

Business Beyond Borders Episode #12 – Oriana Nasser, Managing Director at Jerusalem Stone Group

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Guest: Oriana Nasser

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Cynthia Dearin: Hi there and welcome back to the business Beyond Borders podcast with me Cynthia Dearin. Today I'm talking to Oriana Nasser, who is the managing director of Jerusalem Stone Group which is based in Bethlehem, Palestine. Oriana was born in Palestine but she did her tertiary studies in the United States, and she has a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from San Francisco State University. As you'll hear on the show today she was the only woman in her graduating class and Oriana also has a post-grad qualification from the University of Harvard.

Before she joined Jerusalem stone group around a work in communication and IT with private and foreign companies and she also did a stint with the Palestinian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation in Ramallah. My guest Oriana is unusual for a couple of reasons firstly she runs a company that specializes in stone and marble quarry which as you can imagine is traditionally a really male-dominated field.

The second thing that makes her unusual is that she does that in Palestine and for anybody who doesn't know, this is a very challenging place to run a business from, and that's because Oriana's company is operating in a country which is technically under occupation. Palestine's economy is heavily reliant on foreign aid and there are not many customers for stone and marble in the domestic market.

The movement of goods and people across Palestinian borders is very heavily regulated by the Israeli authorities and so the cost of transportation is very high. And as you'll hear on the show today this creates some real headaches for a company that deals in large bulky goods. The great news is that despite the challenges Oriana and her husband have built a successful international

business, which has gone from strength to strength. So Oriana welcome to the show it's great to have you here.

Oriana Nasser: It's great to be there with you.

Cynthia Dearin: We're recording today. You're in Jerusalem is that right?

Oriana Nasser: I'm in Bethlehem City.

Cynthia Dearin: You're in Bethlehem City and I am in Australia, so we've got a bit of a time difference going on and we're recording from two very different places. And what is really exciting about this is that you are actually our first guest from the Middle East to come on the podcast. So I'm sure a lot of people are going to be really interested in your story, and what you've got to say. And I wanted to go back in time a little bit to start with and I wanted you to tell us about, what life was like for you as a child? Growing up in Palestine, what was it like? Because it's very different to some other parts of the world. And what was your dream when you were little?

Oriana Nasser: Actually, I had an amazing childhood, amazing upbringing, maybe I owe it to the family. I was raised with another two sisters and a boy. My parents never differentiated between pleasing girls or boy and a society that is more... that favors if I may say favors the boys over the girls. So I was pretty lucky growing up also in the family emphasized they education. So like as a child I always wanted to go to college, study something, be someone important.

I didn't have a clear vision of what I wanted to be. I can't tell you I wanted to be an astronaut or like other kids may say. But for me I know I wanted to be successful. As a young child I wanted... I could see a career, I could see myself in a business suit, but of course I couldn't differentiate back then whether being employed or having my own business? What I wanted to be is someone famous and successful.

Cynthia Dearin: And what did your parents tell you that made you feel that you could do that? I mean you said that they treated you the same way as they treated your brothers. What were the kind of things they were telling you as you grow up?

Oriana Nasser: It was normal if I would may say, I know some families who would say you can't do this because you're a girl, versus we have no limits it wasn't like I never heard that term I see it now. Unfortunately, in our society where girls are treated less or go fix your brother a breakfast, or go do something now I see it and thank God I've never experienced it before.

- Cynthia Dearin: Yeah, so your parents were pretty encouraging by the sounds of it and they were prompting you to do whatever you wanted to do.
- Oriana Nasser: Yes, and definitely to pursue an education. It was very important in my family. To emphasize on schooling, getting good grades, by coming to college. They always emphasized education.
- Cynthia Dearin: And so when you[Crosstalk 00:05:42]
- Oriana Nasser: When available we went to good schools, got extra books stories, they invested in books and in education.
- Cynthia Dearin: Yeah, and so you graduated from high school and you went on and you studied as an engineer is that right?
- Oriana Nasser: Yes, I finished high school in Bethlehem and then I went to the United States. I went to San Francisco State University where I started for the first year also I was decisive I loved science, I loved physics and math. So I started my first year also not knowing what I really wanted to major in. That's also I decided going through the first year and taking the university the general depth that I had to take.
- I studied Electrical Engineering which also was very uncommon for a woman to be in that field. I specialized in communication systems which is more IT. But back then IT wasn't a major yet, when I graduated I was the only female to graduate in 96 from the electrical engineering department.
- Cynthia Dearin: Wow, so you were the only woman and a middle-eastern woman in a class full of I assume mainly American guys.
- Oriana Nasser: American and... it was a mix in the engineering department. I had like a few woman in some classes but in the graduation I record in 96 I was the only female to graduate from the electrical engineering.
- Cynthia Dearin: How did you feel?
- Oriana Nasser: It felt good actually, it felt like I accomplished something.
- Cynthia Dearin: So you graduated as an engineer, but what we're talking about today and where you have wound up is running a company which produces quarried stone and marble. So explain for me how did that happen? 96 you're standing there, on the podium graduating is the only woman in your field Electrical Engineering in San Francisco. And then today you're back in Palestine running

this company which makes stone and marble. How did you get from one place to the other?

Oriana Nasser: Okay, it happened... of course it wasn't planned and it happened over periods of years. When I graduated went back home, I got a job at a private company and then I held a position at the Ministry of Interior and international affairs. I also worked with international companies with my fields so that was during the span of six-seven years. After that, after my last job the company closed down and I was in between jobs or what I call in between jobs, I had my first child.

So I decided to take my time to raise my first child and then I had my second child and also and then I was a full-time mom, raising my two children. It was until my second child turned two that I sent him to daycare. And this is where it all started, I decided the company wasn't as big as it is today, it was an engineering office that was run by my husband and he had started with stone business. By his visits and travels to the US he found the need for the Palestinian stone.

And by the way the Palestinian stone is very good known for its good characteristic and it's sold worldwide. So he started very small back then and he was exporting. We're producing on a small scale and after I sent my child to daycare I decided that I wanted to cut in between brackets. So I went to the office and this is how it all started, I started with the accounting with finances, then production that I got more familiar with the whole process and I liked it.

I never imagined that I would go, it happened without even thinking from one task to another from having a position from expanding the company. And we're talking since 2008 till 2018 today. And here am I running the company with expanded a lot, added more international markets. So now I'm in charge of imports and exports, human resources.

Cynthia Dearin: And so when your husband started he was alone, how big is the company today ten years later?

Oriana Nasser: While the factory expanded a lot we were adding more machinery, and am very proud to say that Jerusalem stone group is the first Palestinian company to use CNC machinery with the production. The already famous wanted Palestinian stone is now produced with top-of-the-line CNC Italian machinery that gives stone carvings, we give architectural elements, the columns. The ancient building it's all produced using the Palestinian stones with high-tech machinery.

Cynthia Dearin: And how many people work with you today Oriana?

- Oriana Nasser: Between management and workers we're talking about 30 to 40 employees and sometimes even more with the archive and the temp employees.
- Cynthia Dearin: So it's growing very significantly over that decade.
- Oriana Nasser: It's still growing.
- Cynthia Dearin: Now on this podcast what I'm really interested to get the story about how people took their company international and sorry I wanted to turn to that now, and I was wondering whether you can tell me about how Jerusalem stone groups started to export internationally? Where'd the idea to sell your quarried stone or marble overseas come from?
- Oriana Nasser: It came up by visiting the United States and finding out that that is the need there is a good market for the Palestinian stone. So we attended a stone expo specialize in stone and we had a very nice that's great thing I would work. And this is how it all started by people visiting the booth, getting our information. And later on when we came back we drove down, we contacted them and we ended up getting quite a few projects. It's not one child often that one right, yes. And since we were listed at the directory as well, some people who didn't attend could see that by googling us, by looking for our products they could find us.
- Cynthia Dearin: Now what were those first few international sales like? Was it easy to sell your goods to people or did you run up against challenges?
- Oriana Nasser: Nothing is easy at first it's a learning process, now I can tell you between different countries what they require, the important export procedures different from one country to another. Nothing is as easy at first but we were able to enter the US market. Our quality and finishes is so high that we can compete in the US market.
- Also we have a very good market the Gulf area where we export to Dubai, Abu Dhabi in the UAE also Qatar is a very good market as well. There they like the old style, the ancient style and there is the different the big commercial buildings or the private residential buildings are huge. And in need of such stone.
- Cynthia Dearin: So let me just ask you a bit more about those early sales, tell me about what was challenging? Specifically, when you went to those first international customers. What were the things that you found challenging? Was it actually working with people from the States? Or was it regulations? Or was it

import-export rules? Or was it actually getting the stone out of Palestine?
What were the things that you found most difficult at the start?

Oriana Nasser: The expert procedure is different according to the country, from Bethlehem when we export to the United States we need to go to use the Israeli ports. We have to transport the stone inland to reach the Israeli port. And there it gets processed very high-security where we move the container from the Palestinian truck to an Israeli truck that could enter the Israeli port. So that's extra costs on transportation which the price is already very high yet for a signal Palestine.

Also security checking, security clearance, also depending on the country that would export it to. For the United States Wood has to be fumigated, we have to get fumigation certificate for the pallets to enter the United States. So it's different from one country to another, we have also exported to Europe. Europe also the paperwork is also different, and also we do it through the Israeli courts to Europe.

Cynthia Dearin: But it sounds to me as though the actual process of finding international customers has been quite straightforward for you. Would you say that's right?

Oriana Nasser: Straightforward no, contrary the attending the international shows is very expensive for us. What we have to pay for the exhibition itself. And there you pay per square meter and what our fraud we need a big display. So it has to be like quite decent space to be able to display our showcase. So it cost a lot plus we have to ship the all of the products and also build it there. So that's very expensive attending issue.

Cynthia Dearin: Now today Jerusalem stone group exports more than 90% of its production and sends it or all around the world. What strategies do you use to go from those first few clients that you have, to now where almost everything you produce is sent overseas?

Oriana Nasser: We're always researching, looking for markets new countries where there is demand for the natural lifestyle. And as we take it for them we've also worked on our marketing through social media, through our web page and Facebook page. Sometimes we get some customers and usually I ask the question, how did you find about us? Why us?

And some customers they go to Google and they can fill the Palestinian stone and we appear. They contact us and we're pretty good and replying right away or as soon as possible, and sometimes it works and sometimes they drop the prices or they find it too expensive or they use something else.

- Cynthia Dearin: Now I'm surprised that you say that social media works for quarried stone, that's quite unexpected. Tell me a bit about which social channels you find work for selling the kinds of things that you sell.
- Oriana Nasser: The word Facebook page actually it's very easy to update so any project we have, any product we just uploaded and we try to keep it updated as possible. And we get quite good reviews and views as well.
- Cynthia Dearin: That's pretty cool, so these days which markets you are you exporting to? So you mentioned specifically the United States and Europe. Are there specific countries in Europe that you export to and where else are you sending your stone and marble to?
- Oriana Nasser: In Europe we've sent to Scotland, to London to... recently we've sent to even Switzerland. It was a small order not a full container, we sent to Switzerland but the European market it's also a target for me to expand in the European market. I believe we can do more, my main export nowadays is for the Gulf area.
- Cynthia Dearin: And is that easier because it's closer?
- Oriana Nasser: It's not closer it's different because we use non transportation to ship there. Our trucks go through Jordan, and from Jordan it goes on a Jordanian truck for the company transportation company that we work with. And from there it gets to Saudi Arabia and off to the UAE, off to Oman, off to Kuwait. It's faster, I don't know if it's easier but it's definitely faster.
- Cynthia Dearin: I want to change direction a little bit now and I want to ask you about the fact that you built Jerusalem stone group with your husband, now that takes quite some doing to actually run a business with your partner and also have a life for them. But I mean you are doing well at this business and you seem to be a really good team. And as I understand each of you handles specific tasks, how did you decide who would do what? And what is it like working together in same company?
- Oriana Nasser: Before I answer your question I must admit that I'm a person who was against working with the husband. All three years that I was a stay-at-home mom like always such there's room for help, you can help, you can do something and I just refused to it was really against my ideas of being independent. But when I did it I don't think who does what I think by nature whatever am good in am doing and whatever he is good and is doing. And I feel that it's a complete circle if I may say. We complete each other and we complete the tasks that need to be done each having his own personality.

And the most important thing is that I still feel that I'm independent, I'm still able to take my own decisions of course sometimes I go back to him for his opinion. But the decision at the end I can do, he doesn't impose anything on me which is great. And I find that we separate, we try as much as we care to separate, work from personal, from home but sometimes we take work home and we're still discussing and talking about things. Because believe it or not we do work at the same company but certain days at management offices. And he's in the queries or he's at the factory and I do not see him, we don't meet all day-

Cynthia Dearin: So what[Crosstalk 00:24:03].

Oriana Nasser: We give each other's the summaries of the day.

Cynthia Dearin: Yes, and so what do you do? Just tell us a little bit about what you do? And what your husband does at the company?

Oriana Nasser: What I do is I take care of import and export, I take care of marketing, I follow up with the customers. What he does is, he's good at buying the stones from the queries. It's something that I'm not so good at and since this day I have to admit I can't when looking at a block of stones. I don't know if that's good quality or not.

Sometimes if a project requires traveling he travels more than I do, because I don't like leaving the kids during school days the traffic or sometimes we slit. If we have to be two countries, we split who goes where. I run the human resources in the company, what I had to learn by reading about the labor laws in order to apply it, import/export... that's about it.

Cynthia Dearin: Tell that's really interesting to say how you divide the work between you. And we've just touched on your children and how you sometimes have to make decisions about whether to travel or whether to stay home. Tell me a bit more about how you have managed family commitments because obviously your children were still pretty small when you started to work at the company. How did you balance the demands of work and having small children?

Oriana Nasser: Actually it was the big challenge for me, it's the most challenging issue that I faced. Of course I wanted to be the perfect mom, not have them pay for the price that I'm spending the hours at work. So it was lots of physical work for me and I was lucky because my parents were helpful when my kids were young my mom helped with the food, with sometimes what I needed to leave my kids and travel somewhere.

She would take them for a few days I tried to be the perfect mom, the perfect businesswoman and maybe that took the toll from me and my personal time back then. I didn't have time for me as a person I was the business woman, I was the full-time mother and I didn't have much time for me. But now it's getting easier as they're growing.

Cynthia Dearin: And I think lots of people listening to this interview will really find that resonates with them because I get a lot of questions, from other women who are running their businesses and thinking about expanding internationally and they say, "how is it possible that we can juggle a family and also expand the business internationally?"

I'd be interested to get your thoughts on how you do that, what are your tips for people who were thinking about doing this? I mean obviously you can really do it, because you've done it. Tell us about some of the specific things that you did when you were so short on time, to manage being the best mom that you could and also the best businesswomen that you could be.

Oriana Nasser: I encourage other women to do it certain days I had to get my children to work with me, like I remembered my son walking opening the door and walking and when I was at an important meeting. But what it's not the end of the world it was cute it was nice back then I think people understand that businesswomen are also moms. It shouldn't be something to hold women back at all, one day you're not going to be able to prepare the meal so what it's okay you buy food from the outside from a restaurant you order out.

Some days you can't attend it's fine like welfare your child is sick so what if you cancel few meetings for the day you make it up the next day. I really encourage all women to do it, it shouldn't be the excuse for us not pursuing our business, our dreams, our careers. So many moms are doing it nowadays even in Palestine there's more demand for day care system where almost everybody sending to daycare so they can work. How schools nowadays they can't afford living on one salary or one person working. I think where there is a will there's a way, to sum it up.

Cynthia Dearin: And I think that's really refreshing that you just have a philosophy where you don't worry too much, and you just do what you can manage on all fronts and if it's not perfect well but that's okay as well.

Oriana Nasser: Definitely.

Cynthia Dearin: Let's talk a bit about inspiration. Because you've been on a fairly impressive journey, I was wondering are there particular people in your life, or public

figures, or your inspirational people who you've looked up to as you've gone on the journey?

Oriana Nasser: That's a tough question to answer, the way I look at it is I always look at if you want to call it a better version of me. Constantly working improving myself on all aspects right, so this is like person this better version of me, I'm always looking forward to see. As for people who inspire me I think it's little things and little people are my inspirations. I'll give you an example, last month I was asked to be as a mentor in an event that took place in Domino.

And the mentees were such an inspiration to me. Really with the ideas they had, with steps to take being the small businesses that they're having really they're an inspiration. Also another thing like some people who come up with ideas from nothing. Maybe they're not famous people for me to mention names or tell you role models, people in who are leaders nowadays but really like some woman are trying they are doing something out of nothing, and really supporting that families and kids the real mystery to me.

Cynthia Dearin: I like that, what about books? Do you have books that have helped you on the journey? Favorite books that you've read either recently or a long time ago that has taught you something special or that you recommend. And I mean there can be any books they don't have to be business books but just books that have that you have loved and have helped you in your life and in your business journey.

Oriana Nasser: I love books I grew up with books and it's something that also I am trying to also give to my kids to read. I wish I had more time to spend reading books, I do it in both Arabic and English. I read novels sometimes a book that I read not too long ago was 40 Rules of love for Elif Şafak. That I recommend everybody I think almost everybody read it by now, but if somebody didn't read that I recommend that they read it.

I also read books for human development, for neuro linguistic programming as well and I find it very useful. It's there's always room for improvement, I love these books I really gained a lot from reading the self-development books sometimes I even take courses this is what I call me time, it's the time that I spent for me.

Cynthia Dearin: Yes.

Oriana Nasser: This is how is funded.

Cynthia Dearin: And with your help there the NLP books that you've just mentioned. Is there a particular title that you suggest people read?

Oriana Nasser: Just any book, any good book on that topic I took a course and it was like a summary of that instructor prepared from different books different authors. And I think any book is really helpful, it makes you think. For me what I really think and this is what I tell everybody, you don't have to have something set in your life. I didn't know what I wanted to study, I never imagined that I will end up where I am today. And just follow your heart follow your dreams, any person who is not happy who is running the business and not happy with it, it's not very too late to change.

I really think person should be passionate about what they're doing their lives. Life is too short to be spent in something that we don't enjoy, we want to be as productive if we go to work and make good money and not really enjoying what we're doing at the end of the day.

Cynthia Dearin: Yeah, so Oriana your journey has been a really impressive and a really inspiring one. And we haven't really talked much about the actual difficulty of working in Palestine. So I'm not sure whether a lot of people listening to this will get a real sense of how difficult it is to run a business as a Palestinian person. But since I've raised that I wonder if you could just give us a sense, I mean if you had to compare running your business in Palestine now to running the same or a similar kind of business in the United States for example. How do you think it would compare? Just I would like to give people a sense of how difficult it can be to actually operate a business in Palestine at the moment.

Oriana Nasser: It is quite difficult because we're very restricted, the restriction of movement whether it's for the stone that we buy, moving it to our factory or even moving containers. I mentioned before it's a whole process where we have to exchange trucks while moving it. Another big issue would be also importing, years ago we added to the factory two big robot machines from Italy.

It was quite a big deal carrying these machines into the Palestinian territories where we have to get clearance, they had to check the machineries, make sure that they're only used for stones. Sometimes we need spare parts or one part of the machine gets broken and we need to replace it, we alter it from Italy and it takes a long time for us to be able to receive it. And why once we receive it in Israel it takes even longer to process it to get security clearance to use it. So sometimes like the machine is stuck for quite the long time and I have an order and we can't use it.

Cynthia Dearin: Are we talking weeks? Or are we talking months?

Oriana Nasser: It could be months. Sometimes, it could be months. That's even if we're lucky to receive the parts some car parts that rejected they won't defend. Another

issue like when we first installed it we needed the technicians to come to start these machineries, it was also difficult getting visas for the experts to come and run the machines back first.

- Cynthia Dearin: So how do you find the kind of the patience to deal with those challenges which are not likely to go away anytime soon?
- Oriana Nasser: Well you take it as it comes you have to be really patient because you don't have a plan B or a second option. So we're usually persistent if I need something we keep making phone calls, getting information or the information needed. I think persistence and being patient is the key to solving these problems.
- Cynthia Dearin: So Oriana where to from here, I mean what is next for Jerusalem stone, what is next for you as Oriana Nasser?
- Oriana Nasser: What is next for Jerusalem stone group this year in 2018 will be adding more machines to the factory, in order to be able to produce on a bigger scale, bigger quantities and the second part is where next to me. I have so many ideas especially when I travel from small ideas to big. Definitely, there's going to be something new, I don't know what yet it might be the whole new business that in the stone business. I'm taking couple of years for the kids to be able to go to college. And definitely, there's going to be something for me as Oriana as a person.
- Cynthia Dearin: And if people would like to get in touch with you, and any more about your story or maybe buy some marble or some stone. How should they get in touch with you? What's the best way?
- Oriana Nasser: Through email, through the webpage that we have. They can visit our site at WWGS.PS and hopefully after this interview Australia would be the market for me.
- Cynthia Dearin: Yeah, we had a hard time it definitely hard look. It's been great to have you on the show and it's fantastic to have a female business entrepreneur, doing business in one of the toughest parts of the world on the show demonstrating that it is actually possible even when things are not straightforward. I was just wondering whether you could share with us any final thoughts that you have for women entrepreneurs, who are looking to go global and I might apply to women anywhere, or maybe you have a special message for women in the Middle East who are thinking, "can I really take my business overseas?"
- Oriana Nasser: Actually, I would like to thank you for having me on the show. And it's a real pleasure to know that I'm the first Middle Eastern woman to be hosted on your

show, my message to all women whether in the Middle East or anywhere. Really, pursue your dream, nothing is impossible to achieve and a strong message would be especially for a woman in Palestine and the Middle East. Don't be afraid to try because women here are afraid to not be able to make it.

Not to succeed because everybody's going to be waiting and pointing the fingers to say that she failed, she didn't make it. And so what always think of success but if one business doesn't work, it's not the end of the world try something as another idea. Start really small and then go bigger there's nothing wrong with trying. It's wrong to have all these great ideas to keep them as ideas. Really, pursue your dream take it to the next level and don't be afraid and one step at a time you can make it.

Cynthia Dearin: Oriana it's been fantastic chatting to you today, thank you so much.

Oriana Nasser: Thank you so much for having me, thank you.

Cynthia Dearin: Hi everyone if you're enjoying the business Beyond Borders podcast and you're thinking about expanding your company internationally you might want to check out the International Business Accelerator. Which is something I created to help micro to medium-sized businesses to speed up, and do-risk the process of internationalization.

The international business accelerator or as we like to call it the IBA, is a program built on the three principles of skills and knowledge mentoring and accountability and community. I built it especially for founders and CEOs who want to take their business to the next level and wondering where to start. The program is structured in a way that's simple to follow, it's digital so you can take part from anywhere in the world, it's a lot of fun and our members love it. So if that's you, if you're thinking about going global check it out at International Business Accelerator dot com.