



TRUMPETING HERITAGE

In a world driven by consumerism, it's not often you meet someone who has sacrificed a high-flying career for the path less travelled. By **Ameera Al Hakawati**.



Previous page: Hajera with Doug Richard of Dragons' Den, graduating from the School for Creative Startups

In this Digibury talk, Hajera speaks about how she used crowdfunding for her business. Image: YouTube screengrab

At 29, Hajera Memon should be well on the way to establishing her law career in the city of London. But after just two years of practising law – less than half the time she'd spent becoming a lawyer – she decided to pack up her briefcase, pack in her job as a real estate finance lawyer, and venture into a completely different industry.

Hajera's sudden change of direction came from her growing concerns about reconciling her faith with her career. As she became more and more involved in the intricacies of drafting interest-based loan agreements for large German banks and other corporate real estate clients, an inner turmoil began brewing within.

"Islam has strict rules on working with and being involved with *riba* [interest or usury]," Hajera explains. "As I read around the issue further, my heart didn't feel at ease to continue in this career, as progressing in the field further would have meant more in-depth involvement in interest-based transactions."

After praying to Allah to make her path easy and replace what she was leaving

behind with something better, Hajera broke the news to her family. Although her decision to leave the career she had worked so hard for came as a shock, the reasons behind her move were impossible to deny.

Once the news had broken, the next hurdle was deciding exactly what she wanted to do instead. Hajera knew that whatever it was, it would have to be something that would benefit her – not just in this life, but in the next as well. She was also keen to explore her creative side, something she had neglected during her time as a lawyer.

"I've always loved writing, art and creativity so this was the area I wanted to explore," she explains. "I was also keen to choose something that would allow me to establish a long-term source of beneficial knowledge – *sadaqah jariah* – from the new career I chose."

During a brainstorming session with close friends, Hajera explored various business possibilities that would allow her to write, unleash her creativity and benefit others. She was eager to tap into children's educational resources, but the Islamic children's book industry was already rife with titles. There were plenty of Islamic cartoons as well. She wanted to create a product that didn't already exist, but which had a clear market.

With the help of her friends the idea for Shade 7, an independent publishing house specialising in Islamic novelty books, was born.



"Novelty books are special," she explains. "They are treasured and they are memorable. I wanted to bring the stories of the Qur'an to life in this way, so that they would create fond memories for children and inspire them to learn more about our Holy Book throughout their childhood."

But having an idea and turning it into a viable business are two very different things. Hajera knew that if her business was going to succeed, every aspect of her debut product would have to be perfect: from concept and copy to design and quality. Most of all, it would have to be original.

Recalling fond childhood memories of her father telling her magnificent Qur'anic stories, Hajera decided to create a series

of pop-up books containing stories from the Qur'an.

"As a child, one of my favourite chapters from the Qur'an was Surah Al-Fil," she says. "It contains so many profound moments that leave a young heart truly in awe, and it appeals to both adults and children, Muslims and non-Muslims."

Hajera took things slowly to ensure that the story was narrated in the most authentic and user-friendly way. She took a lot of time to read various *tafsir* (translations) of the surah before eventually putting pen to paper and working on a draft story. She shared the draft with various local scholars and continued working on it until all parties were happy with the outcome.

Yet as time-consuming and challenging as it was to write the book and have it designed and illustrated, raising funds for the project proved much more difficult. Hajera was all too aware that turning to a bank for a start-up loan – like most entrepreneurs do – was out of the question, as it would bring her right back to dealing with interest.

In the end, crowdfunding was the most logical option.

“Crowdfunding involves pre-selling your product to raise the finances for the production or manufacturing costs,” she explains. “My team and I didn’t have long to plan out the campaign as we were under a tight deadline. We needed to raise a total of £40,000 by the end

of January or early February 2014 to be able to put down the deposit for the production of the book, in order for it to arrive in time for Eid ul-Fitr 2014.”

Despite the time constraints, she managed to raise a total of £40,233 for the project – enough to get production going with even a little bit to spare. Friends pitched in to help in any way they could: accounting, legal, developing the crowdfunding campaign, proofreading, design work, videos and photos, web work, teaching assistance for lesson plans, and general moral and spiritual support throughout the journey. Their hard work saw *The Story of the Elephant* make it to customers by Eid ul-Fitr 2014. So far, according to Hajera, the response has been phenomenal.





It's not hard to see why. The story is simple yet beautifully told; the illustrations are strong and vivid; the pop-ups give joy with each turn of the page. And much like the sturdy animal in its title, the book is durable, made to withstand the efforts of tiny hands tearing at the pages.

Muslims are not the only ones who are enjoying the book. Hajera explains that the reactions from non-Muslims have been heartwarming.

"They totally get the offering and our vision to make stories from the Qur'an accessible to every child in a fun and interactive way," she says. "Schools are ordering the book for their classes. We have many non-Muslim supporters who pledged during our crowdfunding campaign and have supported the business through various stages as well. It's amazing how many people don't know that Muslims, Jews and Christians

have common shared stories of the Prophets. They welcome learning more about our synergies and appreciate that far more effort needs to be placed on this than our differences, particularly given what is happening in the world right now. I'm glad our book and vision can be seen as a source of unity and peace that everyone can enjoy, *Alhamdulillah*."

With the success of the book's launch, readers and fans are eager to know what's coming next from [Shade 7](#). Hajera reveals that pop-ups aren't the only items on the agenda. Interactive app versions of the books will soon be explored as well.

But as forthcoming as she is when discussing *The Story of the Elephant*, the next Qur'anic tale on Hajera's list remains a closely guarded secret. Yet one thing is for sure: if it's as memorable as its predecessor, it will be even bigger than the elephant. 🐘