Mohamad Fakih fled war-torn Lebanon at age 16. He lived and worked for a while as a licensed gemologist in Italy before arriving in Canada in 1999, with only $1,200 to his name. Lacking Canadian work experience, Fakih was working for free at a jewellery store, pulling night shifts at Coffee Time to afford a shared basement apartment, and teaching his landlord’s daughter French to offset the rent. Today, he owns Paramount Fine Foods, a fast-casual Middle Eastern restaurant chain with 70 locations worldwide and counting. In 2018, Fakih bought the naming rights to Mississauga, Ont.’s Hershey Centre stadium, which is now called the Paramount Fine Foods Centre.

Fakih knows that he wouldn’t be where he is now had it not been for some help along the way, and he continues to pay it forward. To date, the Fakih Foundation has supported numerous causes, including the UN Refugee Agency. He has hired more than 150 Syrian refugees, paid for the funerals of victims of 2017’s Quebec City mosque shooting and launched a fundraiser for the family members of Canadians who died in the Tehran plane crash.

“I wanted to change the world one piece of jewellery at a time, and now I’m changing it one plate of shawarma at a time,” says Fakih, who has no plans to stop.

Your restaurant empire was built on baklava. Tell me about that.

My wife asked me to pick up a kilo of baklava one day. I went to this place in Mississauga called Paramount, which was nothing like its name suggested. The owner recognized me as I had been in the newspaper for helping my dad’s friend build a house. He told me his business was struggling and, thinking I was rich, asked me to lend him $250,000. I gave him my card, hoping he would lose it. But when I left, I thought about how that was me once, and how people helped me. I realized if his business closed, a lot of people would lose their jobs and maybe even their visas. So I called him.

How did you turn an almost bankrupt business into a success story?

What made us who we are today is that we admitted what we didn’t know and we got experienced people to help us build a company that represented Middle Eastern food and culture in a better way. I think what got the buy-in from all the executives and consultants was our culture of giving back to the community. We donated to churches, mosques and families in need. I believe it brought us more customers and more talent. And it made the company profitable by purpose.

Did you ever imagine one restaurant would turn into 70?

My first location was a success, but the second one was a mess. Many people have one restaurant and they’re successful, but can they repeat it? I realized I didn’t have the formula to do that, so I had to bring in consultants. But when I design a store today, for me, that store is already open, and I’m already designing the next one in my head and thinking about the one after that.

How did you feel about trading precious stones for shawarma plates?

I never thought I would become a restaurateur—I don’t even know how to fry an egg! But what took over was my sense of community. I think I actually
It’s been two years since China, fed up with being the dumping ground for the western world’s low-quality recyclables, brought down what it called Operation National Sword. On Jan. 1, 2018, the country closed its doors to two dozen types of recyclable materials. Canada, which for years shipped vast quantities of waste to China—much of it near-useless, marred with food and other contamination—very quickly had to find a new way to deal with a lot of grimy coffee cups and dirty plastic wrappers.

In the past 24 months, Canadians have heard plenty about paper and plastics landfilled and incinerated, and ballooning recycling costs to municipalities. But there’s a silver lining: the crisis may slowly be planting the seeds of a new recycling infrastructure in our own country—especially if our unwieldy, coast-to-coast patchwork of municipal recycling regimes can be made to work better together.

Canada’s recycling system wasn’t exactly in tip-top shape before National Sword. Ever since the

What’s your proudest achievement?
Getting the key to the city of Mississauga—the city where I lived, the city where I put my first restaurant, and the city that let me put our company’s name on the Paramount Fine Foods Centre—was a beautiful moment. For the city to do that means, “We love you, we trust you, we appreciate you and everyone else who came to Canada like you.” Not like me in name or religion, but like me in general, with the circumstances that brought me here. It means good people really can finish ahead.

Any advice for aspiring restaurateurs?
It’s not for everyone. Unless you’re ready to carve out a good portion of your personal life, a restaurant is not for you. If you enjoy a 40-hour workweek, maybe think about a restaurant, or drive by a restaurant or go to a restaurant—just don’t open one.

What do you mean by “movement”?
A movement is when people start looking up to and emulating you. Even if that means customers pay money for our services because they see what we’re doing with that money and they want to support us. It’s Gino’s Pizza giving away slices to the homeless because they were inspired by Paramount paying for Toronto’s homeless to stay in hotels in the winter of 2018. That’s a movement.

“I CHANGED DIAMONDS INTO SHAWARMA, AND SHAWARMA INTO A MOVEMENT”

Do you consider yourself successful?
I can’t say I’m successful—I think I’m on the way. But we can’t just live our lives enjoying what we have while ignoring the people who need help the most. I always say if you want to make a real difference, commit to something and do it until it hurts.

What about “me time”?
I have a very supportive wife and children. I get them involved in my work and they love what we do together. It’s the Ikea syndrome: they make you build the furniture yourself, and you love it more because of that.

Fakih at a Paramount restaurant in Mississauga, Ont.
Tareq Hadhad vividly remembers the day he arrived in Canada. It was Dec. 18, 2015, three years after he and his family fled war-torn Syria after losing everything—including the chocolate company his father had started in Damascus in 1986—for a refugee camp in Lebanon. Now Hadhad is the CEO of Peace by Chocolate, one of the largest chocolate producers in Atlantic Canada. He also sits on the board of directors of the provincial government fund Invest Nova Scotia.

Four years after starting out in the family kitchen, Peace by Chocolate has between 45 and 55 employees—the numbers fluctuate seasonally—and the capacity to manufacture tens of thousands of chocolates a day. The company’s products are sold by huge grocery retailers like Sobeys, Safeway and Foodland, as well as dozens of specialty stores across Canada.

Anyone who grew up in North America in the 1980s remembers the old Music Television slogan, “I want my MTV.” But to Hadhad, “MTV” stood for something else: Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver. Settling down in Antigonish was never part of the plan. “Who is going to buy chocolate in Antigonish? Who is going to drive there?” But we figured out it’s a small world now. What you make in Antigonish might end up in Vancouver in three or four days.”

How did Peace by Chocolate come together?
If you arrive in a small town, usually there is a lot of competition for employment because of the lower number of jobs. So we started making chocolate in our kitchen. It was such a marvellous time. We sold it at farmers’ markets and local events. We made chocolate for many, many provincial and national events. Right away we got custom orders. We were wrapping them by hand.

Two months after moving production from our kitchen to our basement, we asked the community if there was any chance to build a small factory outside of the house. That was when we told them we cannot get loans from the banks because that is not a part of our culture, and the community offered us an interest-free loan. We bought the first machine, the chocolate wheel [a machine for tempering chocolate]. We bought some display units. We started designing packaging. We started bringing in tools and building [a factory out of] the shed beside the house. Everyone came to support us.

Is that why you’ve decided to reinvest in Antigonish and build your business there?
Yes. We have to give back to the community members who stepped up to support us. In 2017 we had to move our factory into a storefront—it’s now on Bay Street in Antigonish. It’s funny that I arrived...
on Bay Street in Antigonish and not Bay Street in Toronto, where I originally wanted to be. But the business has been growing ever since then, and we opened a factory in the county a five-minute drive from where we started.

What else has the company done to give back to the community?
We were inspired to start a society called Peace on Earth when there were wildfires in Fort McMurray in 2016. There were so many families leaving their houses and losing everything. My family knows that exact feeling, so we use our products as fundraising opportunities. We have a partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association, as well as a collaboration with the Refugee Hub at the University of Ottawa, which supports resettlement and immigration services for newcomers to Canada. We have another product called Nitap. Nitap means "buddy" in Mi’kmaq. We launched the product in 2018 and the goal was to raise awareness in supporting Indigenous efforts. The last one that we started in 2019 was a Pride Bar to support the LGBTQ community. The proceeds of that bar go toward Phoenix Youth Programs, a Halifax-based youth support organization.

It sounds like intersectionality and inclusion are core values for your business.
Part of our major core values is to give back, to support multiculturalism, inclusion and diversity as part of our strengths. If we were not given a hand when we got here, we would not be where we are now. So now it’s our turn to lend a hand to those in the community, to those who are coming to Canada. We announced in 2019 that by 2022 we will hire 50 refugees and we will support 10 businesses run by refugees with distribution and marketing.

What is the most valuable thing you’ve learned throughout this experience?
To be honest, I had lost faith in humanity before I arrived in Canada because of the fighting in Syria. When I got to Antigonish it was like, yes, there is good in the world. They look out for each other. There is so much power in the fact that one life can change the lives of hundreds. The people that started the community group called SAFE (Syria-Antigonish Families Embrace) have changed the lives of hundreds of Syrian newcomers and they changed perspectives everywhere.

What are your goals for the business going forward?
There are always goals and I am hopeful for the business to expand. But also I really hope to see that my family, by 2040 for example, or 2050, will win a Nobel Peace Prize. I’m thinking a lot about big goals for our family. We have learned a lot. We don’t call things mistakes, we call them lessons. You are not failing, you just learn.

It seems like it’s really important to you to have a real human element in everything that you’re doing. Is that something that defines a successful business today?
I think it’s important for big corporations to take off the dollar-sign glasses and see the world in selfless ways. It’s time to switch gears and steer the world toward being selfless as much as possible because the world is changing every day. Now we are facing something that didn’t exist a few months ago with the coronavirus. You just never know where life can go. So it is very important to not be greedy, to give back, to share wealth and knowledge. When we take care of each other, everyone succeeds. ◆
One of Paul Martin’s hallmark initiatives as prime minister was the Kelowna Accord, a five-year, $5-billion agreement aimed at closing the social and economic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. His government’s defeat meant the accord was never implemented, but after leaving politics, he launched the Martin Family Initiative (MFI), a charity aimed at improving education, health and well-being outcomes for Indigenous children and youth in Canada. He spoke with Pivot about his foundation’s evolution, the role of the private sector in tackling social problems and whether we should worry about the explosion in government deficits.

Where did your interest in Indigenous youth education come from? Did it predate your time in politics?
Yes. When I was 17 I hitchhiked out to Hay River, N.W.T., and got a job as a deckhand on the tug barges that transit the Mackenzie River. The vast majority of the people working on them as deckhands or mates or captains were Indigenous. When the vessel was laid up we would spend a lot of time talking. They were hard-working, very smart and a lot of fun. But when you started to talk to some of them about their youth and some of the issues they faced, there was a melancholy I had never seen before. The attempt by society to take away the culture they had grown up with was the cause.

As you’ve mentioned in the past, this is also important to the Canadian economy.
Growth comes from the younger generations, and the youngest and fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population is Indigenous youth. But I would take this one step further. For a country to succeed it has to have confidence in its values, and surely to heaven one of the most important values a country can have is that every young person has the opportunity to succeed.

In 2008 you launched the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Program. Why that program?
The Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Program (AYEP) at its root is a business course, originally very similar to the provincial business courses offered in high schools across Canada to Grade 11 and 12 students. AYEP began in 2008 when we introduced the standard Ontario business course to a high school in Thunder Bay that served fly-in communities in the region. By piloting at this one school we learned a major lesson right off the bat: If we were to provide programs for Indigenous students, we couldn’t copy and paste from existing provincial curriculum and textbooks. We needed original lessons and material created for Indigenous students with an Indigenous lens. So from there we worked with two Indigenous teachers and Nelson Education, a major publishing house, to create the first set of textbooks and workbooks teaching business with Indigenous examples, perspectives and role models. Since then, the course has taken off and we’re in over 50 schools across Canada and have served over 5,500 students.

Essentially, we started AYEP because we felt then and still feel today that Indigenous students are entitled to the best.

As you’ve mentioned in the past, this is also important to the Canadian economy.
Growth comes from the younger generations, and the youngest and fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population is Indigenous youth. But I would take this one step further. For a country to succeed it has to have confidence in its values, and surely to heaven one of the most important values a country can have is that every young person has the opportunity to succeed.

You followed that program with an initiative that focuses on literacy.
When you look at the Indigenous dropout rates, an awful lot of it begins with kids who can’t read or write by Grade 3. MFI’s Model Schools Literacy Project began in 2009 with a pilot project at two on-reserve Ontario schools in Walpole Island and Kettle and Stony Point First Nations. When we started the pilot projects, only 13 per cent of students in the schools could read or write at the end of Grade 3. We worked in these schools for four years, and when they did the testing again literacy was at
81 per cent. The chief at Kettle and Stony Point was, at that time, Tom Bressette. And when Tom gave the results, he said, talking to the country, “You didn’t think we could do this, but we did. We can do whatever has to be done, provided we have the tools to do the job.” The Model Schools Literacy Project is now in 12 schools and will be in 18 by the start of the new school year.

**What is your focus on now?**

You are who you are because of the evolution of your brain from conception to age five. It’s what gives you your verbal capacity and your resilience. [Child welfare activist] Cindy Blackstock said it very well when she said that so many Indigenous peoples spend their adult lives trying to compensate for their childhood. So we’ve started a home visitor program for young mothers or young women who are about to become mothers. We started in the Ermineskin Cree Nation in Alberta, and we called upon women from the community who had successfully raised their families to form a group of home visitors, who are compensated, and we provided a training program co-developed with the community. The Early Years program is now in five communities and we’re having discussions about a very large expansion.

**What role do you think the private sector should play in addressing these challenges?**

There are two things. One of them is funding. These programs cost money in the short term but save an immense amount in the longer term. The second thing brought by our partners is expertise, like the CPA Martin Mentorship Program for Indigenous High School Students. What we’d like to see with all our programs is students going on to post-secondary education. In a digital economy, the more education you have, the better off you will be. That means you need mentors, and CPA Canada has provided these mentors. It’s one of the most valuable programs that we’re involved in because when the students want to talk, be it about their future career prospects or home life, there’s someone out there to listen and to guide them.

In recent years, we’ve seen a rethink of the purpose of a corporation and whether it should be about more than just generating a buck for shareholders. What do you think? There’s no doubt if a business doesn’t turn a profit, it won’t succeed. On the other hand, if you do not recognize that you have a responsibility to help

---

**HEAD START**

The CPA Martin Mentorship Program guides Indigenous high school students to their post-secondary options and beyond

Since the Martin Family Initiative launched in 2008, CPA Canada has partnered with the organization to run the CPA Martin Mentorship Program for Indigenous High School Students. In schools across British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec, high school students are paired up with mentorship teams—CPAs and other accounting professionals who are chosen by their employer. The mentorship teams are drawn mostly from national firms such as BDO Canada, Deloitte, EY, Grant Thornton, KPMG, MNP and PwC, as well as the federal government and the academic arena. Mentors volunteer their time and get the chance to learn about Indigenous issues and culture first-hand. Students are selected by their schools—the placement process begins in Grade 9—and meet with their respective mentorship teams for planned activities starting in Grade 10. The program lasts ideally for the duration of their high school careers and even beyond. Students have dedicated guides to conduct workshops and answer questions about career paths, resumés and job skills, and opportunities for workplace visits and social activities. The goal is for students to graduate high school and go on to post-secondary education, with an awareness of the spectrum of career options available to them, including careers in accounting and finance, and with the skills to flourish in their careers.