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**Transnational Entrepreneurship: A Interview with  
Lebanese-American Restaurateur Charbel Saliba**

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**Abstract.** Literature on transnational entrepreneurship, while expanding, leaves much to be desired. For instance, there is paucity of qualitative surveys that capture the “voice” of a real life transnational entrepreneur. This article aims to contribute to the academic and business literature by showcasing the viewpoint of a Lebanese-American transnational entrepreneur. Charbel Saliba is a successful ethnic restaurant owner in Illinois, USA. Through an interview conducted by Dr. J. Mark Munoz of Millikin University, with the assistance of business student Matthew Herek, Saliba shares his thinking on transnational entrepreneurship and its implications on his business..

**Keywords.** Transnational entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship, International business.

**JEL.** L26, M16.

**Introduction**

Globalization has spurred immigration worldwide. There are about 214 million international migrants globally (International Business Leaders Forum, 2010). Immigrants constitute approximately 10% of people living in developed nations (Riddle, 2008).

While a significant number of immigrants become gainfully employed, many leverage their talent, skills and resources to start enterprises. These entrepreneurs, known as transnational entrepreneurs are migrants with business relationships with their country of origin, adopted country and communities (Drori, Benson & Wright, 2009).

Transnational entrepreneurship focuses on the international terrain where opportunity for cross-border entrepreneurial activities exist (Portes, Haller & Guarnizo, 2002).

Many immigrant entrepreneurs engage in transnational business pursuits (Chen & Tan, 2008) and contribute to the economic well-being of their adopted country. Migrants fill labor shortages, enhance competitiveness, provide economic stimulus, create new businesses, and facilitate skills and knowledge transfers (International Business Leaders Forum, 2010).

In the United States, transnational entrepreneurs come from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and impact communities in profound ways. For example, about 60% of immigrant entrepreneurs of Hispanic origin are classified as transnational entrepreneurs (Portes, Haller, & Guarnizo, 2002) and stimulate business activities across borders. Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley have been actively engaged in setting up subsidiaries, joint ventures and

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other business initiatives in their country of origin (Saxenian, Mtoyama, & Quan, 2002).

There are variations in the way transnational entrepreneurs carry out their business activities. Landolt et al (1999) identified four common types of immigrant ventures: circuit (cross-country transfer of goods), cultural (built on immigrant desire to purchase cultural products), ethnic (retail firms directed at migrant communities), and return-migrant (built by returnees through a strong overseas connection).

While there has been an expansion on the practice and growing research interest on the topic of transnational entrepreneurship, there are limited qualitative studies that provide a candid viewpoint of a transnational entrepreneur. Highlights of an actual conversation on the subject remain a gap in academic literature.

In order to shed light on the contemporary thinking of a real-life transnational entrepreneur, Dr. J. Mark Munoz of Millikin University and business student Matthew Herek interviewed Charbel Saliba, an ethnic restaurant owner in Illinois, USA. Saliba is originally from Lebanon and migrated to the USA to start a restaurant.

The interview transcript and conversation is shown below.

### Start of Interview

1. J. Mark Munoz (J.M.M.): Can you provide an overview of your family history. For example, was there an entrepreneur in your family? Did your family history influence your decision to start a business?

*Charbel Saliba (C.S.): My father had been in the restaurant business for 55 years. I started helping out in the restaurant business at the age of 7 or 8. I learned the trade and appreciated the business early. My father was an inspiration to me and paved the way for me to engage in business as well.*

2. J.M.M.: What was your educational background? Do you have specific views on formal versus informal education? What are your views on transnational entrepreneurship ?

*C.S.: I have a Master's degree in Computer Science. My brother, Said who is co-owner of the restaurant has a business degree. Formal and informal education are both relevant to business. While education is valuable in the practice of transnational entrepreneurship, experience is the key. One simply gets better with practice and over time. And, with experience comes competency and the creation of a competitive advantages that leads to business success.*

3. J.M.M.: Everyone has at least one role model, someone they aspire to be like. Do you have one that is an entrepreneur? How did they influence your decision to start a business?

*C.S.: My dad is my role model. He put a lot of time and work in business and made many good business judgments. He was able to make a success of himself despite having limited education. Having seen him succeed, inspired me to follow his footsteps.*

4. J.M.M.: Starting a new business isn't something people take lightly. Why did you start yours? What steps did you take to start the business?

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*C.S.: My brother started the business, and I jumped in. Since, my dad had been in a restaurant business, it was convenient for us to start one. Having had prior skills and experience was extremely helpful. We started small, got a license, then moved on to bigger things. We built the business gradually and strategically.*

5. J.M.M.: What challenges did you face when building your business, and how did you overcome them? Did you come across any unique circumstances as a result of your race?

*C.S.: Since we spoke English, language was not much of an issue. The operating environment is a relevant factor. In America, everyone has been so helpful and supportive. It was fairly easy for us to thrive. The challenges we faced were : time, trying to stay patient, adjusting to the climate, and dealing with landlords among others. While the challenges were sometimes daunting, we persevered and managed to overcome them.*

6. J.M.M.: What types of support were most helpful to you when you were building your business? For example, did your local community play a role in shaping your business interests and development, or maybe it was a mentor? What or who was that one thing that made you believe, "Yes, I can do this!"

*C.S.: Mentors were helpful to me. Uncles who were in the States since the 1960's gave us excellent advice as we were starting and building the business. The local community provided amazing support as well. Since we were offering an alternative and unique type of culinary option, they patronized our restaurant. There was a brief period when we had to shut down as we moved to a new location. We feared we may lose some customers and have to rebuild. It turned out that our fears were unfounded. When we resumed operations, we had an even higher level of patronage. Our customers stuck with us and continued to provide us with all the support we needed. At that point in time, we gained confidence and started to really believe this venture would work.*

7. J.M.M.: What do you think are the essential skills needed for transnational entrepreneurs to succeed in America? Also, what personal attitudes do you think are essential?

*C.S.: The key considerations are language, education, and the cultivation of creativity. One must have the ability to assimilate in the new environment. One must be open minded and sociable. It is important to be able to readapt and reinvent oneself from a third world to a first world environment. Skills and attitudes have to be modified. One must be ready to change, but not lose sight of his or her roots.*

8. J.M.M.: If you had the chance to start over again, would you do anything differently? More to the point, if you would, what's the reason?

*C.S.: I would consider business location very carefully. It would impact your ability to grow and be profitable. I would leverage technology more. I'd keep up with the latest technology to enhance business, strengthen advertising, and find ways to customize and personalize relationships with customers. These initiatives would hasten business growth and ensure sustainability of transnational enterprises.*

9. J.M.M.: How would you characterize the state of transnational entrepreneurship in the USA? For instance, is it in the early stages, is

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it growing, or is it mature? Do you think it is open to all, or limited to certain individuals? Is it viable from anywhere in the country, or more favorable in certain states?

*C.S.: While the term transnational entrepreneurship may seem new in literature, it's been practiced for centuries. In essence, it is a mature industry. This is evidenced by a large number of successful and wealthy foreign entrepreneurs in America and other parts of the world. I know several other successful entrepreneurs from Lebanon doing business in America. The practice is open to all nationalities and everywhere. The idea is to think global, and pursue opportunities wherever in the world it may be.*

10. J.M.M.: Are you a member of any business organization? Are these organizations unique to international entrepreneurs or open to all races? Did they contribute to your business success?

*C.S.: My business is in a fairly small city. There are limited business organizations and they tend to be local in scope. I am not a member of an international business organization, but may be involved in one someday.*

11. J.M.M.: Do you think social networks and personal connections are important to business? Did you use networking when building your business, and are your social networks race based?

*C.S.: Social network is essential in transnational entrepreneurship. In my business, it is an important contributor to success. It is one's ability to weave through the home and host culture and diverse contacts that allows for business differentiation. Race is inconsequential in networking, relationships matter more. Social networks need to be perceived beyond just business relationships. It should be an opportunity to create real friendships.*

12. J.M.M.: If you could give advice to young transnational entrepreneurs or other young people thinking about starting a business, what would be the most important thing, and why?

*C.S.: If you really want it, you can achieve it. It is important to know the language in the host country and be familiar with the culture. It is equally important to get a proper education in order to be knowledgeable and competitive. The most critical factor though is will power along with determination. One must have the drive and the focus to pursue one's ambition. Building a transnational enterprise is not easy. But, a strong will power will get you through the tough times.*

13. J.M.M.: Have you been involved in socio-civic organizations or philanthropic work? If so, in which organizations, and what role did you play?

*C.S.: The local community has been good to us, and we take pride in giving something back in return. I am actively involved in the community and participate through donations, providing gift certificates, and other forms of assistance. I like to lend support to kids programs, charity campaigns such as that of St. Jude, as well as church, sports and social events. I endeavor to be a local, international and global citizen.*

14. J.M.M.: What do you see happening to your business in the future? Do you have succession plans in place? Do you see your business being run by family members or professional managers, and why?

*C.S.: I plan to keep the business growing. We have plans for expanding into related businesses such as delivery and catering. In our business, we work closely with the*

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*family and intend to keep it that way. In the future, as we grow, we plan to hire professional managers to support our business efforts. Professional managers would be able to bring in valuable skills that could be helpful in our current organization.*

15. J.M.M.: Where do you see yourself ten years from now?

*C.S.: More successful - with operations in several locations. I would like to create a positive impact not just in one local community, but several communities.*

16. J.M.M.: What do you think is your legacy to the business community?

*C.S.: I'd want to be remembered as a successful and trustworthy restaurateur. I'd like my business to be one that provides top quality food and has personalized and lasting relationships with our customers - whatever their background, wherever in the world they are.*

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