



SUNY EMPIRE
STATE COLLEGE

ALUMNI SUCCESS STORIES

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AROUND THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

WRITTEN BY TANWEER ALI

This brief publication is the outcome of a class which I taught in our Prague program, in the Czech Republic, during the Fall 2019 semester. The course title was Writing Case Studies and was offered as an elective to students in the Business Administration concentration.

My goal was very simple. Over a number of years I have developed the practice of introducing students to real life businesses, of all shapes and sizes, ranging from the largest of multinationals to the smallest of start-ups. I have found this form of applied learning a useful way to bring theoretical concepts to life and to encourage students to think critically and to reflect upon textbook learning. So I have tried as much as possible to integrate field trips and guest lectures into my teaching – making use of our good fortune in having a campus that is centrally located in a European capital. However, until now these encounters were always aimed at highlighting a specific sector of the economy or business function, whether we were visiting a restaurant that employs people with mental health problems, the dealing room of a major international bank or a construction site employing the latest in clean technology. For this new course I wanted to use encounters with real businesses in order to get students thinking about the purpose of business itself.

The students had no idea what they were in for when they enrolled for this course. When I started to develop the course concept, the title seemed to fit what I had in mind. I could not have been more wrong! As one student put it, in a reflective essay at the end of the course: “I assumed that this course would be an examination of typical Harvard case studies. That is, breaking down businesses using plenty of math and evaluating lessons learned on paper.” This was not the plan at all - I was aiming to have the students develop their own accounts of selected businesses, writing their own case studies, and not necessarily in the traditional format. A key part of the educational experience would involve meeting business owners face-to-face, rather than through carefully prepared written materials.

True, in the early weeks of the Fall semester we did in-

deed examine some traditional case studies. Early on, my colleague David Starr-Glass was good enough to deliver a guest lecture, giving a brief but very comprehensive overview of the existing scholarship on the use of case studies in business education. By the time the students were ready to visit businesses and meet their founders, they had had a solid introduction to the pedagogical benefits of what they were about to do.

The class was small but diverse, with students from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the USA, the United Kingdom, Vietnam and Namibia. Entrepreneurship is taught in our Prague program, so the students had received a solid grounding in basic principles as well as experience of producing their own business plans in a competitive environment. I wanted them to hear the real stories of real entrepreneurs and learn about the human side of starting a business. This was also an opportunity to witness how the different functions that they had studied in recent years fit together in a real-life enterprise.

In most cases we visited the businesses to see at first-hand what was actually going on. As I wanted to add diversity to the experience, not all the businesses were in Prague, and some of our discussions were conducted through Skype. The business people I chose were all Empire State College alumni; everyone involved had the shared experience of an ESC education.

At the end of the course I asked the students to write reflective pieces about their experiences over the semester. A key lesson that they appear to have learned is that there is no single clear path to becoming a successful entrepreneur. The people they met reached their goals in a variety of different ways.

Moreover the path to being an entrepreneur is by no means a smooth one; students learned the important role that failure can play in strengthening people and the businesses that they create. Strong support networks of friends, family and colleagues can help a great deal in testing times. One student neatly summarized the trials and rewards of starting up a business: “...the initial foray

into their new prospective businesses was littered with difficulty, but each agreed that it was the most rewarding work they had ever undertaken." More than one student said that by the end of the course they were more likely to consider starting their own business.

Another key lesson was the importance of learning new skills and extending one's knowledge into new fields. As one student put it: "... they quickly learned how little they knew about things they could not even imagine would be relevant to their business." We asked all of the alumni how the education which they received at Empire State College helped them later in life, and they answered in different ways. Often what they had learned as students helped them in unexpected ways.

The articles that follow are a selection of profiles of Empire State College alumni, all of whom have built successful businesses. These profiles were written by the students in the course. I hope that you will enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed creating them.

Besides the students who wrote the articles and the alumni who agreed to meet with them, I would like to add my sincere thanks to Katarína Cíváňová and Krysia Simons, both graduates of our Prague program. Katarína worked on the layout of this collection and Krysia proof read the whole draft ahead of publication. I would also like to thank Erin Catone, Francesca Cichello, Kimberly Neher and Lindsay Valenti at Empire State College in our head office in Saratoga Springs for all their help and advice; without them getting this collection together would never have been possible.

PROFILES

WRITTEN IN JANUARY 2020

Natalie Marynak was born in Prague to a Czech mother and an American father. At the age of four, her family moved to the United States, where she grew up. Due to increasing university tuition costs, she has decided to return to the Czech Republic to complete her studies. Natalie is set to finish her bachelor's degree in Business Administration with ESC in 2020. Natalie plans to return to the U.S. and pursue a career in renewable energy. This has been her interest since her early teens but became her passion after she took a course in business and sustainability. She wants to gain experience in this sector before branching off and building her own business.

Matej Hlavoň is currently studying for his bachelor's degree in Business Administration with ESC in Prague. After graduating this January, he wants to continue learning and expanding his education through a MBA. He is a native of Slovakia and has chosen Prague for its cultural heritage and unique location. The ability to study in English has been his primary motivation for choosing ESC. During his studies, he has been working as a business analyst. When not working or studying, Matej is playing sports, exercising, and living an active lifestyle.

Justin Timothy Nixon was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. He is currently studying towards a bachelor's degree in Business Administration with ESC in Prague. The city is beautiful, historical, and multicultural. That is why he has chosen to study here. Apart from devoting his time to school, Justin works in General Electric's Aviation department as a technical writer. He is set to graduate in the summer of 2020 and wants to become an entrepreneur after graduation. Justin has a great sense of humor and his favorite hobby is amateur web design.

Michelle Janssen is an outgoing and exuberant 4th-year Business Administration student at ESC in Prague. She is originally from Windhoek, Namibia, where she and her sister started a specialty cake business, which grew into a large commercial enterprise serving corporate clients. Michelle then moved abroad, living in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, where she lived for a total of 10 years. During her time in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, she gained two years of civil engineering experience, but certain aspects of UAE society left her seeking a more inclusive environment, thus leading her to Prague. Michelle plans to combine

her fashion diploma, which she earned in 2003, and business knowledge to start her own online clothing business.

Lea Tran, whose Vietnamese name is Dieu Linh Tran, was born in Prague and raised in Olomouc, another beautiful Czech city. Lea has had many experiences, including studying in America for a couple of years and working at Unilever as a data analyst. Although Lea considers herself a true Czech, her Vietnamese roots have given her a wide and comprehensive view of the different ways culture impacts the way of life. This, in her words, has "provided her with the strength and flexibility to accomplish so much." Although Lea enjoys her studies in Business Administration at ESC in Prague, she is looking forward to the freedom that will come after her studies, waiting in anticipation for more interesting and fulfilling challenges.

Nathan James Lord is currently in his penultimate semester of the Business Administration bachelor's program with ESC in Prague. Coming from Shropshire in England, he came to Prague six years ago. He completed his high school education at the English College in Prague. Nathan enjoys spending quality time with friends and forging new relationships, both inside and outside of class. After graduation, Nathan would like to start a business venture with his father and is exploring different ideas and opportunities. When asked how he defined business success, Nathan responds: "being profitable while bringing value to the world."

JÁN GAJDUŠEK

WRITTEN BY LEA TRAN

Ján Gajdušek recently graduated with an International Relations degree from SUNY Empire in Prague. Ján revealed that he never felt genuinely passionate about international relations but did not know what else to do. While he was studying, he was offered a four-month internship in the EU department of the Czech government. It was an excellent opportunity to get hands-on experience in the field, as well as clarity about his future. However, his assignment—extensive research on the Arab Spring—brought him no joy. At this point, Ján’s eyes lit up as he began talking about his moment of epiphany.

“I noticed a fantastic glass sculpture located just next to the men’s bathrooms at the end of Straka Academy’s hall. It was the most positive thing I got to see during that period,” Ján recalled. The statue made him realize that he was truly intrigued by art and wanted to pursue it.

Ján decided to take a break from his studies. He explained that while facing out-of-school hardships, he lost the motivation to get the last three credits needed to complete the International Relations program. Thanks to the statue at Straka Academy, he already knew his new direction. Ján spent the next five years exploring art, gaining practical experience, as well as studying art history at Charles University. Nevertheless, he did not give up on his education. That is why he eventually returned to SUNY Empire, where he completed a three-credit independent study course. “It is never too late to try because there is always hope,” he added.

Ján’s career in the art world started with an internship at Museum Kampa, where he worked as an exhibition production manager. His job involved the preparation of exhibitions and communication with artists, curators, and different institutions. To give an example of a work assignment, Ján briefly spoke about his trip to Zurich, where he was sent to borrow one of the last paintings of Andy Warhol for an exhibition in Prague. Overall, Ján expressed that he felt fortunate to have this job. It helped him get to know “the right people in the business” and grow professionally since Museum Kampa has a high level of prestige in art circles.

After almost three years of working for Kampa, Ján decided to follow a different career path and start his own gallery. From the very beginning, he knew that he wanted to focus on the contemporary art of young artists. Since opening a physical gallery is rather costly, Ján created an online gallery instead. This modern-looking gallery, at www.origoo.cz, features a separate art and design section and is a fresh take on traditional art selling.

Ján’s other job is the one he finds the most exciting—the Havrlant Art Collection. Working as a curator with Kateřina and Jakub Havrlant, Ján has been advising the couple on which contemporary Czech and Slovak artwork



to include in their private collection. The website www.havrlant.art showcases the full variety of artwork that the collection currently comprises. Through their purchasing efforts, the Havrlants are supporting emerging artists and encouraging them to continue doing art for a living. Ján shared that he was beyond grateful to be the part of this process.

The book *Kurátor: The Prague Art Guide* was co-authored by Ján, with his friends Valérie Dvořáková and Štěpánka Veselská, and has recently been published. It is his latest project. Having three writers working on the same book was challenging but Ján is happy with the final result. He highlighted the paradox that Prague was such a cultural city, yet it lacked a proper guidebook. *Kurátor* is not a simple list of the fantastic art, architecture, and galleries that this city has to offer. It includes vivid descriptions, beautiful pictures, and in-depth interviews with famous Czech art personalities. The authors are currently working on the digitalization of the guide and hope to release an app soon.



Ján describes his day-to-day work as “scouting for art,” which he defines as finding the best artwork and artists before others do. This is particularly challenging because his competitors in the industry are searching for similar things and people. Nevertheless, Ján believes that his knowledge is helping to keep him ahead of his competition. Apart from his expertise, relationship-building is a crucial part of his job. Ján connects artists with the best curators and galleries and promotes their work through strategic marketing and PR. He finds it genuinely rewarding when he sees that his hard work pays off.

Apart from sharing his story, Ján gave a thought-provoking presentation to our class on art history. He showed images of famous works of art, such as Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and Banksy’s *Girl with Balloon*. He emphasized that novelty and innovation were crucial qualities of valuable artworks in the past but have remained of utmost importance to this day. Additionally, mentioning the Medici family as an example, Ján described art as having a representational element for those who own it. Wealthy and influential families have always invested in art, deeming it valuable. He observed that this was not solely the case of ancient history; even contemporary Czech entrepreneurs were starting to see the worth of investing in art.

Among his final remarks was an appreciation for his SUNY Empire education. Ján is using his understanding of history and other humanities in his casual conversations with artistic people he meets on a daily basis. Moreover, he emphasized how studying politics and economics helped him tremendously not only in his future studies, but also during his career. For instance, he had to consolidate a 50-page Origoo business plan for investors, which would be quite tricky without the skills he had learned in our program.

Ján’s current goal is to keep doing what he loves: selecting young artists for Origoo, advising the Havrlant family, developing lasting relationships in the art community, organizing exhibitions, and promoting his projects.

JAMES "JT" JACUS

WRITTEN BY MICHELLE JANSSEN

JT is an Alumnus of Empire State College (ESC). He came to the college after a 20-year break from higher education. After completing his bachelor's degree in 2018, JT went on to earn his master's degree at Georgetown University.

JT runs his own business, in which he specializes in buying companies with a view to turn them around, drawing on his long experience as a finance professional. As part of the management turnaround effort, he needs to understand the issues the company faces and knows how to finance them with their assets. Typically, JT deals with one company at a time since it often demands all of his time and energy. His responsibilities are determined day-to-day and he is careful not to take on too much at once. He seeks out distressed companies and tries to source and fix whichever department is failing. In his experience, the departments most commonly affected are sales and operations. Such companies are typically cheap to acquire and can be found through various avenues. The more difficult companies to take over are family owned businesses, which are only sold due to a lack of interest from children to take over the family business. Often, these companies need a lot of money. The questions then become whether or not there is room for improvement and growth and if it is worth the investment and risk.

JT finances his acquisitions in cooperation with other investors, such as angel investors. Typically, his share in the companies he buys is 20%. There is normally a transition period to understand the business, characterized by long hours in the office. JT has very few days off because he is the one that will go into the business and try to turn it around. He will bring in relevant experts to help in areas he is not equipped to deal with and bring the company back to a point where it runs efficiently again and is profitable. The turnaround period is usually around 6-7 months – after which the business starts to generate cash again. What JT does is take entrepreneurship opportunities through acquisition. These businesses are less risky than playing the stock market or going into a new venture blindly. There is a larger chance of



success, which ultimately makes it an attractive option for investors. JT has written papers on this and conducted interviews with academics and is more than happy to help anyone looking to replicate his success.

"If you own 20% and aren't putting money in, that's a good business model".

Upon starting his own business, JT never anticipated how difficult it would be or how many roles he would be expected to fill. The first company JT bought was a chrome plating company. This company had international reach and held contracts with brand names, such as Gillette. JT experienced more issues than originally anticipated, especially in receivables and seller's notes. In the end, the investors had to put in more money than they wanted to in order to get the company to a point where they could sell it again. From this experience, JT learned that doing due diligence and involving experts is always key before deciding on any investment. This company, however, provided one of the most satisfactory experiences in his

career when they created greener technology for chrome plating activities, becoming the first in North America to do so. It was a massive undertaking but rewarding. The project JT is currently involved in is a manufacturing company producing screws for the medical industry. This company had a great product but, due to problems in management, was not as profitable as it could be. With minor adjustments and minimal investment, this company had great potential for growth. JT was confident he could turn this company around.

Being in the business for eight years has given JT some unbelievable skills through his hands-on approach and he had several key insights to share with our class. Firstly, the strategy and the way in which we do business around the world is different, thanks to the global economy. You need to think outside the norm to understand and research different markets, regions, and cultures. By anticipating their needs, you can find a gap in the market and then find a way to use this new opportunity. Secondly, you need to understand trade agreements and how they impact sellers. You need to stay abreast of current events and how these things have an impact on your business and the market. Next, owning your own company provides a great foundation in business, banking, HR, operations, sales, and finance. Your expectations of what it means to be a business owner will adjust between your initial undertaking to when you have gained some experience. Remember to treat others the way you want to be treated. You often see your coworkers more than your own family. His motto: *"If you're not having fun, you shouldn't be here."* The fourth insight was to know your own strengths and weaknesses or limitations. *"If I can't figure it out on the back of a napkin it's best not to get involved."* The last insight, and perhaps the most important, was to learn how to *communicate*. Great communicators are hard to come by, but the rest can be taught.

JT is a man who is knowledgeable in many areas of business and possesses skills which he has acquired



over many years of hard work, dedication, and trial and error. He did not complete his formal education until many years after he had already built up his career. He has amassed a network of business relationships by mastering the art of communication, which serves him well in his business endeavors. JT is an inspiration – and a great example of the fact that not everyone has a clear path at the age of twenty but it does not stop you from becoming a success. It is never too late for you to go back to school and earn your degree, if that is what you want to do. Although higher education helps, it does not mean you cannot succeed without it. JT is an advocate of knowledge; he believes this is the best tool you can possess in business. This will guide you in making decisions that can be the difference between being successful or not.

MARTINA HUŠKOVÁ

WRITTEN BY LEA TRAN

"No matter what your interests are, you can do whatever you want if you have a business major."

Growing up the daughter of an entrepreneur, it is no surprise that Martina Hušková has become a visionary in the business world herself. Her father's relentless determination helped her develop an industrious and risk-taking attitude. Because of his success, her family was able to afford her education, something she is extremely grateful for.

Earning her bachelor's degree in business administration in 2005, Martina began her career as an office manager for a large international corporation. She soon learned that the monotony of the daily 9-5 grind and the inability to make meaningful decisions, was not something she enjoyed. So when she got an offer to become an office manager for a real estate company, Martina did not hesitate to take advantage of that opportunity. She remained in her new position for about five months before deciding that she needed, and desired, a complete change—starting a venture of her own and being her own boss.

Joining efforts with a Canadian photographer, Martina started her very first business, a photography firm focusing on making employee headshots and event photos for corporate clients. Unfortunately, when the 2008 economic crisis hit, she realized there was not enough

demand for her services. As a result, she closed down the business and spent a year in New Zealand, working in a restaurant, volunteering at a local film festival, and even taking pictures at a wedding in Samoa.

Once she returned to the Czech Republic, Martina met an energetic Slovak woman at a birthday party of a mutual friend. Their conversation about entrepreneurship soon led to a business idea: a fashion company working with high-quality local designers. Not long after their talk, the two women opened their first shop close to the Old Town Square. Seven months later, they set up another one in Železná street. Apart from having physical stores, they incorporated an e-shop and a fashion portal, mapping the local fashion scene in their business, which was rather revolutionary at that time. After three successful years, Martina felt she needed another change, so she went backpacking to Mexico to clear her head. During her three-week trip, she volunteered to save turtles with an environmental group. "I found my zen in Mexico," Martina recalled. This experience was pivotal not only for her personal growth, but also for her future career since it led to a new business idea.

Thanks to her trip to Mexico, Martina realized that it was not extraordinary for people in their twenties and thirties to volunteer while traveling, but there was no company in Prague facilitating the process. Voluntair, Martina's favorite project so far, grew out of this market need for a company that would connect travelers with local volunteering organizations. Initially, she was running the business with her British friend. They have now gone separate ways, leaving Martina as the only one in charge. Her target market is mainly young professionals who are ready for a new and unconventional experience, but even mothers with children are amongst Martina's clients. Although the market for her services is not enormous in the Czech Republic, the demand is growing and Martina is continuously adding new volunteering projects to her portfolio. When selling the volunteering projects, she stresses that although you are unlikely to change the world in three weeks, you will undoubtedly transform your perspective and attitude. The vast majority of her



clients return with a huge smile on their face, expressing gratitude for the unforgettable and life-changing experience abroad, which Martina enabled. Although she enjoys her other work as a consultant for foreigners and it supports her financially, Voluntair remains to be her most fulfilling endeavor.

Apart from featuring stories from happy Voluntair clients, the website, www.voluntair.cz, showcases current volunteering projects from more than forty-five countries. The projects are either related to working with people, building infrastructure, or addressing environmental issues. Notable examples of currently offered projects involve teaching English on Koh Samui, renovating Banteay Chhmar temple complex in Cambodia, or taking care of elephants in Thailand. Regardless of the purpose of your trip, all projects allow you to get involved with the local community and immersed in the local culture, which is something that many people do not experience while on vacation. Additionally, the partner organization in the destination country takes care of all the logistics and assures the safety of the participants. Given the plethora of possibilities, the process of choosing the right project can be overwhelming. In that case, you can contact Martina directly. She will help you pick the best project suiting



your preferences and budget for free.

Martina is currently hoping to grow her Voluntair client base and is looking forward to new challenges and experiences once she embarks on yet another exciting adventure.

MIREK HRADIL

WRITTEN BY JUSTIN NIXON

As you walk into “The Original Barbershop in Prague,” you may see a friendly grey short-nosed dog named Ashley snorting around, or perhaps the shop’s proprietor, Mirek Hradil, will greet you with a strong handshake and an amicable grin. Mirek looks exactly as most people would expect a contemporary barber to be. He is tall and slim with a dark, well-trimmed, beard containing slight grey streaks that reveal his age, and wears relaxed but fashionable clothing. The shop itself has an atmosphere that is modern but peppered with various elements, such as the natural wood stations, classic barber chairs, and vintage decorations. These are combined with the clean smell of lotions, aftershaves, and hair products to generate a more homely ambiance.

Today, Mirek is the owner of this shop and multiple others of the same name throughout Czechia. However, he was not always the proprietor of a chain of barbershops. After earning a bachelor’s degree in Business, Management, and Economics from ESC in 2005, he knew life in the corporate world was not what he wanted for himself. So, he and several partners decided that they would establish themselves in the bar/club industry. Mirek would spend the next ten years owning and operating successful bars throughout Prague.

At first, the fun and social connections from the club scene were very rewarding for him. However, over time, the culture of the bar and club industry became excessive. He had owned and operated four lucrative locations that, like any business, required perpetual focus. Additionally, the unique requirements of the nightlife industry required participation in its indulgences from the early evening until the following morning, even on nights when he would rather not imbibe.

Eventually, Mirek decided that he wanted to shift away from the party life and into a different sector. He still wanted to run his own business, but an enterprise that did not involve the same level of commitment as a nighttime establishment. While vacationing in Bali, he was inspired by the numerous off-road bike rental companies and decided to create a similar business venture at home in Prague. Unfortunately for Mirek, his new enterprise was immediately engrossed with unforeseen complications. Several uncontrollable circumstances critically



injured his new endeavor and delayed entry until after the busy summer season. Understanding that profitability would be difficult, Mirek closed his bicycle company before the end of his first year in operation. However, the bikes from the endeavor can still be seen lying in a pile behind his barber academy classroom, constantly reminding him of his defeat.

The failure of his bike rental business constrained Mirek to a difficult circumstance. He still owned the lease to an empty space in the center of Prague. With no incoming revenue, he needed to quickly open something profitable to alleviate his financial issues. While brainstorming with a friend, a plan for a new venture was crafted. Recognizing what he felt was an opportunity in the Prague market, he would use the space to open a barbershop.

That inspiration soon evolved into success for Mirek. Using knowledge gained from both ESC and his years as a business owner, he developed his initial barbershop into one of the largest barbershop chains in Czechia. He now owns and operates 14 individual locations throughout the country, employing more than 70 barbers. Interestingly, while almost all of his clients are men, the ratio of male to female employees is 50/50. His team works hard to complete thousands of haircuts per month, with each session taking approximately 40 minutes to an hour.

When asked about how he became so successful, Mirek gives a surprising answer: “shopping malls.” When he



first proposed the mall idea to his friends and other barbers, they laughed at him. At the time, the idea was new to Czechia, and they felt that people wanted a level of service that a mall would not be able to offer. Mirek

didn't want to open traditional stores, but popup locations complimented with an abundance of foot traffic. As a result, any free time not occupied by a reservation could be easily filled through walk-ins. This idea became so successful that Mirek has to turn down offers from shopping malls throughout the country that are asking for his business.

Coupled with his prosperity, Mirek's achievement led to an unforeseen issue: a shortage of qualified barbers. While hairstylists and traditional cutters are abundant, it is difficult to find certified barbers that can fashion hair at an appropriate level for his business. This problem led him to open the first traditional barber academy in Prague. While it may not be very financially profitable, the intangible value of being able to select the best from his pool of graduates to work with him is his goal. This also grants him a secondary reward of being able to see new barbers learn and grow, helping both the industry and the Czech economy.

Currently, Mirek acknowledges that he is tired and needs to relax. He has been working seven days every week since opening his first shop three years ago. He says, "one day off feels like a month in this business," and refuses to do so unless required. He wants to find a way that he can take some time off and maybe even pass his business to the next entrepreneur. However, knowing Mirek's drive to succeed, any such break would most likely be brief.

MOUD NAJJAR

WRITTEN BY NATHAN LORD

As you walk down one of Prague's quieter streets, the subtle scent of nuts and coffee grows until you find yourself standing outside Al Andalous. This shop specializes not only in authentic Lebanese nuts, but also coffee and other artisanal products; such as chocolate, dried fruits, and gingerbread.

Upon entering the shop, you are surrounded by a warm and rustic interior with samples of nuts and roasted coffee beans scattered around, causing great sensory satisfaction. Although the shop is not particularly large, this works to the advantage of the business as the ambiance within the space is quite homely. This was achieved by using an abundance of natural wood, creating an effect similar to that of being in a log cabin. The temperature of the shop is also just right and the smells within it are conducive to the most pleasant shopping experience.

The Lebanese proprietor of the business, Moud Najjar, graduated from Empire State College's program in Lebanon, majoring in Business Management. Although it was hard for Moud to support himself during his studies, the degree he received opened the door to the future that he worked so hard for.

Although originally from Lebanon, Moud moved to Saudi Arabia for work. During his time there, he worked for four separate companies and in many different jobs within each, including managing supply chains, distribution, and other key roles within the head office. It was this varied experience that gave Moud the understanding of the many roles within business that enabled him and his wife to open their very own business a short while after moving to Prague.

When talking about his product, you can see the passion in Moud's eyes. The company was originally founded in Lebanon in 1888 by his great grandfather and is currently managed by Moud's cousin. A few years ago, he started a branch of the business in the Czech Republic, selling their produce in a shop in Prague that we visited as well as farmers' markets around the country. The firm uses traditional techniques to roast the nuts they sell. It



is clear to see that quality is the cornerstone of the entire business model and this culture of quality has found its way to the Czech Republic. The same could be said for all the products that he sells. For example, when it comes to coffee, he spent over a month making sure that the coffee he was going to sell was as similar as possible to the type of coffee they sell in Lebanon. According to Moud, there is a stark difference between the type of coffee that is brewed in the Czech Republic (usually quite bitter) and the type of coffee that is brewed in the Lebanon, where it is much more mild, warm, and buttery in taste. The same desire for perfection could be seen in some of the other products sold in the shop, which would be the dried fruit, chocolate, and gingerbread that are sold there.

Another interesting strategy implemented by Moud, besides quality control, was the use of free product samples. Whenever a customer enters his shop, he offers



them the opportunity to try different products with the realisation that once they do, they will be hooked by their deliciousness. That is something I am not afraid to admit affected me as well. It is this one-on-one interaction with customers that makes Al Andalous the successful

business that it is. A secondary strategy used by Moud is that he places products in the areas most likely to appeal to their target market. An example of this would be how the gingerbread that is sold in this shop is placed at the eye level of children, not of their parents. The reason for this is that the children that are the target market of this product, not adults.

You would be forgiven for thinking that Moud must be fully occupied with his nut business; however, you would be wrong. In his search for superior quality in life, Moud found himself dissatisfied with the quality of some of the food he was eating, particularly falafel. This persuaded him to start a second business producing and selling falafel that is as similar as possible to the falafel that one would find in Lebanon. Therefore, he made falafel at a stall in a Christmas market last year, selling between 400 and 500 a day. For this reason, Moud has decided to open a falafel shop next door to his current shop.

As a successful entrepreneur, people are often eager to ask Moud for advice on how they can emulate his success. He left us with three rules to remember. Firstly, that there is not only one way to achieve success. In his opinion, obtaining as much experience in different jobs across many businesses helps you become a more rounded entrepreneur. The second, that starting a business earlier, whilst you are young, is usually a better option. Lastly, it always helps to have the best product, one that you are passionate about.

All I can say after tasting Moud's products is that I am passionate about them too.

NIKOL BERÁNKOVÁ

WRITTEN BY MATEJ HLAVOŇ

Nikol is a former ESC student, who graduated in 2011, majoring in Business Administration. Her university life didn't end there as she decided to study her Master's degree in Scotland. After completing her master's, she returned to the Czech Republic, where she found a job in a hotel. During a crazy night on Prague's number one party street, she met a Czech guy who managed a guesthouse in Sri Lanka. He made her an offer to leave her job and start working for him on a distant island in the Indian Ocean. However, Nikol refused the offer and stayed in her job for another three months.

Then, by chance, she met the same guy, on the same street over a drink. All at once, the offer seemed to be more like one she couldn't refuse because her job was just not meeting her expectations. Her family gave her their full support in the form of a bottle of slivovice (a strong spirit made from plums, common in Central Europe) and so her journey began. Suddenly, this brave young woman appeared in the coastal Sri Lankan village of Arugam Bay. She arrived there in the middle of the night and was greeted by a rather rude old lady, who took her to her room. When the door opened, she could not see much as the walls were painted in a joyful pitch-black color. Nevertheless, Nikol did not idle for too long, she killed a couple of spiders and unsealed her first aid kit – slivovice, which she actually does not even like. Despite all the barriers, including not having a salary, she overcame it all and took over the house. With huge renovations, it began to turn into a mid-level accommodation facility. The competition in the area consisted of either very local accommodation or expensive hotels. Nikol's new hotel represented a gap in the market. The money and time invested in the building were worth it and tourists, from as far away as Germany and Sweden, started showing up.

Things got better and she decided to expand to Weligama, which is a more vivid and touristic town on the other side of the island. As a 25-year-old woman, Nikol wanted to build a 4-room facility from scratch with a little money lent to her from her parents. A café was a substantial part of the new project because Nikol found herself craving the kind of coffee that she was used to at home. However, everything wasn't perfect and she faced problems with the 100% construction tax for foreigners,

unfair pricing, electricity blackouts, and water issues. Another obstacle was having a house near the ocean. This was risky because the breeze was rather strong and salty, therefore contributing to erosion or deterioration of the structure. Nevertheless, she managed everything and started building the house, designing the menu for the café, doing marketing, and so on. She wanted the place to be low-cost, clean, simple, and different but with a European touch. Luckily, in a short period of time, her dream was recognized and Nikol was hoping for the best.

When the first bookings came through, Nikol was just about to go back home to Prague for Christmas. This was the best present possible. With one reservation after another, the whole place was suddenly fully booked. After a relaxing Christmas with her parents, it was time to go back to work. Nikol needed someone whom she could trust so her auntie came to help her. However, she was still working 13 hours per day. Nevertheless, her dedication to hard work made the business thrive. She earned some money, even in the very first year, largely due to the guests who were recommending the place to their



friends and relatives. Despite all the obstacles and some hostility from rivals, Nikol managed to stay there for four seasons.

After some time, she realized she missed Europe too much. Furthermore, she started sort of disliking her guests because all they seemed to want for breakfast was vegan food and avocado toast. Also, the overall situation on the island was not improving so it appeared

to be the right time to move forward. She leased her property to a Sri Lankan guy and moved back home. Now, Nikol lives in a cozy apartment in a picturesque town in Italy, not so far from Rome. Her life has become much more relaxed. She teaches English at a school and in her free time she is writing a book about her adventures in Sri Lanka, often over a glass of Italian wine and a bowl of pasta.



NÁRODNÍ 38

WRITTEN BY NATALIE MARYNAK

On a dreary September afternoon, our university class had the opportunity to visit the newly-opened café of former ESC/UNYP Prague students, Huy Do Quang and Robin Nguyen, the self-proclaimed new wave of Czech Vietnamese. Café Národní 38 sat tucked in a quiet courtyard of a bustling Prague street, seeming only to be frequented by those in-the-know and the occasional curious tourist. Its welcoming outdoor seating and open arch doors begged for a closer look. Inside, the custom-built furniture, stylish light features, and tasteful minimalistic style played a marvelous supporting role for the star of the show; a giant moss-covered wall meticulously preserved and carefully shipped from Scandinavia, oozing with Instagrammability.

After our class took a quick look around and blasted off a few drink orders, the two young entrepreneurs joined us to start the question session. Their lighthearted demeanor, coupled with a few quick quips, instantly brought a spark to an otherwise dull day as they began to tell us about their café and the story that led them to their venture in the first place.

Huy graduated with an International Business degree and started to work in the consulting field with a large multinational corporation, initially participating in a year-long internship. After his internship, Huy joined the

company full-time, only to leave his assignment and the company a mere two weeks in. After a mind-clearing trip to China and Vietnam, a rejuvenated Huy returned to the Czech Republic and decided to give corporate life one more shot. He joined the sales team of an even bigger company and managed to land a promotion fairly early into his stint. However, Huy had bigger dreams and decided to quit one week after his advancement in order to pursue his dream of owning his own business — a café. He managed to find the perfect setting in a state-owned building. With a clear vision in mind, Huy threw together a project proposal for the agency that owned the building within a half hour and sent it in for approval. Two weeks later, he received the call that his dream had been approved. When the reality set in, Huy knew he needed some help with his project... so he decided to call up his former classmate and buddy, Robin.

Robin, a man of artistic inclination, is the creative marketing mastermind behind the whole concept. In university, he managed the marketing content for student council and operated the television channel by capturing footage, creating content, editing, and more. After graduating from university with a Communications & Mass Media degree, Robin joined an ad agency, where he was in charge of buying ads via an automated system. He quickly moved up through the agency but found that the work was lackluster and painfully void of creative freedom. When Robin received the call from Huy, he knew that it was the exact change of pace he was searching for.

In July 2019, after the brand development and the café renovation, Huy and Robin opened Národní 38. They base their business on building relationships not only with their customers, but also their suppliers and the community. They work with NGOs such as Světluška, an organization that helps the blind, and Kapka Naděje, an organization devoted to helping sick children. Huy and Robin also source their coffee, milk, wines, and chocolate from local Czech businesses. These partnerships reflect their values and their target market is young people who are like-minded and understand the value of spending money to support small local businesses and organi-



zations. The choice to provide a higher quality café in terms of product and social value means that their prices are slightly above average but still very reasonable. Huy mentioned they have a very strong focus on quality and said, “if we are not confident that we can do it right, we don’t do it at all.” “That’s why our menu is limited and we only have a few food options and certain drink options available,” added Robin.

Their success as business partners stems from their ease of communication. Huy revealed, “the key is to talk a lot.” “We discuss stuff and bounce ideas and always come to a resolution right away,” echoed Robin. They rely on each other for their respective good sides; Huy trusts Robin for anything social media and marketing related and Robin trusts Huy to spearhead the business aspect. They work together regarding the middle ground responsibilities, which involves sourcing ingredients, hiring employees, and choosing suppliers.

Robin and Huy gave credit to ESC and UNYP for teaching them certain skills that proved useful. They both agreed that participating in student council helped them by allowing them to play with a budget and also assisted both of them in developing a network. Robin also mentioned that the Social Media Marketing class allowed him to understand what it was like to be able to work under pressure and apply class knowledge to real-life situations while Advertising Strategies encouraged him to use creativity in business. Huy credits the Entrepreneurship class for giving him the knowledge of failing fast, quick, and cheap. Huy said, “whenever we have a new idea for our menu, we test it. Then we either take it to the next stage or discard it.” Finance classes also helped Huy with sophisticated costing. “We try to check our profit margins and try to create a nice mix. We try to track how much people spend per person, during what time of the day they are most likely to eat, and more. We are more data-driven than most cafes,” said Huy.

When asked which challenges they encountered that they didn’t expect, Robin and Huy didn’t hesitate to respond. Their biggest challenge stemmed from the bureaucracy involved with renting a spot in a historical building and trying to pull approvals from the historical society without much help or guidance. Finding and managing a construction team was also a source of big

concern for the two entrepreneurs. They had an ambitious goal of completing the reconstruction within a month but it took them a total of three months to wrap up the process, thanks to the thick red tape they had to cut through. Robin and Huy also did not foresee the challenge of hiring and retaining people to help run their café. The turnover rate is high in the foodservice industry, so the young men choose to involve their employees in tasting sessions and food trials so that each of the employees feels more valued and connected in an effort to lower their turnover rate. Huy lightheartedly said, “what we thought would be easy was difficult and what we thought would be difficult was easy.”

The adventure of creating a new business has not come without its difficulties for Robin and Huy but they harbor no regrets about their decision. Their bold expectations are going according to plan, so far, and their forward-thinking attitudes have them motivated to exceed their goals. They expect to hit their breakeven point in January 2020, just seven months after their initial opening. Huy and Robin agree that opening Národní 38 has given rise to the most engaging work they have ever done. The motivating factors are completely different for them and they are more excited about daily life than they ever were during their corporate careers. After they get their café running smoothly, they hope to open a bar together. Until then, you can find them serving up delicious coffees, small-batch food items, flavorful wines, and more at Národní 38.



TOMÁŠ PITTEK

WRITTEN BY NATHAN LORD AND MICHELLE JANSSEN

At the beginning of his visit to our class, we learned that Tomáš was younger than we had expected and explained that he was, in fact, a recent ESC graduate, having completed his Business Administration degree in 2016. His business is called 'Utopy' and is predominantly an online shop, specialising in the sale of women's hoodies and leggings.

Tomáš had not always wanted to open his own clothing label but had started working in his family's chemicals manufacturing business. The idea of going into clothing came to him in a club in Brighton. He was inspired by the bold prints and colours people were wearing and he wanted to bring that to the Czech Republic. Tomáš explained to us that there had been many challenges in the process of starting his online clothing business, especially in the form of marketing. The original brand under which he sold these products was titled 'Fake', which was apparently quite well received within the Czech market. However, when expanding into other countries, such as Germany, the brand name did not seem to be taken too well. It gave negative connotations, such as being cheap, rather than the tongue-in-cheek approach that was intended. Therefore, Tomáš rebranded it to Utopy. This process, as we were told, was not easy and led to a situation in which his customers were confused.

The journey Tomáš took to launch Utopy was a hard one. His plans changed and adapted with the market demand. It became a situation where he was not doing what he wanted but rather what was profitable. He worked alone for two years, not being able to hire anyone else. He had to plan everything from pattern design to packaging and even had to do the photography on his own. Another example of the difficulties he faced was when he decided to open a business in Ireland, which his friend would be running as an employee. However, issues arose when his friend took advantage of his position and the fact that they had no binding legal contact. Tomáš found himself in the unfortunate situation of having to write off the money he had already invested in the venture to expand



into the Irish market. One difference between Tomáš and many others is that when others are faced with these business challenges, they tend to give up. Tomáš, however, pushed on with his endeavour and comes across as very grateful that he did.

One aspect to Tomáš's approach that we found particu-



larly interesting was his view on flexibility. Tomáš holds the belief that it is your job to adjust to the market and not vice versa. He claims that in many businesses, it is important to realise that your specific ideas may not be what the customers want. Instead, you should listen to their desires and adjust your product offered to them. Following along this vein, Tomáš decided to use a superior product to differentiate himself from his competitors. One way in which he has done this is by sourcing better, albeit more expensive, material from Slovakia to produce his clothes as opposed to those sourcing from Asia, like the majority of his competitors. This trend can also be seen in the packaging Tomáš uses when mailing his product. He explained that it is now common to use plain cardboard packaging, as this is far less expensive than personalised packaging. However, Tomáš feels that although personalised packaging is far more expensive, in the long run it will cement Utopy as a premium designer brand in the mind of his customers.

Tomáš's resilience in the face of all these challenges and his own shrewd business sense is ensuring his ever-growing success and notoriety.