

Interviewee: Alicia Haddad
Interviewers: Kaitlyn Ryczek and Reza Massoudi
Date: April 19, 2024
Location: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Kaitlyn Ryczek and Reza Massoudi



Overseen by: Dr. Cinzia Pica-Smith, Assumption University

Abstract: Alicia Haddad was born on April 17th, 1983, and raised mainly in Barre and Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. She moved to Worcester when she was 19. She attended Assabet Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School, Quinsigamond Community College, and Mass Bay Community College. Upon completion of her education, she worked for a roofing company in New York. Her boss, who was a father figure and mentor, urged her to change careers and follow her passion for providing healthy food to those around her. Following her mentor's advice, Alicia created many healthy foods and sauces. As a first-time vendor at Stormville Flea Market in New York, she completely sold out her product line. Now as the owner of Alicia's Spice Company, she shares the joys and challenges of a woman in business. She also talks about her childhood, the importance of family relationships, and the joy she derives from providing healthy food to those around her. She credits her grandmother, with whom she spent much time as a child, with teaching her how to prepare healthy and nutritious dishes.

KR: My name is Kaitlyn Ryczek.

RM: And I'm Reza Massoudi.

KR: And we're here with Alicia Haddad in Worcester Mass on April 19th 2024. We are completing a citywide oral history of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, we are focusing on the areas of women's health, education, work, politics and community involvement. We want to focus today on your experiences with your work. Thank you for helping us in this important project.

AH: Thank you for having me.

KR: Is it okay if we to record this for our...

AH: Of course. Absolutely.

KR: So, what is your full name, including both maiden name and married name if applicable?

AH: My name is Alicia Haddad.

KR: And when were you born?

AH: April 17th 1983.

KR: Have you ever married?

AH: No, I have not.

RM: So, what cultures and ethnicities do you identify with?

AH: I am Lebanese, and my culture is mainly American with a Middle Eastern twist, ha, ha.

RM: Me too. So, tell me a little bit about your parents.

AH: Well, my mom, she was definitely not the cook in the family. She ... I've spent a lot of time with my grandparents growing up. My father passed when I was seven, so it was a very interesting upbringing. And so, my grandmother and I pretty much did a lot of cooking and baking, canning. We grew all our own vegetables. She taught me pretty much everything that I know now, and I wish she was alive to see the company that I've created. She's kind of at the root where family and love mixed with a passion for bringing allergen friendly products to the market. Because growing up, I had tons of allergies, which I still do. I have a lot more now than then, and so finding foods that I could eat that weren't full of dyes, preservatives, anticaking agents and things like that, it was extremely hard. But back then they didn't know what it was. It was just eat, trial and error, and then try and figure it out. And in school I couldn't really eat anything either because back then nobody really understood the allergies, so...

RM: You just kind of give her whatever and see what happens.

AH: Oh yeah. And a lot of it was, "You don't really have an allergy. Just try and eat this anyways."
“

RM: Right.

KR: Yeah, I'm sure.

AH: Which was interesting to say the least. But my grandmother was very intuitive, and we realized that once I was eating at home, I was fine. We go out to dinner, it was like for days I was lethargic, I didn't feel good, I was breaking out in rashes and whenever we would cook at home, or we would pull something that we had canned, I was completely fine. So, it was kind of kind of an interesting thing.

RM: Would you say that those experiences and what your grandma did for you sort of like pushed you in the direction of creating your own company?

AH: Yes.

RM: And all that came with that?

AH: Absolutely and I love cooking. I love creating fun things and the kitchen was the one place that I could be myself and express myself, whether I was baking something or making a wild concoction for a marinade. She always gave me free range and she taught me how to write things down, so I would know exactly what I making. And it was really awesome. She gave me that confidence to do something different.

RM: That's great.

KR: So, where have you lived during your life?

AH: So, I have lived in Massachusetts and New York. And I worked in New York for several years as the Director of Safety for a large historical and commercial and residential roofing company. And then I came back to Massachusetts. So, I had a house here and I lived there during the week and came home on weekends and yeah. I just--- I love my job, but something was missing.

KR: Yup. So, what was the neighborhood, when you were growing up, generally like?

AH: Well, I grew up and we moved a few times when I was younger, up until fifth grade and so it was it was a free for all. There were farms all around me. I mainly grew up in Barre up until fifth grade, then came back to Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, where my mom and family mostly lived at the time. But growing up with farms all around you and animals and just everything you could imagine was awesome. Like we were outside from the time we got home, all summer long it's like you were outside, you were getting dirty, you were not in front of a T.V. We actually didn't have cable or anything growing up. My mom just didn't believe it in, plus she was a single mother so she couldn't exactly afford it, so we played outside all the time.

RM: That's great. So, when do you sort of arrive to being in Worcester a little bit more?

AH: So, I moved to Worcester when I was, I'd say I think I was like 19 when I moved to Worcester, because I was in Shrewsbury and then I was on June Street for I'd say eight years and then I bought a house, and the rest is kind of...

KR: So, what is your main connection to Worcester now? Is it work, or?

AH: So, my heart has always been Worcester.

KR: Mhm.

AH: My grandfather was Haddad, depending on which country we are in, it was Haddad. But so, my grandfather and my great aunts when they came to this country, they were in Brooklyn, New York for a little while and then they came to Worcester. I think they were in Brooklyn for a few months and it was--- I'm not sure why they were there, but so my grandfather, if you look him up, he was a famous jazz musician and his whole existence was giving back to Worcester and I spent a lot of time, like I said, with my grandparents...

KR: Yeah.

AH: ...on either side growing up. And they were a huge part of raising me and I was always cooking with that side of the family, too, so it's kind of funny because they were on Wall Street and, actually number 10, and so 100 Wall Street was the El Morocco. You don't have to keep touching it. It will keep recording.

KR: I just don't want to mess it up.

AH: Your phone's going to die. You won't mess it up. It will keep recording.

KR: Perfect.

AH: But so, the El Morocco was a famous restaurant and it originated in a three decker. Then it was something special that people from all over the world came and they would dance in the streets till all hours of the night. If you look it up, it's actually pretty cool, the history on it. And so, in the basement is where the mother made all the food. And celebrities from all over the world would come and it was something that police never bothered them. The food was amazing, the entertainment was amazing, and then once they outgrew that space, across the street, 100 Wall Street it's apartments now, but it was this beautiful restaurant. It was one of the fanciest places in all of New England.

KR: Wow.

AH: I spent a lot of time there growing up, every birthday, holiday, Christmas party, everything you could imagine was spent there. And so, I'd run through the kitchen with all the other kids. My grandfather didn't own it, but he played there and my great aunts worked there and so pretty much like extended cousins, not really but, pretty much family by heart and so it was it was just amazing. Like anything my hands could reach and grab and eat, I pretty much ate. So, I think that cross between both sides of my family, just was so supportive in learning how to cook Lebanese cuisine. You know, food is such an important part of our cultures on either side. And just adapting and making it healthier, because middle eastern food isn't always as healthy as we think it is because there are a lot of oils, and fats and butters and things that we use and

obviously too much rice is never that great for your diet, but I just, I try to make everything healthier and substitute certain flavors for vegetables and try and get the textures right. I know I'm just always up for a challenge like that so...

KR: Do you have any current family members that are still living in this area?

AH: I have some cousins, but on the Lebanese side I have one cousin who's like our moms' age.

KR: Mhm.

AH: Well, my mom's age. Her name is Carol and she's amazing. Her mother, my aunt Catherine, was my grandfather's sister, so she would've been my great aunt, but she's since passed on. And then, I have a few cousins. My mom's in Maine.

KR: Oh, that's not that far. Couple hours?

AH: Four and a half hours.

KR: Oh.

AH: Yeah, haha.

KR: So, it sounds like you've like been in this area for some time. So what challenges, do you think the city of Worcester faces and like have you any changes made over time?

AH: I mean without offending anyone.

KR: Mhm.

AH: I think that the city of Worcester is still adapting to how supportive they can be for small business.

KR: Yup.

AH: And I think that we have... It's hard to say that without coming across as ungrateful because I'm grateful that I'm here and I love my city. I just think that you see how many businesses have opened up in the last even five years or gone out of business during Covid or lack the structure and support of the community because you see how many things are going in the Canal District for example. There, there's not enough parking, there's not enough support, there's not enough community backing to actually keep certain businesses running. And I think that that's hard because we throw a lot of money at a business, not mine per se, but certain retail locations and restaurants, but where's the support after that?

KR: Yeah.

AH: And I think that. So, I'm a state, nationally, and federally accredited woman -owned business. And that is not something, not most women- owned businesses go for, state or federal status.

KR: Mhm.

AH: And with that being said, I'm also, from what I've been told from the state, I'm now a sole proprietor (_____???) which is extremely hard to get that status as well...

KR: I'm sure.

AH: ...through the IRS [Internal Revenue Service] and federal. So, with that being said, I'm now a tax-exempt woman- owned manufacturer and there are not many in the state, so.

KR: Oh wow. That's awesome.

AH: I just think that if there were more people that...Like I've done all that stuff on my own. I didn't hire anyone to go in and apply for all these different things, it's just me. But again, if I didn't research it on my own, if I didn't step up, so to speak, and push myself to keep going for the things that I've learned on the way, then I wouldn't even know they exist. And I think there is just a lack of support and rent is so expensive here, land is expensive, we don't have a lot of open land because the city is so congested. I mean I think if the city was able to branch out and more.. You know, whether it's Leicester or Spencer or whatever, kind of broaden their grants or funding for certain communities, it would be--- it would keep a lot more businesses here, but because we are considered---Worcester's like a gateway city. I think that we are lacking because we're limiting, because you think of how many people in Spencer and Leicester are struggling with food insecurity, they are struggling with....Yeah, they might have a farm, but there's so much lower incomes in surrounding areas that we're not including, and they aren't getting the support that they need either. And I just wish that the city would... I know that the city is to support the city, but I just wish that there a way to kind of (???) and encompass other communities that need help as well, because we could bring more jobs to Leicester or Spencer. I'm not just saying those two, but like...

KR: Yup. Definitely.

AH: There's just different areas that I think we could all benefit from. And I just don't want to hurt anyone's feelings either, but I mean it is what it is, and I get off subject so just reel me in.

KR: It's okay.

RM: So, I was going to ask you what would you change, but I'm assuming that...

AH: Yes.

RM: would be something, so I wanted to ask how do you think they like would go about that, or if you've seen any sort of like improvement in that like area recently?

AH: No improvement. None. No improvement I think that...

KR: Not good.

AH: No, it's not and I still think that even a couple weeks ago...It's like look at how many restaurants you're seeing close and then look at how many new restaurants are going in. It's like, okay if it's not worked for the previous three people and we're still going to keep--- there's still not enough parking. I used to go to Unrivaled Training, which is on Water Street. I loved it, but there's no parking. So, it's like you go down to the Canal District, there's no parking, like it's game day, forget it. You can't even workout at the gym you love. And I mean that's only me working out for one hour a day. Imagine how many restaurant owners and businesses they're missing out on a great opportunity just because it's like we have a flat parking lot. Put a high rise parking garage, like it's a no brainer to me. I understand that it is going to obstruct certain views, but these businesses need support. Like Maker To Main is an amazing example. When they moved from Main Street down to the Canal District... I know Lynne Cheney, I've known her since she started Lettuce Be Local. And when she started her business, Maker to Main, she was promised all these things by the city. And I know because I sat in on those meetings and became extremely supportive of her journey of farm to table. She would link farmers with restaurants, and she would do all these crazy deliveries to all over the state whether it was milk, cheese, breads, vegetables, meats. And then she opened up Maker to Main. She wasn't eligible for any Covid money, any Covid funding, nothing. And if you went downtown during Covid, it was a ghost town. She somehow made it through. She opened up a new location and I think it was only like six months later she closed. And it was... I, in my heart, like how much money, effort, blood, sweat and tears she's put into it and all she does is give back. She's doing a huge fundraiser right now for farmers and things like that and it's not even going to benefit her.

KR: Mhm.

RM: Yeah, right.

AH: Her passion, she's an amazing person. If you ever want to interview somebody, she's wonderful, she really is. But yeah, so I think that I would change just maybe having more, more of an open mind. And I think that also something that I would change that I've spoken a lot about and is I'm offended, and nothing offends me. There's nothing in the world you could ever say to me, do to me nothing that would offend me, but calling a woman a minority is offensive.

KR: Yeah.

AH: And I just think that your calling a veteran a minority...So, it's just they are a very rare breed when they are opening a business. Yes, a veteran should have their own status above anybody else

KR: Yeah.

AH: They should have a status that's called veteran status, and if they have funding or anything that is available on a state or national or federal level, they should receive that before anyone else, whether you were a man, whether you were a woman, whether you're polka dots, I don't care. It should just be--- they should be at the top right here because they served our country. And then you shouldn't be called a minority.

KR: Yup.

AH: I'm offended every time I have to answer something I have to write that like I'm white, I'm not. I'm Lebanese, I'm Middle Eastern. There's no box for that, so I have to write it in and every time I do see it on a random application, I'm like, "I got a status now," but it's just ---we're not in 1950. I feel as though the more that we keep classifying people, like as a minority in that sense, and we're still dividing everyone, we're still I don't know, you get the point.

RM No, I totally get it. I also, so sort of going off of that, I know you said you feel offended. How do you think experiences are for women, sort of, generally in Worcester?

AH: I know from experience and being at certain events and roundtable meetings for manufacturing that women, when they own a business especially in manufacturing, we're not seen as equal. And, you know, I know I'm not the smartest person in any room by any means, but I've worked hard to get to where I am. And I value the opinions of everyone around me, and I just wish that the older generation of manufacturing, specifically men, and I'm not a sexist person, it's just I've I come from construction, the roofing industry. I have very thick skin, and again I don't--- I'm not offended by anything. And I know that not everybody's going to understand that women should be treated the same. I don't want to be treated any differently, I just don't want to be put down, spoken about like...People always ask me, "Oh who runs your company?" "Who owns your company?" It's happened many times in front of certain senators and in certain instances with the city and I, I have been supported by a lot of people where they're like, "No she owns the company." And I've actually had an older gentleman laugh and say, "No really, what did your dad start the company?" And I'm like, "Nope, I'm the first person in my whole family to start my own business." So, I just think that --- I mean, again we're not in 1940, 1950.

KR: Yeah.

AH: Like women own things, too.

RM: So, you would say... I don't want to categorize everyone, but you'd say like for the most part, experiences aren't super progressive because kind of like, like you said it's not 1950?

AH: Yeah, I mean we have brains, you know. I think because we show emotion differently that we are seen as weak, but I mean I think emotion makes you a good leader. It makes you somebody that you know certain emotions, you have to be empathic to people's styles of learning and how they work. I'm not just going to go in bull in a china closet and be like, 'No, I expect you to...like I expect people to do things, learn them, do them right, but not everybody learns in the same manner. And I've been told because I, I didn't go to business school, so the way that I've learned is self-taught. Would I recommend that for everyone? No. But just because I don't hold a specific degree like the older generation...It's like college, college, college and it does work for some people and I think that's wonderful, but it doesn't work for everyone. I went to a trade school, so building and grounds management is what I know, construction is what I know. But if you look at construction and manufacturing, what you do in construction is the same repetition as manufacturing. It's just you have certain machines that are in place in a manufacturing facility that you have to learn and you have to execute. It's the same thing, it's the same thing as quality control with construction, with manufacturing, you have to make sure that everything is perfect at all times.

KR: Kinda going off of that, so where did you attend school?

AH: I went to Assabet Valley [Assabet Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School] in Marlborough and then I went to Quinsig [Quinsigamond Community College] for two semesters and then I went to Mass Bay Community College.

KR: You said you were in the construction and manufacturing programs? Okay. So, what challenges did you see while doing, pursuing your education?

AH: Well, I went for nursing in college, and I went because that's what everyone wanted me to do in my family. And at that time, I had also... I think that there just was a great deal of pressure to become something that... I just I love making people happy, and I like taking care of people, and I do that through food, but at that time I didn't think that this would ever be a career option for me and...

KR,: So when you first finished up your education, what did you think options were after?

AH: I just went right into construction, I never finished college.

KR: Oh, okay.

AH: It just wasn't, it just wasn't something I enjoyed... (laughs) I don't want to be like, "I hated school," but I didn't --- I just ---I went through a lot of transition... [Did not want next part included]

RM: As you enter construction and working, I know you said like your family, but was there anyone, was there anyone else maybe that you felt was like a mentor to you?

AH: Oh, my grandfather, Kevin, absolutely my grandfather. He was a Shrewsbury police officer his whole life, but before his police officer career, he always was like a handy man on the side. So, he taught me how to tile, he taught me how to how to take care of myself. I could change a tire, I could--- there wasn't anything he didn't teach me whether it was construction wise...Like we were on the roof one day because like this shingle blew up and you're going to learn how to just patch it. I'm like, "Oh God." So, it's just that he taught me how to paint, he taught me how to at a young age. I was always his little shadow, both my grandparents. So, my dad's side you could find me in a restaurant or a bar...(laughs) or my grandpa was teaching me how to so, but yeah, my grandpa he taught me all the fun things. And then my old boss from New York, his name is Mike. He, he was a powerhouse and actually he was the one that actually pushed me to start my own business.

RM: Oh, wow.

KR: So, what was your first job?

AH: Dunkin Donuts, shoutout to Dunkin brands... (laughter).

KR: And, what are some other jobs you had after that, and you can like talk a little about your company now?

AH: So, I worked in the pizza shop for years and then I worked for Fidelity Investments and then construction. Well, I waited in restaurants but...

KR: Just little side jobs?

AH: Yeah, I always had. But yeah no, I think waitressing, I always had at least two jobs, so...

RM: So what's like the back story of the whole... I'm interested in the company and about that.

AH: Okay, so, I was working in New York for the roofing company, and what we did was historical buildings. It was like our specialty

KR: Mhm.

AH: Like you know how there's a lot of homes here and they have the slate and clay shingles, so we did historical restorations which meant... Say there was a storm, and a bunch of slate pieces were broken from a tree.

KR: Mhm.

AH: What my old boss...he was actually a farmer, so we had so much in common. Him and his wife were just amazing. I loved them, they're like second parents. But anyways, so he---the Maryknoll properties...You've heard of the Rockefeller properties in New York?

KR: Yeah.

AH: Those were all the accounts that we had, and they still have those accounts. So basically, you take each piece of clay or slate, like tile, or roofing shingle, so to speak, of. You number it, and you put it in a crate, and so when you get to the broken ones, then you have to match them, the color, the pieces, the shape, the width, the thickness, everything. So, we would do that, but I was the director of safety for the whole company, each division. I was the head person, there were people under me, I loved my job, but I was always cooking for everyone. I didn't like how my old boss and his wife ate because, everything that they had there they were like, "Oh we made it homemade," but looking at it, like there a lot of fat in that.

KR, RM, AH: (laughter)

AH: I'm like "You shouldn't be eating that." I was always making soups and healthy things for them. And so, it was one day, he called me in and he's like, "You know honey, you're just like, I know you're really happy but, something's missing. You're not fulfilled." He's like, "I know you love your job." And I was like, "Are you trying to get rid of me?" And he was like, "No, I wish you'd stay here forever, but I want you to be happy." (laughter). So, I was working on a remediation project for one of his properties, it was like a side project for me. And we were trying to get ready to sell a few of his properties to fund some certain machines that he wanted to buy outright. And I met the owner of maple Farm who owned an environmental company, and him and his wife owned. Their retirement plan was the maple farm in upstate New York. And so, I became friends with them, and it was nice because we all would talk about food. We'd talk about soil, and page levels, and certain climates and like how to grow things, and we were always making crazy recipes. So, they kept saying, "Will you make me some maple barbeque sauce, or will you make some maple products?" And so, I kept saying no, and then one day I went up to the maple farm and I made a maple barbeque sauce, a maple apple sauce, and a honey maple jalapeño spread, and that's how it started. Three different sauces, and Stormville Flea Market in New York was my very first event I ever did. Which is kind of funny because I couldn't to afford to get a hotel around there, because they were too expensive. So, I slept in the back of my jeep. So, I sold out in the first weekend.

KR: Wow.

AH: So, and that's how it all started.

KR: So, what does this work mean to you now?

AH: Absolutely everything. I know people say they should have identity outside of what they do, but I don't. I love what I do because my whole life is cooking, it's like the gateway to someone's heart. You know if you can, if you can make a product or a dish or something and you can make it healthy, full of flavor, and allergen friendly because my facilities are also nut free, soy free, and dairy free. Not only is it gluten free, kosher, keto, vegan, it's safe from every major allergen. So, I think that that's important because growing up I didn't have that, so it's like I feel like this is an extension of my heart and the vibrancy of what I do. I just love it. (laughs)

RM: So, like looking more to like the business side, how do you balance sort of like the responsibilities and like sort of everything that goes into that because I know it's probably like a ton?

AH: It is extremely hard to learn that work-play balance and I think it was almost, it was seven years before I took my first vacation.

KR: Wow. That's a long time.

AH: It was, but I think that when you are so immersed in something, and I wish I learned sooner that better balance, and I'm trying to be better at it. But it doesn't feel like work when I'm there. It doesn't feel like work when I'm doing it. It doesn't drain me, it doesn't deplete me. Like for some people it's a lot for them. But I mean I like to learn every aspect of something before I hand it off to someone else. Because if I can't do it and I can't manage it and I can't oversee it and understand it, then I feel like that's where trouble comes into play for certain businesses. If you don't understand something and you just give it to an accountant or whomever, I think that's where sometimes you give all your trust to somebody, but you can't go in and check something. So, you know, especially with machinery where it's anywhere from tens of thousands of dollars to hundreds of thousands or millions, depending on what you have for equipment. You need to know how to trouble shoot, you need to know how it works because if somebody is out or if somebody touches something, you need to know in the middle of manufacturing how to go in, how to code it, how to fix it, what wrenches to use. You need to know how to fix these things.

KR: Yeah.

AH: And I think that that part of it is extremely important just to know. You don't need to be great at everything, you just need to understand it and you need to know the processes, because if somebody comes to you and they say, "Why are we doing it this way," you can hand them the handbook and what you've created for the s.o.p. [standard operating procedure] and you can just say to them, "Okay this is why we do it this way." And I think training is a big part of that, too.

So, if the owner doesn't understand it, or at least back when they started the company, understand it, you know as things get bigger, you have people in charge. You know you have multiple layers of people that are in charge that are going to handle it, but the owner needs to understand things.

KR: Definitely.

RM: So, do you think that there's --- how do I ask this? Give me some like pros and cons, what would be like, some examples in your like your business aspect?

AH: In what area? What do you mean by that?

RM: Just like overall, like say you're running a business, like that decision you made and how your lifestyle is now. How would you say, like what parts do you love about it and what parts are like not my favorite or something like that?

AH: I have to say I love the life I've created. It's been a challenge because I think that because I'm doing something different, because of the certifications that I have, gluten and nut free, gluten, kosher, keto, vegan, the woman- owned and then also being nut free, soy free, dairy free. If you try and find another facility that is all of those things, it's extremely hard which is why I'm manufacturing them myself. I wish that there was more understanding from banks and institutions for what I do. You know, I sold my house to fund this business. I hold 100% of the company myself, still almost almost nine years later. And I'm in Whole Foods now, branching out of New England at the moment into other regions. Also onboarding with Hannaford and in the midst of also trying to find a different space, but trying to do all these things as one person is extremely hard.

KR: Yeah.

AH: So, I think that the pros is providing something that no one else is doing, that I know is healthy and safe. Say you have, if you have celiac or you're anaphylactic with nuts or soy or certain things, I can go to, for example Holy Cross [College of the Holy Cross] has, they have, from what I've been told, I haven't seen it, that they have a sperate dining area. I know UMass [University of Massachusetts] does have one because I've seen it, for people that have celiac and gluten intolerance. And I think that that is something that every school should have.

KR: Yeah.

AH: Whether it's an elementary school or whether it's a college, every educational institution--- people should be able to send their kids to school and know that they are safe. And I feel like it's hard because think of how much we have a snack in the classroom or in- between classes. I mean I'm not saying they should ban nuts because I love them. It's just you want to be able to have faith that when your kid goes to school, that they're safe.

KR: Yup.

AH: And if I can provide a product, for the taco seasoning or even the barbecue sauce rub, they can use it to season chicken. But at least they know it's a low sodium or no sodium and it's low in sugar or no sugar and it's all of the things that's on the packaging.

KR: Do you have any regrets?

AH: Workwise?

KR: Yeah.

AH: I think that in the beginning I wish I reached out and asked for more help. I think that I was.... I just didn't know what avenues I could to go and ask and now I have some great mentors in the industry, so I just wish I met them sooner

KR: Yeah.

AH: But I think not having the business background kind of put me behind more then somebody who would've understood all the structures of business in the beginning.

KR: Okay.

RM: I'm trying to think of something to ask.

AH: Well, I have a question for both of you.

KR: Yes.

RM: Okay.

AH: So how does this tie into the history portion of... I understand the history of me and my business, and all the accomplishments and accreditations and things that have happened over the last few years. Because I feel like there's a lot more to the business that it...I can send you articles and links so you kind of understand what that portion of it is, but we could sit here for two weeks and there's no way I could ever describe all of the things that go into it.

RM: Well, I mean, I think for me it's just like... I'm, I'm a Health Sciences major, so like going into a PT [Physical Therapy] track, so I don't know really have like too big of a guage on like a ton that's going into the business side...

AH: Okay.

RM: Like a lot of things, so for me I would say, it sort of, it's like giving me an understanding of...

AH: Okay.

RM: Sort of everything as a whole and like what really goes into you starting your own business, doing everything on your own

AH: Well, I'm a terrible interviewer, interviewee, like I'm like lalalala.

RM: No worries.

AH: Oh, it's awful. But I think, I think that part of it is just, what makes my brain tick is you look at how many preservatives, dyes, anticaking agents are in food. Kids are off the wall in school.

KR, RM: Yeah

AH: And it's not their fault. Look how much shit we feed them. Like I just think that if you go back to like the '60s, we didn't have all the stuff we have today. Look at other countries, like Sweden. They're so healthy, like certain parts of Germany, they're so healthy. Like there are just so many other countries that are just --- they live so long. Look at Tibet, for example. They barely have any processed foods at all, it's not something that because they're an older ancient culture, but look they live till they're 120. So, if they're doing something right, their farming, they don't have or look at social media. Look at how much stuff we see on social media for food that's not good for you. Or these Tik Tok videos where everything is just like... look at the lady [with] syrup and pancake, cookies, bacon this cheese whatever and it's like that's a heart attack in one bite. Like this is what the younger generation is gearing towards. I'm not saying Tik Tok's bad or anything. I'm saying until you understand what goes into that from a diet perspective and preservatives nobody knows, and I think big pharma... I don't know how you feel about Covid and vaccines and things like that, but this is personal for me because I got the vaccine. I was the only person in my family that was to not get the vaccine and we decided I was not getting it, both sides of my family and my mom got sick in 2022 and in February I went to go see her at Maine Medical, they wouldn't let me in because I didn't have a vax card.

KR: Wow.

AH: Yeah. So, by the time I drove back to Mass., I had made an appointment to get the shot. The next day I was in the ICU for 11 days, one shot, and I have been sick ever since.

KR: Wow.

AH: On and off very badly sick. So, it's like people's bodies can't handle it, but I was the epitome (??) of health. I was in the gym six, seven days a week, it was my brain stimulation. Now I had to learn how to walk, I had to learn how to talk, I had to learn how cognitively do things all over again in the last two years.

KR: Wow.

AH: All while trying to keep my company going, onboard with Whole Foods, service 43 Whole Foods by myself, deliver to them, make the product. It's not something that is just a simple thing. But look at how much money healthcare has made and that big pharma since Covid. I'm not saying it's conspiracy, because I'm not one of those people, but I'm just saying if we look at the foods, look at how many people in the last 20 years have finally realized, okay there is something wrong. Our kids are sick, like elderly people are sick when they eat certain things.

KR: Mhm.

AH: They never really had that before all the processed stuff. Then, you know in the trend of (???) all the way up to Covid years, how much money healthcare was losing from acupuncture, from farming, from people doing their own stuff at home and the healthy foods and all of the holistic and (_____???) herbal remedies was on the rise. So, if you look at foods and what grocers were really selling for food, people are shopping the perimeter. You'll see that people were shopping the perimeter and that's kind of like a broad statement. You look at the vegetables, the hybrid vegetables that are grown in a specific way, but if you go and you're buying something that's locally grown from a farm nine times out of ten, it's much healthier. You know what I mean? So, when Covid hit, it was like the industry way of regaining control and not really control, but making money off of people because look at how sick everyone is now.

RM: Yeah, so I have a couple of things to ask you.

AH: Sorry, you don't need to say all that I just want you to understand where my brain is at.

RM: A couple things off of what you said because that was really interesting. First of all, so completely off topic, but I had a knee surgery in the fall, doesn't matter at all, but I sort of had to switch my diet up, like I wasn't unhealthy, but they were like don't eat outside, don't think, don't that..

AH: Yup. Oh Yeah.

RM: So, I sort of paid more attention to the labels, this and that.

AH: See if I had it, I don't.

RM: Sort of like based off what you're saying, like it's crazy like I was...

AH: Oh, it's ridiculous.

RM: I was looking at the side, and I was like this is insane. I don't even know where to start.

AH: Or like so when everybody says to me like, "Oh, you can make a vegan-like mushroom soup mix.

RM: Right.

AH: So, I ordered mushroom bullion, so to speak, from this company and the list of ingredients was like this on the back. It was, and it looked like, I don't want to say meth [methamphetamines], because I've never seen what meth looks like, but it was just all crystals, like crystalized like salt, but it had no weight to it.

KR: Wow.

AH: It was just white crystals, and it was this container, about this big and I was like, "What is this?"

RM: Right.

AH: So, it's like why would we gravitate towards something like that and all these preservatives and bone chare, like you're not supposed to eat it because it doesn't help your recovery. If anything, it makes you more inflamed, your joints, your everything and then your joints can't repair properly and your ligaments and your everything and it will make them stretch out more because you can't properly repair them.

RM: Right.

AH: And no one gets that.

RM: That's exactly what I was thinking because my surgeon was like just low sodium, don't. And I'm looking and I'm like, "What doesn't this haven't in it? Like every single thing."

AH: Yup. And that's why the energy drinks, when you're working out you need some sodium, I will say that, you need some sea salt, you need certain things in your diet, certain electrolytes. But if you read certain drinks, they're not healthy at all, they are probably some of the worst things that you could possibly have. Look at look at the ingredients in Gatorade.

RM: Yeah, I know.

AH: I'm not knocking Gatorade, but I'm just saying like it's, it's wild that this is what we've been...

RM: It's a lot more than electrolytes.

AH: Yeah, back in the day, it was like, "Here's a water and dump some salt in it and here's a squeeze of a lime or lemon."

RM: Yeah, I think I mean that's a lot of sort of health protein bars this- that companies --- because I work at a smoothie bar in a gym.

AH: Okay.

RM: And I'll be looking at Gatorade, for example, not that they're bad, but I'll be looking at like the protein bars, and it's like, "Oh my God 30 grams of protein, so good" And you flip it over and it's like 50.

AH: (___???)

RM: It's like 50 grams of added sugar.

AH: Oh yeah.

RM: And I'm like this is insane. [laughs]

AH: Oh yeah. Or there's now a protein drink that is like you put it in water

RM: Yeah.

AH: and it's not creamy. Look at the ingredients.

RM: It's like the juice one?

AH: Oh my God because I'm like I really, I really I could use this. And then I'm like, "Oh no, I can't."

RM: My friend has one of those, I know exactly what you're talking about.

AH: It's crazy or what is that other one? Liquid IV.

KR: Oh yeah.

AH: I drank it three times within like a two-day span, I was in the hospital.

KR: Wow.

AH: It's just crazy, you're like this is so boring. No, I'm kidding.

KR: No, no.

KR: Going back to like Covid, how did that affect your business?

AH: It was --- you learn to adapt very quickly.

KR: Yeah.

AH: I was making gift baskets and doing no contact deliveries to people's doorsteps. I was bringing joy to people which made me happy, but I was selling. I remember sitting on the floor of my facility and just crying and being like I don't even know what to do and then I looked up and I have thousands of pounds of spices here. And then I went online and I'm looking, everything was sold out on Amazon, everything was sold out at Whole Foods, everything was sold out at Shaw's, so I started packaging in tamper resistant containers of spices.

KR: Wow.

AH: And that actually did get me through. I was delivering them to food hubs and stores and people were ordering them. I was doing home deliveries and I mean I worked right through the pandemic. I mean I wasn't making any money at all. I still really haven't taken a paycheck from my business. It's all been.... Just so you know, I sold my house to fund certain things and I mean now there's no funding. But it's just you learn very quickly, just whatever you can do to make money, bring it in the door.

KR: Mhm.

AH: And just stay afloat. And I feel bad because there were lots of businesses that went out of business during Covid and they're friends of mine and now it's like they... I don't want to say they won't even look at you in passing, but they know they owe you money. Shit happens, right. Your business, your business goes under. I get it did. It hurt my business that you owe me thousands of dollars, yes, but I'm not going to hold that against you personally because that was something we could have never imagined or planned for.

RM: That's really interesting, sorry to cut you off, but do you like... I don't want to say like ask if that's something you regularly do, but do you find that important to sort of, because I know a lot of people in business or business owners it's very clean, cut and dry about the business, like if it doesn't help the business, I'm not going to do it.

AH: Yup.

RM: But do you find that that important to you that you would do something like that to help out?

AH: I have always been somebody that wants to help out. And I think that for me that was also a learning curve too, the empathetic side of me. If there's a children's program, but I learned over the years how to say no and learn what's going to benefit, what's where my time is best spent and I know that I had to cut back on a lot of different things and especially during Covid, learning that you can't always help everybody. Everyone's always going to have an opinion of why you should do something, donate something, bring your time or teach them how to start their own company. And it's like over the years you got to learn what's going to benefit and propel you. And you also have to learn what trade shows you try. If it's not going to work, it's okay to be like, "No, I'm sorry that's not a good fit for my company." Or like I think branding's really important, too, as you have to learn that.... I try to go with certain companies that were local, but you have to have a thick skin and be like, "No that is not the direction I want to take the company in, you're not understanding my vision, you're not hearing me, you're not listening." And then you just finally give a couple tries, but then just say enough is enough. And then you just stop your contact because if it's not going to benefit you and help you grow and help you get more exposure, it's not all about the money

KR: Yeah.

AH: Like not for me anyway, maybe other companies yes, it's the bottom line. But mine is more getting to reach more people so they understand what I do, why I do it, and educate them on food and, hopefully, they'll see that the product is great. And sampling is extremely important, but I can't send free stuff to everyone. I just can't. It's just ...I'm not, I'm not Kraft, they don't do it either. But it's just, you just have to learn to say no and so it's hard to when they're your friends. But then you have to have that conversation, business is business and I'll do what I can when I can. But if I say no, don't keep asking me. And that's hard because we're a tight-knit... Worcester is like all of the entrepreneurs in Worcester and Massachusetts, we are a tight-knit group. If people are out there and there're not supportive of what you do, at least like, "Hey, congratulations."

RM: Yeah.

AH: They might not like every post. I am not on social media enough to have the bandwidth to like everything, but if I see something, I'll text somebody and be like, "I'm so proud of you," because that's important, the positive reinforcement. And knowing that now, wish I knew eight,

nine years ago, but now that you could be like, “Hey I have this idea, you know can we talk for five minutes?”

KR: Mhm.

AH: You know five to ten minutes is a lot of time for somebody that runs a company to even like...

RM: Right.

AH: So, some people have five to ten minutes or eight minutes or whatever, and it's like you get anxiety thinking that you, because you know it's going to run over.

RM, KR: Mhm.

AH: Every time so yeah, I don't know I got off subject. I do that.

KR: Based on your life experience, what advice would you give to women of today and future generations?

AH: Don't listen to anyone who tells you no. If you have a great product, you whether... if it's a service or product or something you have created, you have an idea, a patent, you want and you know that it's going to make a difference, just go for it. Find a way to make it happen, because you are going to be told no a million times and you might not always have people in the room that support you and that's okay. Find a way to make it happen.

RM: So do you think like sort of building off of that, what kind of mindset would you have to have, what kind of thoughts to keep you through sort of if someone kept saying no to you or it's a little difficult or...

AH: It's funny you say that. So, I was with Martha Stewart about a month ago, and it was the brunch with Martha and friends and I asked her a very similar question, because I know what my why is. You have to have the wherewithal and the confidence and you have to know in your core that you are setting out to do something or provide something that's different. And it's funny because I've always looked up to her and emulated her, Oprah, too, she's amazing, two women who have been totally opposite ends of the spectrum and told no their whole life. And look at where they both are now, look at the grit, the persistence, they didn't give up. And I think that what you go through in life makes you stronger. And if you learn how to take every negative and positive experience, and pull the good from it, whether it be a death, whether it be somebody turns you down... I've gone to more bank meetings and they've been like like, “No.” They just

don't get it, so I'm alright. I'll find a way. Whether it's working on a weekend, or painting a house, or building cabinets, like I'm not afraid. During Covid I also shoveled driveways. I was doing anything to make sure that the bills were paid to make sure that I could get through personally because I couldn't take from the business because there's really not much coming in. So, you adjust, people should understand that not everyone will support you. You might not have one person outside of your immediate family saying you can do this, doesn't mean that your idea's bad. Somebody might be trying to steal your idea, they might be trying to copy what you're doing, they might be trying to break you down, so you don't do it. It doesn't mean that you can't do it, just use it as fuel, yeah.

RM: That's good.

AH: And let me tell you I'm not as strong as you think. I cry. I sit on the floor of my facility, and I look around and I'm like, "Wow, I did this." But like there are moments where the pressure is just immense, but you get your 10 minutes of losing your mind and trying to not let anyone see or hear it and then you just pick yourself up and you go, "Okay I had my minute. I'm done, I can do this." Just don't be afraid to feel that emotion, too, because whether you're a man or a woman, you're going to go through it and business is hard. There are going to be days where you're completely alone, like Richard Branson, for example. He's dyslexic, but he's still... and he had no support in the beginning, before he met his wife. He had no one and he built Virgin [Airlines], he built all those enterprises. The same thing, look at Bill Gates, same thing he had no one.

KR: Mhm.

AH: And I think, too, a lot of it comes down to finding the right partner. When you do and when you stop focusing on a lot of people to fill a void, that's helpful. But until that comes, if you focus on yourself being that one person, because for me it's just me.

RM: Right.

AH: So, I think that knowing that I can count on me at the end of the day, I can, knowing that I am going to be okay because I'm taking care of myself. I'm not saying that I'll never marry, it's just a lot of people think that they can do it on their own, but it always is helpful when you have a really good, strong support at the end of the day, when you come home and you don't want to talk to anybody, but you just want somebody to give you a hug and be like, "You're doing great."

KR: Mhm

AH: It does make all the difference and that's something that all these successful people say and believe it or not, Martha has support. She's got two or three people around her that are like her immediate, you know, core people that she can actually do that with.

KR: Yeah.

AH: She's amazing, by the way.

RM: So, you said you have times where you're sitting or you're like, "I did all this." So, what is or what I would say what is or what was that sort of definition of success or like I finally did it?

AH: Oh, I still haven't had that moment, I just look around and I'm like, "Okay. Well, I started from nothing."

KR: Mhm.

AH: You know, I'm never going to think I'm successful, it doesn't matter what level I get to in life. I just I won't, there's always going to be room for improvement, self-improvement, work improvement, expansion of different products, different avenues, different accounts, different teachings, different children's programs. It's never, if you think, "Oh, I'm successful," then there's something wrong with you because there's always room to improve.

KR: Yeah, so before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to include?

AH: No, but you've got to go to work.

RM: No worries.

AH: You were supposed to be there at what time?

RM: We'll get there eventually.

AH: I don't know, like what?

KR: Anything, just anything else you want to tell us.

AH: I just think it's important that the younger generation understands if you have an idea, you have a vision, you have a vision board, you can manifest anything.

KR: Mhm.

AH: You know, you can come from alcoholic parents, drug addicts, you can come from an underserved community, you can come from a rich family, it doesn't matter. A rich family, you might not have any support, just like someone who has nothing

KR: Mhm.

AH: It doesn't matter who you are or what you come from, if you believe it can happen, it can happen. If you put in the effort, you put in the work, you don't give up like every day... You know your reputation, you can't fail if you're doing that, you can't fail if you just keep pushing forward.

KR: Yeah, well thank you for...

AH: Well, you can fail, but you just... and it's okay to fail there are people that fail every day. And I think that's part of growth, too. I'm not saying that you can't fail. I'm just saying your chances are so much less of failing if you just keep going so...

KR: Thank you.

AH: You're welcome

RM: Thank you so much.