

Hakeem.

Creating an Inspiring Business to Help Others Facing Mental Illness

Hakeem Kareem Al-Zayyidi, age 33, from Victoria, British Columbia, did not expect that the world would shut down in same the year he would graduate with a Degree in Business from Royal Roads University in 2020, after using a \$2,000 scholarship from the B.C. Schizophrenia Society's Yes2Me he was awarded in 2019. Due to the pandemic, Hakeem faced the hurdle of not only losing his job and then being unable to find work, but had the added challenges of managing a mental illness at the same time. He wanted to start his own business, and after discovering Make A Change Canada in 2020, was able to fill his purpose of inspiring others living with mental illness.

"Louise helped me with my business plan. It took me about eight months to develop," explains Hakeem. "Although I have my business degree, I know I have weaknesses and I know I have limitations. I know my strengths and I know I'm not very good at developing plans on my own, so I thought it was better to have someone guide me."

Louise Doyle was Hakeem's Business Advisor with Make A Change Canada's Tech Diversity Online Program from January 2021 until March of 2022. Even though Hakeem had his B.A. in Business, and had also earned a Diploma in Business Marketing Options from Camosun



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College in 2017, he still needed supports in identifying his strengths and to help him create a solid business plan.

"Louise helped me to not focus on all mental health illnesses, but to focus on the illness I identify with, which is schizophrenia. I identified in my business plan that I wanted to get a job with mental illness—to work with people with mental illness—and also to get experience as a person and as a motivational speaker with those components," adds Hakeem.



Hakeem was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his early 20's, and he maintains that his struggles with this illness have taught him that hope is hard work.

"I'm happy I did, because I came up with a solid business plan. I still struggle with the financials. My area is marketing and I'm really good at the marketing. I'm terrible at the processes and flows of things, or structuring," says Hakeem.

Hakeem is a Motivational Speaker, Owner/ Operator of [Hakeem Inspires \(Hakeem Al-Zayyidi Enterprises & Associates\)](#), which was launched in November 2021. He explains that the logo's "black and white hands" represent the different shades of colour of white and black and also that of diversity and inclusion. Hakeem has had a life journey filled with challenges including the loss of his twin brother, Kareem, who also lived with schizophrenia.

Hakeem describes his presentations and thoughtful insights as "bringing a dynamic edge for his audiences, and based on basketball as a metaphor for life."

"Right now, for my business, myself as a

motivational speaker and a person, I reflect on who I am as a person," explains Hakeem. "Before, for some reason, I was a bit too arrogant, selfish and self-centered. So that changed. Hakeem—in my faith Islam Arabic—means wise and intelligent. And [this description] challenges that of my identical twin's name of Kareem, which means honourable, generous and kind. Right now, I'm challenging that," says Hakeem in describing how he examines his behaviours, thoughts, and actions towards his own personal growth and spiritual journey. This growth is part of Hakeem's desire to become a servant leader that he defines as, "concerned with investing in others and helping others in the community."

Hakeem reiterates a key concept in his speeches as, "when 'I' is replaced by 'we' even mental illness becomes mental wellness."

Hakeem gave a heartfelt testimonial of empowerment for people with schizophrenia and their families in BC in an article for Innovative Medicines Canada titled Hope is Hard Work. He has also participated in Udamma fashion shows that promote community and cultural diversity, including Nigeria Independence Day 2019, and summer 2020, Yanga: A Pop-Up Afrocentric Fashion Show. Hakeem has since started designing his own inspirational t-shirts.

"I created a t-shirt called 'You Inspire' that I use in my presentations," says Hakeem. Partnered with Mynd Management, Hakeem hopes to continue with his clothing line.

After giving a speech as a member of Connections Place in Victoria in November of 2021, Hakeem was hired by the organization as a marketing staff and program educator. He recognizes that this opportunity allows him to positively impact others living with mental illness. Hakeem hopes to help other members share their story as part of a public speaking group as well as to educate about mental wellness and recovery, and reduce stigma.

“I have big dreams of speaking to NBA teams one day when my speaking skills improve. I’ve truly come a long way from an I.Q. of 74 when I was first diagnosed with schizophrenia,” adds Hakeem. He adds that sports teams such as “the NBA, NBA G league, basketball camps, college and university teams, sports teams and athletes are not immune to mental illness.”

On the local front, doors continue to open for Hakeem. He was recently offered two jobs, one as the main speaker trainer for Nanaimo Disability Program with Toastmasters, and the other as an advisor for another mental health organization. He says he will not be taking either as he has other plans for his future.

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Something close to Hakeem’s heart is the desire to develop a program in Victoria, British Columbia, aimed towards helping others in Islam with mental illness. He has converted to Islam and wants to make an impact for those in the quest for diversity and social acceptance.

“In my faith it’s very taboo and frowned upon, they don’t talk about mental health, never mind mental illness,” says Hakeem. “I was the first person to actually speak out locally about schizophrenia at the Islamic Centre. The faith leader, which is the Imam, allowed me to speak and represent what it’s like to have schizophrenia and I felt empowered to be able to open up other people’s minds.”

Hakeem says that he is connected with other local friends and brothers and they’ve been investigating how they may be able to start a nonprofit organization or program to help those with mental illness in Victoria and throughout B.C. and Canada.

“It’s [mental illness] absolutely frowned upon and not talked about enough,” maintains Hakeem. “I hope to talk to other mosques and Islamic centres including speaking again at the Muslim Youth of Victoria.”

Hakeem tells others with mental health issues or disabilities that Make A Change Canada is a great option if they are looking for employability services, coaching, mentoring, and future employment options. He describes the supports as “. . . meeting you where you’re at, working with your abilities and helping you identify your strengths, and weaknesses.” Hakeem adds that his experience was “easy going, no pressure, and they really work with you.”

When asked if he has any regrets, Hakeem says that he wishes the Career Services Program lasted longer so he could have gleaned more time with his business advisor. After his file closed in March of 2022, he found himself in the throes of public speaking and feels he would continue to benefit from the supports he had been receiving earlier.

Hakeem continues to inspire others, and closes with “it might be scary to try something new but they [Make A Change Canada] really make it easy for you and work with you . . . regardless of your level of cognitive ability and depending on the type of work you want.”

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