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Photos Courtesy of Pelin Thorogood

Pelin Thorogood

The Wholistic Research and Education Foundation
A Conversation with a Serial Entrepreneur

By Judith A. Habert

Pelin Thorogood was just 18 years old when she flew over five thousand miles from her hometown of Istanbul, Turkey to Ithaca, New York. An unlikely voyage for a young girl, but there was a strong motivating factor that made this trip worthwhile. Pelin had just received a full ride scholarship to study Engineering at the prestigious Cornell University in New York. Not only would she obtain outstanding grades but would go on to earn two additional degrees while there, a master's degree in engineering and an MBA.

Pelin's dad had worked for NATO and her mom for a Swiss firm, so she had travelled extensively across Europe in her youth. She had spent her teenage years at the Robert College of Istanbul, a 157-year-old independent American high school in Turkey. It remains the oldest American school still in existence in its original

location outside the United States. Pelin learned multiple languages at Robert College, including English. So, although her move to upstate New York was a bit of a culture shock, at least there was no language barrier when she arrived - still an incredibly brave move for an 18-year-old.

"I was born and raised in one of the oldest and most historical cities in the world, and our family travels had taken me to most of the cosmopolitan centers in Europe. So, living in a small college town for 6 years while at Cornell was truly a unique experience. It was an absolutely beautiful place. It turned out to be an incredible educational experience as well as a whole new adventure, both culturally and nature-wise. It was in Ithaca that I realized that the great outdoors is my truly happy place."

After graduation, Pelin started out as an engineer and then quickly moved into product man-

agement and marketing, which entails defining product specs and go-to-market strategy. "Since I was one of the few people with a business background as well as engineering, I could not only define the product, but could also articulate its value proposition to consumers, industry analysts and internal businesses units, including marketing and the business development departments." Then Pelin received a call from a recruiter to step into the VP of Marketing role at WebSideStory, a cloud-based software company that literally created web analytics as we know it today. "WebSideStory was the absolute perfect opportunity to combine my analytical skills and business experience into transforming the art of marketing into a quantitative science." WebSideStory, where Pelin ended up serving as Chief Marketing Officer (CMO), became a true San Diego success story by going public (3rd ever cloud computing company IPO) and making numerous acquisitions of its own before being acquired by Omniture/ Adobe.

Pelin eventually left WebSideStory to have her second child. "I wanted to spend more time with my young family, while also leveraging my experience growing companies. I was fortunate to easily transition to an advisory role for over four years, working alongside CEOs of some very exciting Silicon Valley companies. Those were fun years with a different kind of rhythm. I really enjoyed the diversity of the companies I worked with, and felt I was bringing a ton of value to the CEOs I supported. Yet, deep down, I knew I wasn't done with an operating role and missed being in the middle of the action. Perhaps most importantly, I craved to lead my own team again." Pelin returned to the C-suite upon receiving a call from the original founder of WebSideStory. The year was 2012, and he was looking for help with a new analytics start-up he had founded. "I initially joined Anamatrix, a multichannel analytics player, as an advisor given my substantial experience in the space. I was also able to bring in my industry connections and raise money from venture capitalists. So, my involvement quickly evolved from serving as an advisor to stepping in as the new CEO when the new VCs and the founding investors

wanted to leverage my deep understanding of the analytics market as well as my ability to execute on a winning go-to-market strategy. I hit the ground running by bringing on a highly experienced senior management team and positioning the company as a leader in the emerging marketing analytics space. As CEO of a start-up, you end up being a chief everything officer, spanning sales, marketing, finance, R&D and customer support. I was grateful to have the respect of the engineers and often sat down with them to discuss the business optimization scenarios they were developing for various major clients. I also enjoyed spending time closing deals with major customers and then ensuring we could indeed meet their specific requirements.” Anamatrix received major industry accolades, including for best business intelligence (BI) and big data solution, and was acquired by Silicon Valley firm Ensignten in 2014. For the next 18 months, Pelin led the technical and cultural integration between the two companies as well as the expanded corporate rebranding and positioning as Ensignten’s Chief Strategy Officer.

While it’s clearly in Pelin’s DNA to attract and embrace new challenges, she felt the exhaustion as her new role involved even longer hours with weekly trips to Silicon Valley. “I felt extremely tired all the time, but assumed it came with the territory of balancing family with the rigors of corporate life. However, this time was different as I could barely pull myself out of bed and was losing my signature joie de vivre. After numerous consultations with MDs and osteopaths, I was finally diagnosed with adrenal fatigue, a condition where one’s adrenal glands can’t keep up with the tremendous amount of daily stress we experience. Adrenals are designed to produce hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline to enable us to deal with short term “fight or flight” situations. However, with long-term stress, our adrenal glands burn out from prolonged production of the stress hormone cortisol – and adrenal fatigue sets in.”

Her primary physician of over 20 years told Pelin she can either start antidepressants, or given her preference for natural medicine, consult with the Ayurvedic MDs

at the Chopra Center. You can imagine which route she selected! Looking back, the rapid improvements in her wellbeing and quality of life upon adopting the recommendations of the Chopra Center MDs would serve as a key turning point in Pelin’s life and career.

The health issues in Pelin’s family escalated when her husband Scott, who is the co-founder and CEO of Nanovision, nearly died of a massive aortic rupture



and dissection in 2015. “We ended up having to airlift him to a San Diego hospital for what turned out to be an 11-hour lifesaving open heart surgery. Scott was in a coma for days following the invasive procedure, and things were touch and go for quite some time. Given the extent of the damage to his vascular system, he ended up having two more open heart surgeries before thankfully recovering fully.” Watching the miracle of modern medical technology unfold as doctors cooled her husband’s body and arrested blood flow entirely to replace significant portions of his damaged thoracic aorta with synthetic vessels was a transformative experience for Pelin. Just as transformative was the realization that the same medical technology was woefully inadequate when it came to addressing pain relief following these traumatic surgeries.

The break she took from her tech career to focus on her family during this health crisis, along with key realizations about how she could make a difference in the world of healthcare and wellness ended up serving as a launching point for another career for the ever entrepreneurial Pelin. “I

left the tech world to deal with massive trauma in our lives. But that break also gave me the time to really reflect on what I wanted to do going forward. And one thing that came through loud and clear was that I had spent my career excelling around the “how” aspect of what I did: how I took care of my customers, my shareholders, my employees, how I lead companies, how I engaged with people. But if I were honest with myself, I didn’t

have a solid “why,” a purpose that I was truly passionate about behind it all.”

Stepping back from work to take a long, hard look at her life was an invigorating process for Pelin. “I had spent years developing great software products that drive significant productivity gains for corporations big and small. And, there’s certainly a ton of value in that. But after going through a life changing experience like we did, I realized that was no longer enough for me. It was time to really think about what my next step would be and seek that perfect intersection of my skills and my passions.”

It’s that kind of deep self-re-evaluation that drove Pelin’s desire to make a major shift from her illustrious career in big data and analytics to natural medicine. People say setting intentions opens your eyes to things you may have otherwise missed – and that certainly proved to be the case for Pelin as well. When Pelin and Scott’s long-term friend Andy Noorda visited to check up on Scott, he also introduced them to CBD, a non-psychoactive compound found in both marijuana

and hemp. The year was 2016, and Pelin hadn’t yet heard about the now wildly popular supplement.

“Andy told us that CBD was delivering absolutely remarkable improvements for his son Max, who was born with cerebral palsy and started to tell us about its anxiolytic and anti-inflammatory benefits. Given the tremendous pain Scott was experiencing due to his open-heart surgeries and the issues with the plethora of prescribed pain medication, we thought we’d try some CBD transdermal patches to see how they assisted with the pain... they appeared to really work, and I was intrigued. When Andy and I started asking our friends and colleagues about CBD well before it was as popular as it is today, we found out many were already using CBD for a variety of conditions. Not just epilepsy, which I know many have now heard about, but really everything from brain tumors to Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, autism to sleep, and everyday chronic pain. The breadth of the potential benefits was honestly astounding to me!

Just as interesting—especially given my analytics background—was how a lot of others indicated that CBD did not benefit them. They said, “Yeah, I tried CBD, I heard about all the hype, and it doesn’t work for me at all.” So, we wanted to get to the bottom of how and why CBD may provide these diverse health benefits and why it worked for some people and not for others. As we looked into the medical literature, we realized there was simply not a lot of research from NIH [National Institutes for Health] or other sources primarily due to the Schedule 1 status of CBD and cannabis.”

Based on what they saw, Pelin and Andy thought it was time to bring in private money and resources for much-needed research funding and decided to co-found the Wholistic Research and Education Foundation. Their mission is to explore the health benefits of CBD-rich therapeutics with clinical and scientific research and leverage this evidence-based data for education and advocacy. Their approach is what some call Venture Philanthropy, which is a model that goes far beyond writing checks. They say they take a deep, long-term view into what it means to invest in cutting-edge

CBD research and education to improve public health and safety.

Although it was an entirely different field for Pelin – one she didn't have a formal education in – she found that she was approaching it with the same kind of thinking that served her so well earlier in her career. The foundation's efforts to drive some of the most groundbreaking research studies also gave her the opportunity to work with and learn from incredible doctors, researchers, and scientists across the nation. "We leverage analytical thinking and a multidisciplinary approach, spanning clinical, basic science, genetic, neuroscience and advanced imaging techniques for a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the CBD mechanism of action across a multitude of conditions. Interestingly, the multidisciplinary data collection is very reminiscent of my tech days, and I am hopeful that the insights gained will lead to more of a personalized, precision medicine approach to cannabis and CBD treatments."

Gallup polls and other national surveys indicate that about 15% or more of the population may be using CBD, which translates to millions of users in America. As of late, CBD appears to be popping up in many consumer products, from skin products and tinctures to lipstick. So, I was happy to hear that Pelin's nonprofit, Wholistic Research and Education Foundation, is also very much focused on demystifying CBD and separating fact from fiction with their evidence-based education and advocacy efforts. "There are clearly major gaps in research around both the safety and efficacy of these products as well as a lack of understanding on how they work. We still need more data on dose, frequency, timing of use and delivery methods most associated with therapeutic benefit for different conditions. Another issue is the lack of industry regulation and oversight for CBD products, which has led to systemic quality control issues. Recent independent testing has even highlighted some CBD products do not actually contain any CBD or they may be contaminated with pesticides and heavy metals. Basically, you cannot always believe what you read on the label, and the prevalence of such mislabeling, along with the lack of

sufficient efficacy research, creates a real public health issue."

After hearing these scary facts, I had to ask Pelin what our readers should do when trying to select a CBD product to assure they are in fact receiving what they are paying for.

"Given current lack of FDA regulation, one of the best ways to determine the quality of a CBD product is inquiring about their certificates of analysis (COA). If a company has a COA from a certified third-party lab that has

uses, hemp cultivation was legalized again with the 2018 Farm Bill. The new law defines hemp as cannabis strains containing less than 0.3% THC (a psychoactive compound). Due to decades of prohibition, much of the hemp used for the CBD products in this country is imported, primarily from China and Eastern Europe, and unfortunately their cultivation standards have been lower than in our country. The key issue is that hemp is a bio-aggregator, which means it extracts whatever



been licensed to conduct such analysis, and they publish those results, then you should feel more confident that the product does indeed contain the stated amounts of CBD and other cannabinoids, and no other harmful compounds. Also, look at the date stamp on the COA to ensure it is relatively current. CBD manufacturers should be conducting what's called batch testing, so each time they produce a new batch of product, they should have them tested again."

One of the interesting things I learned during my time with Pelin was that the quality and efficacy of CBD is very much based on the quality of the hemp that it is derived from. "Hemp was already being cultivated by Native Americans well before the pioneers arrived. And it became one of the first crops to be adopted by the early settlers in the 17th century as it could be grown for food, oil and fiber. Things changed when hemp became illegal in 1970, when the U.S. government passed the Controlled Substances Act to regulate all cannabis, including industrial hemp. Due to the recent explosion of hemp-derived CBD products and its great many other industrial

uses, hemp cultivation was legalized again with the 2018 Farm Bill. The new law defines hemp as cannabis strains containing less than 0.3% THC (a psychoactive compound). Due to decades of prohibition, much of the hemp used for the CBD products in this country is imported, primarily from China and Eastern Europe, and unfortunately their cultivation standards have been lower than in our country. The key issue is that hemp is a bio-aggregator, which means it extracts whatever

is in the soil where it is grown. If the soil is polluted with heavy metals, etc., those compounds will actually show up in the plant and ultimately in the CBD product. This is clearly something we want to avoid. So, it is critical to know what kind of soil the hemp used in your CBD product grows in." About a year ago, Pelin was asked to join the board of trustees of the UC San Diego Foundation, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to maintaining and enhancing the margin of excellence at UCSD. Pelin says she was thrilled to bring her experiences from her entrepreneurial career as well as her more recent foray into the nonprofit world to an institution that is obviously making great strides in positively impacting not just San Diego, but all of California. "My involvement with UCSD initially started with the first-of-its kind 'CBD Efficacy for Autism' study we funded at UCSD's Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research. UCSD is broadly regarded as one of the best research universities nationwide. Its culture of excellence and innovation, as well as the researchers' collaborative spirit, have truly blown me away. I

was genuinely honored when they asked me to become a Trustee. Being part of the amazing UCSD community is one of the most rewarding experiences of my life."

Pelin serves on the Foundation's Donor Relations and Stewardship Committee, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Council and recently joined the Executive Board of the UC San Diego Basement, a campus-wide incubator and startup hub that runs innovation and entrepreneurship programming. "As Chancellor Pradeep Khosla put it during one of our conversations, entrepreneurship is at the very heart and soul of UCSD – and it shows! The inspiring track record of the number of companies started across numerous disciplines, their success rates over time, number of patents filed (and granted) all add up to make our young institution one of the nation's top entrepreneurial hubs, in the same league as leaders like MIT and Stanford. Since I view the world through a very similar entrepreneurial lens, the opportunity to further enhance such impactful programs greatly adds to my sense of purpose."

Advocacy for entrepreneurship education and mentorship has become a key part of Pelin's mission. Even prior to her involvement with UCSD, she had been serving as an Entrepreneur-in-Residence and a guest lecturer for her alma mater Cornell for nearly ten years. "I am a sincere believer that the creativity, passion and optimism of an entrepreneur is what fuels innovation and meaningful progress. I love connecting with young entrepreneurs, hearing about their vision and openly sharing my own experiences with the hope of making it just a little bit easier for them to achieve their own dreams. I also believe in giving back. I know I've been fortunate. I mean, my college scholarships were a precious gift without which I could not have come from Istanbul to study at one of the best schools in the world. And I had incredible mentors throughout my career who believed and invested in me. So, it's now my turn to give freely to drive impact, serve as a role model and try to help others in unexpected ways. Mahatma Gandhi famously said, 'Be the change you want to see in the world'; at the end of the day, I try to live true to those very powerful words."