



**AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY
OF BEIRUT**

OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Beirut, Tuesday, January 2, 2024

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AUB's Darwazah Center celebrates a decade of Darwazah Startup Accelerate competition

First place winners Walleti and Kizana awarded \$20,000

The Samih Darwazah Center for Innovation Management and Entrepreneurship at the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business (OSB), American University of Beirut (AUB) held its annual Darwazah Startup Accelerate (DSAccelerate) awards event.

For the 10th year in a row, the Darwazah Center trains, mentors, and supports aspiring student entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurial journey—making the Darwazah Center motto a reality—"we build entrepreneurial capacity." Around forty applications were submitted, and through a highly competitive process, only seven reached the finish line. After two months of hard work and pivoting, the finalists got themselves ready to pitch their innovative start-up ideas in front of an audience of around 120 persons from diverse professional and academic backgrounds as well as ecosystem players.

Mariana Darwazah, representing the Darwazah family, Dr. Yusuf Sidani; dean of the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business; and Dr. Bijan Azad, director of the Darwazah Center and professor at OSB; spoke at the event.

Mariana Darwazah, who is a former instructor at AUB as well as Jordan University, shared the story of her Lebanese roots and her family's belief in education and their loyalty to AUB. "I have always loved AUB. Unfortunately, I could not join it as a student

because of the war in Lebanon, but I was extremely happy to join it as an instructor after I obtained my MBA from California State University in Sacramento, USA,” she said.

“I am very impressed with this year’s pitches. I have attended the DSAccelerate winners’ celebration before, I sense a noticeable trend that the quality of startup pitches has gotten much better,” she added. Darwazah also expressed her pride about the center’s successful initiatives saying: “I am honored to be representing the Darwazah family and getting a flavor of the impactful activities of the center. I truly enjoyed every moment today and I wish the future entrepreneurs the best of luck.”

Dean Yusuf Sidani spoke about OSB’s strategic imperatives and about offering students a psychologically safe environment. “A culture where people can feel safe while speaking up and taking risks is a culture that ends up being innovative and entrepreneurial, and this is the link between OSB’s strategic imperative and the event of today,” he said.

Sidani also highlighted OSB’s role in offering students a space that enhances learning outside the classroom through extracurricular activities, in order to enhance employability, leadership skills, and entrepreneurial skills.

The center’s director, Dr. Bijan Azad, showcased a few videos about the activities currently being held, the center’s pillars, the venture building practicum, and testimonials about the scaling-up program. Azad then noted, “While we are celebrating the hard work of startup teams, it is crucial to emphasize we are not in the business of building startups, because as a university-center of excellence we are in the business of developing the skills of entrepreneurs who then build great companies and grow our economy.”

Two previous DSAccelerate winners also shared their inspiring stories since winning the competition. Mohamad Abbas, co-founder of uPaint, winner of the 2022 competition, updated the attendees on uPaint’s growth since last year saying, “Not only did we 2x our revenues during this year, but we were also lucky to participate in the Hero Training Program at Draper University in the Silicon Valley, USA.” Abbas also expressed his intention to give back to the Darwazah Center and provide support and coaching to the students currently starting their entrepreneurial journey.

Ghassan Abi Fadel, co-founder of Moodfit, winner of the 2015 competition, shared the eight-year journey since the company’s inception, highlighting that there will always be ups and downs in business, but the most important thing for entrepreneurs is to enjoy what they do and to always have fun. He also mentioned that Moodfit is currently

participating in the center's scaling-up program called AUB-SPARK Scaling-Up of Startups Program.

Following the stories, seven finalists of this year's competition, Walleti, Kizana, Dental Companion, Safrati, Lancili, Seraaj and EaseUp presented their pitches.

The winners had been selected in part by the jury evaluations, including Dr. Khater Abi Habib, chairman and general manager of Kafalat s.a.l., Dr. Nabil Fahed, chief executive officer of Fahed Group, Lina Tannir, senior finance lecturer at OSB and founding member of Lush Cosmetics, Yusr Sabra, co-founder and ceo of Wakilni, and Pamela Saber, investment facilitation manager at Berytech.

Walleti, a cryptocurrency app and Kizana, a digital wardrobe platform, won the first prizes, \$10,000 each. Safrati, an online travel support platform and Dental Companion, a dentists' support app won the runner-up prizes, \$1,000 each.

In addition to the cash prizes, the Darwazah Startup Accelerate winners will be admitted to the Venture Building Practicum course to accelerate their startup ideas and will receive support from the Darwazah Center to launch their businesses.

ENDS

For more information please contact:

Simon Kachar, PhD

Interim Director of the Office of Communications
Director of News and Media Relations

T +961 1 37 43 74 - Ext: 2676 | M +961 3 42 70 24
sk158@aub.edu.lb

Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 800 full-time faculty members and a student body of over 8000 students. AUB currently offers more than 120 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

Stay up to date on AUB news and events.

aub.edu.lb | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)

American University of Beirut

PO Box 11-0236, Riad El Solh, Beirut 1107 2020, Lebanon
T +961 1 35 00 00 – Ext 2650 | communications@aub.edu.lb

aub.edu.lb