

DR. KEN 'DR. SMILEY' ROCHON, JR.



Victor Azar

"Smile, hummus is among us."

FROM PAIN & ADVERSITY TO HUMMUS SMILES

BY VICTOR AZAR

Imagine you are 6 years old in first grade in a strange country. You are singled out, ridiculed, mocked and called a "dirty Jew" by the teachers and your classmates. At recess, you are alone and none of your classmates want anything to do with you. That 6 year old was me. My father was a Seventh Day Adventist Minister. This Christian denomination, unlike all other Christians, kept Saturday as the Sabbath instead of Sunday. Keeping Saturday as the Sabbath identified us as Jews in a country (Iraq), that considered the Jews as the enemy. The reason the teachers and classmates knew about my religion is because my father made a deal with the principal to let me take Saturday off and not attend school on that day. Our religion dictated that it was a sin to work or go to school on that day. In the Muslim world, such as in Basra, Iraq, they had one day off per week which was Friday. This was

DR. KEN 'DR. SMILEY' ROCHON, JR.

not a good situation for me to endure. I always felt alone and ashamed from such an early age, and did not do well at school because of missing one day per week. I could never catch up with my studies. I longed to be loved and accepted. This was the foundation of my personality which affected the rest of my life.

My Father was such a believer in his cause that every time his church bosses asked him to move to a different country or city to start the lord's work, he accepted the calling. No other ministers would take such assignments preferring to stay close to church schools for the sake of their children. When I was having these horrible experiences at school, my parents would tell me to persevere because the Lord had chosen me to test me. Lucky me! I was also told that Jesus would be coming soon and that I would go to heaven and all of the worldly people, including the children in the school, would go to hell. All of this was because we were God's chosen people. We would get visitations from the Church officials who came from headquarters in Lebanon. They would hear about my tribulations and tell me that everyone in Beirut was praying for me. However, nothing would change for me. I was still harassed and persecuted. Can you imagine what that would do to the psyche of a small child? Do you think that would make

KEEP SMILING: D.O.S.E. OF HOPE

me a hateful, angry, and vengeful person? Or a loving and peaceful person?

As it turns out, I felt that this was an injustice against me which made me an idealistic person fighting for peace and justice, and watching out for the little guy and the underdog.

While my early schooling years had a very significant effect on who I became, subsequent tragic events throughout my life served to amplify the experiences of my early childhood years.

Also, while living in Iraq, we witnessed three bloody revolutions, where, as a child I was terrified of all the sounds and smells of war. Street fights broke out everywhere with gun fire, bombings and dead bodies everywhere that we could smell after a few days of decomposing.

We moved back to Jordan just in time for the Six Day War between the Arabs (including Jordan where we lived at the time) and Israel which caused us to live through all that fear again. This war continued for another couple of years as Israel was intermittently bombing the town where we lived. We had a bomb shelter under our house where we

DR. KEN 'DR. SMILEY' ROCHON, JR.

ran to as soon as the attacks started. Also, we lived through the Black September war which was between the Jordanian army and Palestinian groups such as the PLO and others. This was the most violent and scary conflict that we had ever witnessed. So much happened during that period which I will hopefully write about in a future book.

Later on in life, we immigrated to the United States, the land of liberty, freedom and opportunity, and we loved it. On a personal level though, the tragedies continued with a very painful betrayal by my cousins and a very ugly divorce. I will not go into much detail here except for that my divorce was adjudicated in Jordan, Syria, and the US, and it was an extremely difficult time. With the help of the Jordan catholic church, who took bribes from my ex in-laws, I was deprived from seeing my daughters or hearing their voices for the next ten years. This was more traumatic for me than all of the above experiences.

So you might wonder what would become of a broken and PTSD ridden man like myself? How would my outlook on life be? Would I become a hateful angry person? Would I turn to crime?

KEEP SMILING: D.O.S.E. OF HOPE

Actually, I think of myself as a very lucky man for having had all these experiences and I am very grateful for having this life and all of its successes. After arriving in the US, I worked minimum wage jobs to earn money that I would give to my father so that as a family, we were able to survive and thrive in this new environment. I did this for 10 years during which we saved enough to buy a house and a business. After we established ourselves as a family, I went to college.

I excelled in college and I loved learning. My Bachelors degrees include business, political science and mathematics from Eastern Washington University. I also earned my Master of Science degree in management sciences from Carnegie-Mellon University.

After graduating, I joined PNC Financial to head up a project to modernize General Motors' payment system. GM wanted to be able to deal with their suppliers electronically all the way through the procurement cycle and they wanted to do it with a new promising technology called Electronic Data Interchange (EDI). I was so passionate about this project because it would free up people from the painfully repetitive manual data entry. I was so idealistic and naive that I thought that, as a society we would do less busy work and more joyful meaningful work

DR. KEN 'DR. SMILEY' ROCHON, JR.

and also work less. However, what happened was the opposite. GM was able to consolidate its supply chain and thousands of suppliers worldwide were eliminated and thousands of people lost their jobs. I excelled while working on this project. I published an article in a prestigious technical business journal that put me on the map in the banking and corporate worlds. I got on a speaking tour to educate other corporations on the benefits of implementing EDI and made a lot of money for my bank. In the process, I was also involved in standardizing this technology through the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). My colleagues and I standardized all of the EDI transactions, including encryption and authentication, which are still in use internationally to this day. GM was so impressed with my work that they honored me and my boss by having lunch in Roger Smith's (GM's Chairman at the time) private dining room overlooking central park in NY.

Wells Fargo wanted to catch up with this technology and they targeted me through head hunters for a big position with three times the salary. I accepted and we moved to San Francisco. So, I became a vice president of payment systems at a major bank only 3 years after graduating from college. I was able to put them on the EDI map and I also introduced nationwide the first ever online banking system.

KEEP SMILING: D.O.S.E. OF HOPE

But all was not well at home, and, at the urging of my wife, we moved back to Jordan. I shifted careers from banking automation in San Francisco to hospitality management in Amman, Jordan. Using a hotel owned by my wife's family as a base, I morphed into a promoter extraordinaire. While I helped promote the hotel to book tour groups, I also, helped with my in-laws tourism office to also promote tour groups that arrived in Jordan. And, while I was doing all that, I also started a night club in the same hotel with live bands which became a sensation in the capital of Jordan. As if that was not enough, I was tasked by my in-laws to find land and build a 5 star hotel/resort in the rose/red city of Petra which was one of the most enjoyable projects of my life.

In the Spring of 1994, King Hussein of Jordan shook hands with Rabin, the prime minister of Israel, in the White House, agreeing to start a peace process. I knew that soon we would have a peace agreement with Israel. With an American passport in hand, I was able to cross into Israel and announced that I was there to do business. This was a welcome novelty to government officials as well as tourism company directors. This also was a great time in my life. My dream of peace was materializing right before my eyes. While I was going back and forth to Israel, I was able to find a tourism company that matched my company

DR. KEN 'DR. SMILEY' ROCHON, JR.

in Jordan and we became strategic partners. We decided to create a system where third party nationals could come into either country and be taken care of by both companies in both countries. This was the first agreement of its kind to ever be executed between the two countries. We announced this agreement in a press conference that we held in Jerusalem on the day after the signing of the treaty in the presence of Bill Clinton. I was quoted by many world wide publications including the Jerusalem Post.

So I set out to promote my in-laws' businesses as well as the new 5 star resort. I was able to complete a turnkey operation at the Petra Plaza in the fall of 1994 with 95% occupancy for a full year with money in the bank.

Tragically, in the fall of 1995, prime minister Rabin was assassinated because some people in Israel were not happy about the peace. Rabin was also preparing to have peace negotiations with Syria which sealed his fate. I realized that matters were going down hill from there and decided to come back home to Spokane, WA and work on my own family businesses. That's when the divorce started because my ex did not want to come back to the US, despite being unhappy even around

KEEP SMILING: D.O.S.E. OF HOPE

her own family. It took me at least 5 years of pain and darkness before I picked up myself and moved on with my life.

To make a long story short, I started a food business, running cafeteria contracts, and a catering business. This was great fun and I really enjoyed this business. All was well until the recession of 2008 when the catering business dried up. While catering, I always incorporated different hummus flavors out as appetizers. People were crazy about my hummus and they urged me to package it and sell it. I did just that and it became a huge success in the Northwest of the United States. After three years of manufacturing and packaging my products in one of my kitchens, the business grew so fast that we just could not keep up with the demand. Luckily, a nearby produce distributor offered to produce and distribute my products which was a very welcome thing. I was now freed up to promote my products and experiment with new products.

One of the things that I do to promote my hummus is going to the stores and conducting tastings. This is my most favorite thing to do. I just love the surprised happy smiles on people's faces as they taste the flavors. Seeing these smiles is what I live for. I see couples or families come to my table and after they start tasting, their whole being changes

DR. KEN 'DR. SMILEY' ROCHON, JR.

as they smile and start sharing their experience with people passing by. They say, "You have to come taste this, it is amazing."

Through my website and social media, people get that I am very passionate about health. I make sure that the ingredients and the way we process our products result in the healthiest and cleanest label hummus anywhere. This passion was the result of yet another negative life experience. I had an aggressive cancer that I cured naturally through, mostly, nutrition. Since then, I have continually been researching all kinds of topics that have to do with health and then implementing these findings into my products.

All of my experiences, including my horrible childhood experiences, are the catalyst for who I have become. Living through wars and seeing death and destruction will always be a part of me. This is why I am always an advocate of peace. I will do anything to see that everyone around me is happy and safe. I have become a caretaker and a pleaser. This is why I love to see people having a good time and smiling around me. I'm not sure that the hummus business is my calling, but seeing how people react to me and my products, sure feels like it. I am finally loved and accepted, which is what I craved as a child.

KEEP SMILING: D.O.S.E. OF HOPE

ABOUT VICTOR N. AZAR

Victor N. Azar is a Palestinian-Lebanese-American businessman and founder of Victor Foods. Victor Foods was created to manufacture and distribute award winning hummus and other mediterranean foods in the Northwest of the USA.

Victor graduated from Carnegie Mellon's School of Urban & Public Affairs with a Masters of Science degree in Management Sciences. His undergraduate degrees are in business administration, math, and political science from Eastern Washington University. Victor is a successful entrepreneur who started and operated many successful businesses in Spokane, WA, and abroad. After graduating from Carnegie Mellon, he worked in the high tech banking industry at PNC Financial, where he developed and implemented GM's EDI payment system, which produced huge economies of scale for General Motors. As a result he became a published author and lecturer in the high-tech banking industry. Within two years in his banking career, he became the vice president of all payment systems world-wide at Wells Fargo in San Francisco.

DR. KEN 'DR. SMILEY' ROCHON, JR.

During his entrepreneurial career, while he was living in Jordan, he was the driving force behind the creation of the first joint business agreement between Jordan and Israel. He announced this agreement in Jerusalem in a press conference that he held with his Israeli counterpart hours after the signing of the peace treaty between the two countries in 1994. Victor also started and operated a night-club in Amman, Jordan that became the busiest night spot in Jordan and promoted the first ever rock and roll festival in Amman's palace of culture to benefit Queen Noor's indigent women's cottage industries project. In 1995, Victor was the poster child of the peace tourism campaign. He delivered keynote speeches to huge audiences of travel agents in the major cities of the United States.

Back in his home-town, Spokane, he started D'Zaar Catering and Food Service, Inc. and acquired contracts with Triumph Composites and the Northwest Museum of Arts & Culture to provide cafeteria and catering services. In 2010, Victor started Victor Foods to produce mediterranean foods such as hummus for the grocery shelves in the Northwest of the United States.

KEEP SMILING: D.O.S.E. OF HOPE

Books that changed my life:

The Prophet - by Gibran

Think & Grow Rich - by Napoleon Hill