

A dose of hope by Amina Aktouf



was born in New York city in 1991, and ever since then, I moved from country to country until I finished high school. My father worked for the United Nations, he was reassigned to a new duty station every 3 or 4 years and the whole family had to follow.

This provided me with an opportunity to discover other cultures and traditions, and taught me to become more observant and tolerant of everybody around me. When I graduated high school in 2009, I joined the American University of Dubai. At that time, I thought I knew most of what I needed to know. I thought I was well rounded, had the experience from the various countries I lived in, believed myself to be a very adaptable person, a reasonably good communicator, etc. I entered AUD and applied to the school of Business with a concentration of Management as I had in mind the goal of becoming a hotel manager one day.

My first week of university, in a very brief, but important phone call with my father who advised me not to limit my options. He told me not to make conclusive decisions about my future without having lived the most important years of my life - my 20's. Although I found his advice to be quite firm and rash, his words sunk in. I spent a few days researching the job market in the MENA region and what demand there was around me. After much thought and deliberation, I realized that my passions for writing, photography, filmmaking, and all areas relating to this field fit very much into the Mass Communication degree. The research I had done aligned with my trail of thought and I had discovered that there was a strong rise in the demand for graduates with a degree and understanding in Mass Communication. And thus, I decided to shift my major at the start of my Freshmen year.

Within my first year, I was excited to absorb and learn from my classes, my professors, and my peers. However, I understood very quickly that although I was taking the required amount of classes per semester, I was only going to class a total of, and no more than, four hours per day. Although this was quite relieving and entertaining during my first few months, I did, however, realize that I could be making much more use of my time. I was living in one of the hubs of the MENA region, and in one of the most bustling areas in Dubai - Media City. Opportunities were all around me, all I had to do was stand on my feet and grab them (or take advantage of them).

I applied to my first internship towards the end of my freshman year. I applied to Al Arabiya news channel, and all it took was an email expressing my interest, my passion, and my desire to learn from them. Within a few days, I received a positive response which yielded to my first wonderful 6-week learning experience in which I was able to absorb the way a news outlet worked, the pace at which a newsroom functioned, and the various roles that existed within the field of journalism. Everyday I was able to grasp different skills, and observe the unfathomable layers of this industry, which I never would have otherwise experienced had I not set out to acquire it myself. As I finished my 6-week internship, it only left me hungry for more.

Within my 4 years at AUD, I took part in 6 internships, none of which were mandatory or imposed by my institution. From magazines, to PR companies, to news outlets - each taught me their very own lesson. Every semester, I decided to find a new industry within my field to set out and experience for myself. This isn't to say that I did not have a few rejections, however, as the famous saying by Wayne Gretzky goes "You miss 100% of the shots you do not take." Every internship taught me something new, and in fact, gave me a sense of where I wanted to be, where I envisioned myself, and where I belonged.

One week before I graduated university, I got a call from MBC Group, asking me to come in for an interview for an internship in their Corporate Social Responsibility Department. I, firstly, had very little to no idea what CSR was, and secondly I had already done 6 internships and was very uninterested to do another, especially since I

was graduating and ready to look for a full-time and stable job. Speaking to my father, he suggested “Go. Do the interview. See how it is. You never know what it could become.”

And so I did. CSR was a field I never even knew existed. It was a field that combined the humanitarian, with the private sector, with civil society, etc. I thought back to the time when I stood in my father’s office at the age of 11 and was scribbling on the white board and turned back to him and saw him sign papers handed to him by his assistant. I had asked what he was doing and he replied “I just signed a multi-million deal to help the unemployed in Iraq following the war.” I wanted to be able to have that same amount of impact and positive imprint in this world as he did.

So I did the interview, loved the field of work, and completed an 8-week, unpaid internship. Although I had hoped it would yield in a full-time job at the end, the department was not hiring and so I had to move on and look for something else. I worked in Public Relations for 5 months, and I knew it wasn’t for me. Nevertheless, I took it as a learning experience and knew I had to follow through until I could find what I truly desired to do. In January of 2014, I got a call that MBC Group was hiring for a position of CSR Executive. With joy and confidence, I applied for the job, completed the necessary interviews, assignments, and presentations, and thankfully landed the job a few weeks later.

This was all thanks to the internship that I had previously completed which taught me more than I could have ever imagined. It gave me the upper hand against candidates that were far more qualified than I was on paper and allowed me to realize that this is the field that I wanted to be a part of. Not only was I thankful for this internship, but for the 6 others as well, for it was, although quite long, a process of learning for me which led me to realize what certain industries entail and what I felt I was meant for and where my passions lied. Within these internships, I was lucky enough to have several mentors who let me assume responsibilities in the roles I was in which helped better prepare me for where I am today. Some teams were more difficult to work with than others, but the exposure to these different types of peers helped me become a better team player and better communicator.

As youth, speaking to youth, I would like to say that I understand what it is like to be confused, or lost, or even passionate about too many things that it seems impossible to narrow down. My one piece of advice is to not sell yourself short and please, do not ever think that you are incapable of sealing your own fate. You are not what happens to you, but how you react to what happens to you. Regardless of where you’ve come from, or where you’ve been, or where you aspire to be, your dream is always one step away, one action away, one phone call away, one email way, and one decision away. A decision to stand up and call that company that you’ve always wanted to work for. Or a decision away from knocking on your professor’s door and ask them for extra mentorship in order to excel in a class that you know will benefit you for the rest of your life. Or a decision away from devoting your time to putting together a plan to creating that start-up that you’ve always dreamt of launching. One decision away from paving your own future.