UAlbany Weekend MBA Stories – Nigar Hale
Vice President, Marketing and Membership, The Chamber of Southern Saratoga County

If you know Nigar Hale at all, you know her name rhymes with “cigar” and she is a die-hard Buffalo Bills fan. “Avid is too small of a word to describe how much I love the Bills,” exclaims the proud owner of Thurman Thomas and Rex Ryan bobble heads. “We have season tickets and drive out for every game without fail, tailgating included, of course.”

Nigar’s passions don’t end with sports. They include culinary arts, American literature and content marketing. Before achieving her MBA in 2009 from the University at Albany Weekend MBA Program, Nigar spent most of her career in publishing. “I did my undergrad at the University at Albany, where I received my Bachelor of Arts in History.”

Nigar started in the publishing industry just as the world of publishing was changing. She traveled a lot, covering a territory up to 2,000-square miles throughout the Northeast, primarily working out of Ballston Spa, New York.

While Nigar was traveling all over the country, her husband Michael worked in Clifton Park and took care of their two young children, Natasha and Nolan. “Michael truly held down the fort,” shares Nigar. “He participated in every aspect of their lives, including my son’s nursery school graduation, which I was so sad to miss because I was traveling.”

By the time their children were in middle school, she decided to take a step back from her intense traveling schedule. “It was a changing of the tides when they went into middle school,” she tells. “Those years are so formative and I don’t regret stopping traveling for a minute because it was taking a toll on our family.”

Ever since high school, Nigar has embraced the mantra, to thine own self be true. “Michael has always been the first person to support me improving myself, which of course included improving our family,” Nigar imparts. “A lifelong ambition of mine was to achieve my MBA. He knew that and was in full support.”

After pressing, “pause” on her travel schedule, circumstances allowed Nigar to bump into an old friend from their time together in publishing. “She just so happened to be a recruiter for UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program and invited me to an orientation.”

The orientation proved valuable and inspired Nigar to press forward. “I did my due diligence and looked into other MBA programs,” she mentions. “UAlbany’s Weekend MBA Program is the only one I applied to. It was simply the best fit for me financially and in structure, including the appeal of the international trip to Budapest, Hungary.”
A large part of the program’s appeal was the cohort structure. “Once you make the commitment of your time and finances, you work in varied teams with 25-30 other professionals,” reports Nigar. “Almost every single course included teaming up with four to five new people. There were no pretenses and there was an impressive level of professionalism and intelligence.”

Having conducted several orientations, Nigar is no stranger to teamwork. However, she explains, “The UAlbany Weekend MBA Program was different. It was like a college environment except we came from varied backgrounds and levels of experiences. To a person, we shared one common goal: the countdown to graduation.”

One of the things Nigar Hale and her cohort are most proud of, is raising funds for a cherished classmate who was killed in a car accident, Jeremy Jachim. They displayed his name in memorial in the hallway leading into the university’s newest building, the recently renamed Massry Center for Business.

In 2006, when Nigar left her global publishing position at John Wiley & Sons, she was unsure how to change the direction of her career. “Not only that,” she adds, “I didn’t know how to gain the confidence to do so. We get bombarded with commercials about saving for retirement and I always just assumed I would just keep working. I didn’t think much about competing.”

Upon achieving her MBA, Nigar realized she could indeed compete at a business level in the years leading up to her retirement. “I realized I can go toe to toe with the heavy hitters,” she divulges. “I found my love for the community and local scene. It’s ironic, really. I traveled all over the country in search of subject matter experts who would write about a discipline for textbooks. Then, I pursued my MBA and realized how much I love the local scene.”

Nigar chose to do her MBA thesis on the company she founded, Blue Pepper Strategies, a provider of marketing solutions for independent restaurateurs. “I wanted to work for the hospitality industry and focus on the guest experience,” says Nigar. “To me, that was everything.”

When the recession hit and her husband Michael was laid off, her priorities needed to shift. GlobalFoundries was being built in Malta, New York, giving Nigar her first glance at chamber community work. She shares, “All I wanted to do was enhance the experience for the region, the community, my kids’ school, and my own back yard.”

Like puzzle pieces fitting together, Nigar Hale began working at Chamber of Southern Saratoga County in July 2011. She still works there today. “Earning my MBA helped me gain confidence in understanding business theories and gave me the ability to further my career,” she said. “I emerged from the program understanding my success with publishing had birthed my love for project management. It was then I gained clarity that everything I had done to that point, was really just confirmation and affirmation that I love project management and the local community, which is precisely what chamber work is all about.”

“Sometimes I wish I could do it all over again ... again,” she confesses.

To professionals considering pursuit of their MBA through UAlbany’s Weekend Program, Nigar would first ask them why they want it and what they hope to gain. “This program is ideal for professionals who have some level of real world business experience under their belts. It’s also perfectly poised for those looking to change or enhance their careers.”
The confidence she gained was her biggest win, without question. “It was refreshing to learn what I was doing all along was right for me and now I have the analysis to back me,” says Nigar. “Analyzing case studies of successful and not-so-successful companies has given me a blueprint. I can use that blueprint to help an organization transition from good to great. I know how to do this now because of my MBA.”

Working with the Chamber of Southern Saratoga County has allowed Nigar to volunteer for the Burnt Hills Ballston Lake Business & Professionals Association (BPA), where she currently serves as President. “I’m very proud of this opportunity to serve,” she expresses. “It’s a privilege to explore the future of that area. The experience has baked into me a whole new passion for economic development.”

One of Nigar’s most cherished experiences was the golf tournament she and her family attended to benefit Ronald McDonald House Charities. “Somehow,” she declares, “I sat right next to former Buffalo Bills running back Thurman Thomas!” (You’ll recall, she has his bobble head.) “The best part of the dinner was I got to meet the real Thurman Thomas, the personal one, the one beyond his celebrity persona. He told me he named his daughter after his former Buffalo Bills teammate O.J. Simpson. And,” she giggles, “The fact that he had his arm around me all night wasn’t so bad either.”

Above and beyond all else, Nigar Hale’s greatest blessings are her children, Natasha, now 21 and Nolan, now 20 and her beloved husband Michael, with whom she will celebrate 25 years of marriage in June 2016. The future is bright.

Connect with Nigar Hale here:

LinkedIn:  https://www.linkedin.com/in/nigarhale

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