Interview Transcript

Interviewer: Thomas Carbureanu

Interviewee: Hanan Dhanani

Date: July 12th, 2017

Time: 1pm

Location: The Retreat Nail and Beauty Bar

What did you do before owning a nail salon?

I actually worked for a software company. I was in their finance department and I worked with their project management team. It was a great company and I loved working there, I just don't think it was fulfilling. I had a very boring corporate job.

So you have a degree?

Yeah I have a degree in economics from Queen's University

Why did you open up a nail salon?

It was always my hobby. In fact when I had a part time job at Queens, one of my things was to always look up nail art videos and I would be doing it on my friends or my sisters and practicing on myself. And when I had a chance in my life where I thought *you know what* let me try and turn my hobby into a career, that was the first thing that I turned to because I'm so passionate about it. And it's something I could really see turning into a physical location.

Did you see yourself when you were younger owning your own nail salon?

Never! But I think that's true for a lot of people. You never really do the things you imagine yourself doing when you were younger. But I wouldn't regret the path that led me here at all.

Are you happy with where your business has grown, to date?

Yeah, it’s actually surprising. I was looking through (we keep all of our old appointment books) and the very first Saturday we opened we had 3 customers in total. And I look at the Saturdays we are having now, a year later, and it's crazy to see how far we've grown. But it's obviously not just me, a lot of it is owed to my employees, my staff, the team, my family, my friends, who have all supported me. It's definitely been a team effort that has gotten us where we are so far.

What kind of equipment do you use around here that may be different than other nail salons?

One thing that I find that people love about us is when people do gel polish removal, we have the cute little clips that we clip on the tinfoil. I think that gets the biggest reaction. The other thing is a lot of people are surprised by our furniture, I think, more than anything. Our chairs are quite modern and have little personalized massage pillows on them. Which is a little bit different than your regular nail salon, it's more of a streamlined look. And our bowls are not actually plugged in, so they are actually independent entities which is good because they're easy to sanitize, they’re clean, we don't have to compromise the health of our clients when we use those bowls. And they look cute as well.

What kind of atmosphere do you try to create in your space?

I think the key term is probably “affordable luxury”. I grew up in this neighbourhood and I knew there was always never a place like this around, which is why I wanted to bring something like The Retreat to the area. It's really like giving yourself a chance to pamper yourself and create a little oasis for yourself, which is why we don't have a TV, we just have music playing depending on the mood- my mood really... Or whoever else is in the space with us. It's a very calm atmosphere.

What would a typical work week look like for your employees?

Depends. We have a few that work about 3 days a week and we have some that are here 6 days. It really just depends on the individual employee but everyone comes in at 10am and we all leave around 7pm. Weekdays are a little bit slower so you get more chances to talk and share instagram things that we found. But Saturdays and Sundays are definitely a lot more hectic, especially in the evenings. It doesn’t really give us a chance to sit and talk with each other.

Are there certain employees for certain jobs or does everyone do everything?

Everyone has their preferences so there’s some people who love doing facials, who love doing waxing, and some people that love doing nails. The good thing is that we work together as a team so if things are busy and someone else needs to jump in to do a set of eyebrows, that’s not even an issue. We have specializations but everyone has the same general degree if that makes sense.

Who has been your greatest inspiration? Inspiring book?

100% my dad. If I could be half the person that he is, I would probably be happy. He’s just been unwavering in his entire life and his support to his family and friends and even down to his kids. And the type of businessman that he is, he’s the one.

What is your favourite part about being a nail salon owner?

The connections I form with all the people. It’s crazy how many customers become your friends and it’s quite odd to call them your customers even though that’s where that relationship started. And it's a chance to have someone leave with a smile or feel a little bit prettier. And it's also, you know, sometimes you play a little bit of a therapist at times.

What kind of relationships do you form with your customers? ( customer )

Very close ones I would say. Like for example mimi… (conversation with customer). Like that. Its great to be on a first name basis. A lot of people make fun of me because I have a very creepy memory, all the details I’ll remember. I had a customer walk in and I asked her ‘Oh how was house hunting in Mimico?’ and she’s like ‘I literally told you that like 6 months ago’ and I’m like ‘I know, I remember! Tell me more!’

In one word, characterize being an entrepreneur.

Stressful.

How do you define success?

I think there’s no one definition for success. It’s always changing because it’s in relation to what your goals are at that certain specific time. For example at one point I thought finding a location would be successful and now I’ve done that. So now it moves on in stages, you’re never going to actually have a standard point that you reach to that is success.

What habits helped make you successful?

I don’t think I am successful. I’m kinda hard on myself.

What habits have you formed to get to ‘success’?

I think a major part of it is taking some time for yourself, because when everything seems a little bit daunting, if you step away, even if it’s for a day or half a day, somehow the solution will always come to you. So I think it’s always being adamant on making sure you have time. Which is also why we stay closed on long weekends, because I think the staff and me need that time to recharge ourselves.

What customer group do you target?

We target everyone, which is one of our key points. I know a lot of places that kind of emulate the same sort of atmosphere that we do feel a little bit bougie but I am very open to the fact that anyone from any age group is welcome here because in the end, everyone deserves to *retreat themselves*. We don’t discriminate and we don't have a real focus but from the neighbourhood itself, we have a lot of young professionals, a lot of young moms, and we also have an older crowd which is really nice because you get to connect with different people.

How did you build and grow your customer base?

I tried everything when we first started. I tried even print media and I think that was not such a great campaign. It brought in some people but nothing to the extent of Instagram. I feel like most of our customers have grown just by walking in the door. We have a really high retention rate and I think it is because we offer the best possible service that we can. Also people find us a lot through Instagram and Facebook. We do instagram ads but we kinda just showcase our work.

Have you ever turned down a client? Why?

Yes I have because the client was very disrespectful to our staff and that’s one thing that I don’t condone. I think that if you're going to be rude, there’s no place- If there’s an issue, 100% we will always fix it, but if you are being rude for no reason on a consistent basis, no one deserves that kind of abuse.

What would you want your customers to know?

How much they affect us. In a sense that, we think about you even after you're gone, like if you had a wedding to go to, we think ‘Oh I hope that wedding went well’ or if you have an issue with a nail and we fix it, we think ‘Oh I wonder how that’s working out’. We love when people come back and tell us stories like ‘this worked out great’ or ‘no, I need this now’. So how much we care for them and how much we appreciate them because we wouldn't be here without our customers. We’re very lucky, we’ve had a very very very good bunch like everyone’s been super nice, super supportive. So just that level of appreciation.

How important have good employees been to your success?

Extremely important, probably the most important. You’re nothing without your team.

How many employees do you have?

In total 6, but obviously not all of them work at the same time.

What qualifications does someone need to work here?

You need to be a certified nail tech. And the reason, so becoming a nail tech is not a regulated practice in Ontario, which means anyone at home can start working, but we do require that you have some certificate of education because when you go to school, it covers things that are very important to us that isn’t necessarily taught when self-trained. Things like sanitation, recognizing different types of blemishes, recognizing when and when you cannot do a treatment on a client. Things like that, that are important to me in general, come from schooling, which is what we require. We also do in house training.

What are your thoughts regarding the proposed wage hike, and how do you think it may affect your business?

It’ll definitely affect it because then, the cost will go up, but I think that’s something that’s going to affect small businesses everywhere. It’s one of those things that because wage will go up, prices will probably go up to match it and “follow the curve” of the market.

What challenges have you overcome in the first year of business?

There’s too many to list. There’s been a lot and there’s been a lot of different types. Everything from construction, to permits, to designs, to having to fire employees that level that we needed them to be at. There’s been a lot but they’ve all taught me an important lesson.

How do you generate new ideas for your business?

I do this thing where I go and get my pedicure done at other places, not because I don’t like my own place, but because it gives me the chance to see what is out there and how can I improve myself to be a better business owner and offer better things to our customers. And it also shows me what is our competitive advantage. So what can I highlight and advertise like ‘look, we do this thing that no one else does’ and I know no one else does it because I have gone and spent my own money to find out what other people do. So it’s kinda my dirty little secret, I call it “Pedicure Club” and I’m the only member, but it’s great because you will never grow your business if you stay in your bubble. You have to go and see what else is going on out there.

What is unique about your business?

We don’t compromise sanitation for anything. We are very accommodating, almost to a fault I’d say. And we all develop special relationships with our customers and with each other, I would say.

How has being a small business owner affected your family life?

The good thing is my family is super supportive so they will just come hang out here and treat it like their living room so I still get to see them. But it is really tough like mother's day and father's day, everything has to be planned around like ‘When does Hanan done work? 7. It definitely makes a difference.

How many hours do you, yourself, work every day? Every week?

I work 6 days a week for about 9 and a half to 10 hours a day. And then monday, which is my day off, I’m normally off shopping for supplies or doing something related to the business, so I work *a lot*.

To what do you attribute your success?

My family and my employees. There’s only so much one person can do without the backing of a team of people.

What has been your most satisfying moment in business?

I think the most satisfying has probably been reaching the one year mark. A lot of businesses struggle and a lot of them fail at one year. I’m not saying that we are an amazing success story, yet, but it’s been a lot of work and I’m really proud with how far we’ve grown. So, reaching that one year milestone.

What made you choose your location? How is it helpful?

What made me choose the location is, because I know the neighbourhood very well, I remember when Fairview had Rainbow Cinemas. So I knew that this is a market where there’s a gap to be filled and I knew what it needed and it was what I wanted to do. It helps that the subway is right next to us. We’ve had a lot of people who work in the mall cross the street to come to us. We have Henry Farms, a cute little neighbourhood.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

In 5 years it would be nice to have another location. It would be nice to be an established part of the community. Maybe offering more services (and fine tuning the ones that we have now). It would be great, also, to maybe separate our sections so we have a bit of a nail studio as our flagship and maybe open another location that focuses more on skincare so we can really divide our full attention on each location.

If you had the chance to restart your career, what would you do differently?

I don’t think I would do anything differently because it is your past experiences that lead you to what you are now. The only thing I would do is, going back, is maybe make different choices, in terms of finding a place. When I got this place, it was exactly four walls, there was nothing. So I had to learn a lot about construction really fast. I think for a new business owner I would recommend maybe finding a place that is already built out, or had dry wall up at least.

What advice do you have for other small business owners?

Staffing is always going to be the hardest thing. It’s very tough to find a group of people who will love the business as much as you do, but when you do, it’s amazing and I think that’s what I found here. But you’re going to have to kiss a lot of frogs before you get to your princesses. And try to find something that doesn’t have a lot of overhead cost to dip your toe into it, and then fully dive in.

If you were doing this interview, what would you ask?

If I was doing an interview with someone in the same position as me, I would probably ask, what’s the best piece of advice someone has given you in the past year?

What is that?

The best piece of advice is ‘take is easy’ from my dad. No matter how much you think the world is going to end, I promise you, it won’t. Eventually… it will be fine.

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