because sometimes you take paths and roads that could lead you somewhere that is better than you thought or imagined. And I say to the people who are supporting them, because I've been lucky to have a lot of I call them angels in their life that have showed up and given me hand when whether I was homeless or whether I was fighting immigration, any of those stages. Angels showed up and had faith and believed in who I am when maybe I didn't necessarily know that I even needed it or wanted it. And I think surround yourself with those kinds of individuals that are looking for you, looking to make an investment in you, looking to make sure that you're thriving no matter what and overseeing the challenges or the situations or the moments that you're in at that moment.

E

Ed Clemente 19:50

Well and it helps you're a good person too. I know I've known you for a while. You are a nice person and you help out a lot of people so it's not by accident I think you ended up on this path. And so your very last question. You've been here a while you got kids. What do you like best about living in Michigan? Either a destination or event or festival?

F

Faris Alami 20:11

Yeah. So the first time I got that question, I think it was at Automation Alley was effectively like, Why would you leave Arizona to come to Michigan? What's wrong with you? And I said, honestly, one of the things besides family of course, being here, and now we have a lot more friends and family that are here is really the four seasons for me is exciting. I grew up in a region that never really saw four seasons. So seeing the snow, seeing the leaves change colors, seeing the sun in the summer, you know, the, you know, three, four seasons that we get here,

most of the time, they used to tease people in Arizona, I had two seasons, either hot or extremely hot. That was it. So now, you know, to have four seasons is very exciting for us. The parks are really, you know, just walking in the parks and all the parks that we have and the water that we have. It's just beautiful for me and I love the downtown Riverwalk and others like it or the pathway for bikes, or just walking around. It's, for me, Michigan has a lot to offer to the world. Besides the four seasons that are awesome people that you get to meet like you Ed.

E

Ed Clemente 21:15

Well, you're kind. Well, once again, our guest today was Faris Alami me is the founder and CEO of International Strategic Management, you keep up the good work and you keep going at it. And sure you're gonna always have good fortune as you work through life. But thanks again, Faris for doing the show.

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Faris Alami 21:34

And thank you so much for having me. Thank you. And thank MEDC in general.

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Ed Clemente 21:38

Join us next week where our guests will be John DeMaio. He's the president of Graphex Group. And he'll talk a little bit about the EV battery business.

A

Announcer 21:47

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