

Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to another installment of Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and sometimes legends and allow them a chance to offer some keen insights into how they see themselves and most importantly just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where previous interviews have included former mayors, state politicians, a former Miss America, sports legends, and heads of major business concerns, community activists and developers. Today our guest is Omar Ayyash executive for the office for International Affairs of Louisville Metro government and he considers himself a citizen of the world. And let me read a bit of his bio and you'll understand why he considers himself that. He is of Palestinian descent. Omar was born and spent his early childhood in Amman, Jordan. He was educated during his adolescent high school years in Vienna, Austria and Omar holds a Bachelor in business administration with an emphasis in marketing from the University of Kentucky. Omar many know today is rarely without a wide grin and a quick warm laugh however when Omar moved to Louisville after graduating from the University of Kentucky in 1994 believe it or not he had trouble making friends.

So he took a course in international business at the University of Louisville to meet some new people. This same course got him interested in international affairs and as it turned out that class helped point him toward his current career as well as his first job out of school at the Kentucky World Trade Center as a membership consultant. Omar then worked at the Kentucky World Trade Center for over five years during the mid '90s and several positions including acting director of the Louisville office during the same time he was earning an MBA with a concentration in entrepreneurial studies from the University of Louisville which he received in 2000. He did put

that master's degree into practical application trying his hand at entrepreneurship when he opened Omar's Gyro, I may pronounce it wrong, from 2000-2003 as an owner operator with another partner on Bardstown Road. Soon after he was named to his current post Omar sold his interest in the venture to his partner in May of 2003. Omar said he attained great insight into the realities of entrepreneurship during this time such as once you say you're going to do something he says just go out and do it and learn as you go because you're going to make mistakes. Most successful entrepreneurs are the ones who know how to fall, get up, dust off the dirt, and move on. Being a go-getter is essential to becoming an entrepreneur.

After leaving the Kentucky World Trade Center in May of 2001 with the final title of acting director Omar joined the OIA which is the Office for International Affairs as an international program specialist. Now since Omer Omar brought an extensive international background with him Louisville Mayor. Jerry Abramson tapped Omar appointing him in February of 2003 as an executive director of the office for international affairs. Abramson said quote "Omar's experience with different cultures and as an entrepreneur enables him to be an initiator of innovative ideas. He's got a very warm demeanor that sends a very positive and welcoming message whether he's dealing with an immigrant coming to Louisville for the first time or whether he's dealing with a business leader here in Louisville." OIA's mission under Omar's leadership strives to do three things create awareness about the international community through its many programs which include translation and interpretation services, it serves as a customer service function to support the international community and the community at large, and maybe most importantly be an advocate for immigrants doing business in Louisville.

His list of accomplishments since being appointed in 2003 as executive director proves just how busy he has been. World Fest which was launched in 2003 is the largest international festival in the region with over 60 thousand people attending on Labor Day weekend in 2006. The Mayor's International Awards which also began in 2003 honors organizations that have successfully embrace

cultural diversity and OIA's International Directory, a multicultural visitors guide and information resource with the tagline quote "Your Guide to the world in a Louisville" was launched in 2004. That's not enough. There's a few more notable facts about Omar he was named a Business First 2001 class of 40 under 40. He was named a Leadership Louisville class of 2004. And get this he speaks three languages including Arabic and German and is the first Arab American appointed by a mayor in the history of Louisville, Kentucky.

His role model is his father Nassiaish, hope I pronounced that correctly, who served as a diplomat in the United Nations and died when Omar was only 13. Quote "Every time I have a situation that I need to contemplate he's there with me. I always think if my father was around how would he handle it?" I like that. Despite all his accomplishments at a young age and as an immigrant Omar's full of ambition and not one to rest on his laurels with an MBA already he set his sights on a Ph D., starting another business eventually, he even wants to serve as an ambassador within an international organization such as the United Nation's someday. But for now he's got his hands full. He is married Lana Ayesh of Amman, Jordan and he along with his two beautiful baby daughter's name Salma and Sara he resides in Crescent Hill. Quote "The smile on my face it's inherited" unquote. He's been quoted and I can tell you firsthand it has become Omar's trademark. It is rare to see Omar without a grin on his face. Welcome to Leadership Landscape.

Omar Ayyash: Thank you.

Kirt Jacobs: I need a drink after that lovely bio. You have amazing history.

Omar Ayyash: Thank you

Kirt Jacobs: But the one question I want to ask you the first question we usually ask your guests is what drives you to do what you've done? But what brought you from Vienna or Amman, Jordan to Louisville, Kentucky. That's something I think that.. or to Lexington I guess to the University of Kentucky. How did that come about?

Omar Ayyash: Well you know goes back to my father and my mother having a foresight that they wanted a better life for us and they knew that the world was becoming a global world so they moved us to Vienna, Austria.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Omar Ayyash: And Vienna. Typically when you're International Ex Pat you send your kids either to the American school, The British, or the French school. That sort of sets the tone where you're going to send your kids to get their higher education. And my older brother had said I want to go to the United States to get my education so he asked my dad to put us all in the American school. So it was only natural for me once I got done with highschool and I went to the American International School of Vienna. That I was coming to the United States to get my college education. And out of all the places and all the United States I ended up coming to the University of Kentucky because really up to this day it's really one of the best buy's in the country for out-of-state tuition what the level of education that you get. And it's a great place. Yeah it was a culture shock at first -- Vienna to Lexington.

Kirt Jacobs: I can imagine

Omar Ayyash: But it turned out to be a place that I love and you know 16 years later here I am. Of course after I got done with Lexington I started looking for the bigger city to move to and Louisville was just the perfect place. I mean I did have a little bit of a challenge as you read in my bio when I first moved here but you know with neighborhoods like the Highlands and Crescent Hill and a lot of the neighborhoods they remind me of my days in Europe so it's kind of like both worlds you know. The American world where you can be an entrepreneur. You can be a go-getter but then there's culture and there's neighborhoods and that's what's unique about Louisville that doesn't happen in many other cities. And that's why we're still here. That's why we enjoy calling Louisville our home.

Kirt Jacobs: That's great. It's very story and rather prophetic with

the immigrant population moving here which will talk. What drives you to do what you're doing now today?

Omar Ayyash: Well the main thing. What drives me to do it is passion

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

Omar Ayyash: I think you know from the day I arrived in the United States 16 years ago I realized that I am an ambassador.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Omar Ayyash: You know I might not have the official title by the Arabic community or my old country Jordan or anything of that nature but I realize that it's my job to get people to understand what it means to be an Arab. What it means to be an Arab American. what it means to be a Muslim. What it means to be an immigrant. And my road to citizenship hasn't been an easy one. I mean it has had some bumps in the road where you know I couldn't get a visa to get to the United States at one point. Or my work permit didn't get approved the first time. So that's really what continues to drive me every day is when I meet people that have that are in need of services whether it's through government or local government, state government, or the federal government I have had their experience in some shape or form and I want to make it easier for them. Plus I have this huge desire to make sure that everyone understands that the world is a global village. You cannot just operate within your own backyard and forget that you know there's another market in China or another market in the Middle East or another opportunity and that's another passion that drives me for that.

Kirt Jacobs: Whom do you credit most influential in your life? Can be more than one person.

Omar Ayyash: Certainly you know as in my bio says it's my father. I can not thank him enough for his leadership. My mother also someone that served well having lost my father a young age my mother served in that capacity very well where she was both parents

and and really helped us continue to be ambitious. My my father you know was a person that showed me how to be a diplomat and showed me how to be someone that's willing and to understand different cultures. Shown me how to operate within different cultures. Showed me the value of education. And also started instilling in me at a young age how to be a representative of our family among international dignitaries and things of that nature. My mother on the other hand really you know after my father passed away. She didn't want to change our lifestyle too much. So she kept a lifestyle where as if my father was still a diplomat It was still alive.

Kirt Jacobs: Oh I see alive ., I see.

Omar Ayyash: And in the role I had to serve as the head of the household. So we would have ambassador's coming over to our house to have dinner and here I am 13, 14, 15-years-old and I'm going to entertain the former ambassador to the United States, to Turkey, or what have you who works at the UN And I've got to act like an adult and sit down with them and have you know these kinds of talks

Kirt Jacobs: What an education.

Omar Ayyash: It was. It was an incredible education. It really set me in the right direction and gave me that opportunity. And you know also that young age my mom got me involved in financial matters of the family and you know there was not a day that I wouldn't walk past the bank in Vienna, Austria and would not look at what the dollar is compared to the Austrian schilling. I mean. And it was because most of our currency was in dollars at that time and I was always concerned to see how the dollar compares to that shilling and that was again during my teenage years.

Kirt Jacobs: Yeah.

Omar Ayyash: Having that financial experience and worrying about the financial matters of the family and and made sure that we as a family are doing well.

Kirt Jacobs: This question we ask all of our guests. If there is one Omar what is your biggest professional regret? At a young age can you name one? Can be personal too.

Omar Ayyash: Wow. That's a difficult question. I think the biggest professional regret the one that I had issues with and probably still have issues with is my departing from partnership with Omar's Gyro. It didn't go as well as planned. And you know I've struggled with that with it to this day. On a personal level as well as on a legal level and you know and you know the advice that I would give myself if I was able to you know go back four five years sort of what have you it's you know when you get into a business relationship know how to get married but also know how to get divorced.

Kirt Jacobs: That's a whole other T.V. show. We won't get into that this is about leadership. On the flip side of that what's your biggest professional triumph?

Omar Ayyash: Biggest professional triumph. The thing that I'm most proud of is World Fest.

Kirt Jacobs: It's an amazing event. I've gone to it the last couple years.

Omar Ayyash: Thank you. The success that it's had you know from 5-hour, 6-hour event with the four or five thousand people coming to it to now two event with 60 thousand people coming to it. From you know nowhere on the festival radar screen to last year being the 13 largest festival in the city of Louisville and the largest international festival within the region. And it's just the beginning. I mean we've got the platform to keep going forward.

Kirt Jacobs: Was that your idea? Did you have an epiphany? Was there a moment for World Fest or was that kind of a decision by committee? How did that come about? I'm just curious.

Omar Ayyash: In reality in retrospect it was the desire of the mayor to have not necessarily World Fests per se but when he was out

campaigning for the first term under Metro merger everyone was talking about the heritage weekends..

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

Omar Ayyash: ...that Louisville used to have. You remember the weekends when the Belvedere where one weekend was Italian and Greek what have you. And you know it seemed like there was a huge desire for that. And it wasn't the first week of January when we got around the table and started looking at how we're going to do that and got the input of the international community and quickly we came to realize that September in the city of Louisville was already international month. There was already a lot of international activities that are happening and we packaged it together as International month but realized that we don't have a kickoff event. To get this month going and because it was Labor Day weekend it just sounded perfect to create this kickoff event. So it was Mike Malone, Kara Butler and myself that really worked hard at it for the mayor the first year and we got it started and and they're still very involved.

Kirt Jacobs: What do you find exciting about all that you do?

Omar Ayyash: What I find exciting about what I do is the diversity of tasks and functions and and opportunities that I have to deal with every day. I mean you know my morning could start where I am with an international dignitary. Could be a prince. Could be an ambassador, Could be a high level rank government official. Where we're greeting them here with the mayor on behalf of the city of Louisville to the afternoon working with the Somali Bantu that is illiterate in his own language and is trying to get situated and then move on with their life. And and and then of course handling the daily projects or the annual projects of the Office of International Affairs has embarked on.

Kirt Jacobs: You know I think your positions is rather prophetic with your background because at least to me it's remarkable or at least interesting that there is this surge of immigrant population into Jefferson County or Louisville Metro and it is do you think

that's something that little has done as a municipality or is it by designers it just something that happened on a national level that maybe made Louisville attractive to immigrants? I was just curious your thoughts on that.

Omar Ayyash: Well you know the first thought that comes to my mind is the big thank you is first have to go to the refugee resettlement agencies.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Omar Ayyash: Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Vocational Services, ??? Refugee Ministries. They're the ones that really started Louisville's international population. And we've done studies where we found out that in terms of their refugee resettlement program and the number of refugees that are moving here we rank in size bigger than most cities our size. We rank more like a Chicago or New York in terms of attracting refugees and reselling them and things of that nature. But what happened after that wave is that the community started really becoming interested in the refugee population so we started attracting more immigrants and then we created the Office of International Affairs which is still one of few in the country. I think right now we might be one of the ten in the country that is...

Kirt Jacobs: Really

Omar Ayyash: ...focused on this attention. And in the recent year or two we've really ranched up to the top and leadership position all the way from mayor to city government to the Office of International Affairs as a city that's willing to embrace our international population. A lot of cities have gone the other way and they are seeing more problems. So it wasn't a week ago that I was visiting with the. Adult Education National Visiting Committee that was reviewing Jefferson County Adult Ed education here and they were just floored from a national perspective of Louisville is doing with its international population. And and really trying to embrace the international. And and at the end of the day you know it's not about social services where oh we have to take care of our immi-

grants. That's important.

Kirt Jacobs: Right.

Omar Ayyash: It's not about outreach where oh let's have festivals and celebrate our international population. Most of that's important but what it's about it's economic development. It's workforce development. You cannot deny that the United States is aging population. I think we're at the 38 here...

Kirt Jacobs: median age

Omar Ayyash: ...average age. And when you look at our immigrant population the average age is more in the 20s --21,22. And given the fact that we have a good shrinking workforce in certain industries. It's not the only solution but one of the solutions is to attract the immigrant population into this community and help them fill jobs whether it's nursing, education, healthcare, hospitality. I think is that nature so we're being smart. Really we are being smart.

Kirt Jacobs: Pretty sophisticated it sounds like the way we are handling our immigrant population. Can you define leadership in one word Omar? This show's about leadership. Can be more in one word.

Omar Ayyash: You're asking tough questions about how to define..

Kirt Jacobs: Can be one word in one word.

Omar Ayyash: To me leadership in one word it has to be more than one word it's hard. respect.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

Omar Ayyash: And that passion

Kirt Jacobs: Right

Omar Ayyash: And being able to listen. And allow people to you

know lead.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Omar Ayyash: You know being a leader is not necessarily you're always the one that's going to sit in the in the hot seat you know. Yes many times you're going to have to run the meetings and you're going to have to run the program but with World Fest you know we've got so many different groups of people that are involved. If you're the sponsorship development person you're the leader in that area and I follow your advice and if you're a marketing person you're the leader and I follow your advice and knowing when to switch on back and forth.

Kirt Jacobs: So you believe in delegating responsibility

Omar Ayyash: Completely

Kirt Jacobs: OK if you can change one thing Omar in your life or in general what would it be?

Omar Ayyash: At this point if I was to change one thing in my life I would hope the majority of my family would be here in Louisville. For several reasons one Louisville is a great city.

Kirt Jacobs: Yes it is.

Omar Ayyash: And my mother comes here a lot and actually last over the last couple of years she's almost lived here but she's not here on a permanent basis. Because I have a brother in Michigan she's going back and forth. But having kids now and having kids that were born in Louisville which means Louisville is a much more important place in my life I wish they can have their cousins and nephews and and that's the challenge that sometimes when when you're of an immigrant background and you don't have family and in the vicinity that you live in it it's it takes a toll when you have kids. When I was a single person it was OK life went on I had plenty of friends and things of that nature but for your kids you want them to be around their family and you want them to grow around

their family.

Kirt Jacobs: Do you think there's a possibility that will be able to come over?

Omar Ayyash: I hope so you know. We're working towards that of course immigration laws are extremely difficult in that sense. My brother-in-law was living in US Louisville for a while but he had to go back. My sister might finish college and come here and you know I hope that at some point maybe my other sisters-in-law or my nieces and nephews would consider the University of Kentucky or the University of Louisville to get their college education

Kirt Jacobs: That would be cool. It would be cool to have them come over here. I notice we have some things here on the table. I didn't know if you wanted to point out some of these.

Omar Ayyash: Yes certainly. You know to start out with something that we're extremely proud of is that we launched an immigrant study that shows the profile of the immigrant population here in Louisville and it tells a great story. There is always the myth that people think that immigrants are not educated. This study shows no immigrants are educated in Louisville. There's Louisville is very diverse in terms of its immigrant population we have over 91 countries represented.

Kirt Jacobs: Really

Omar Ayyash: And our city and and that's you know the highlight of this sort of wonderful study. Then another great resource is the International Directory and it keeps growing and in size every year. And the great thing is people don't realize how many international organizations exist in our hometown.

Kirt Jacobs: Is there a rough number. How many are in the directory?

Omar Ayyash: There's probably of about 150 international organizations. Some are like Sister Cities of Louisville which are well

known but others are there ??? American Association or the Hispanic Latino Coalition and things of that nature. Another thing that we have put together is a cookbook. International cookbook and and its recipes from all over the world but what makes it a special cookbook is that it's not only recipes but it also has the profile of the person the immigrant that moved to Louisville and why they moved to Louisville. And you know they they all have great stories and you know like some of them had to flee civil war in Somalia to come here. Some moved here because of marriage or job location. And then the last thing I have here is a project a special project that we're working on.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Omar Ayyash: Roads to You, a celebration of one world. We are bringing 25 musicians from about 18 different countries to do 75 events for a week long in the in the community and it's music but it's really cross cultural understanding. It's getting people to understand the different cultures

Kirt Jacobs: When is that planning to be?

Omar Ayyash: This is going to happen May 14-20, 2007.

Kirt Jacobs: Oh wow so it's coming up.

Omar Ayyash: Yeah it is coming up.

Kirt Jacobs: Well cool this will probably air by that time Well cool I appreciate you sharing that with us

Omar Ayyash: My pleasure.

Kirt Jacobs: Could you describe in detail a particular incident or scenario in your professional or personal life where maybe you utilized a style philosophy of leadership. You might have touched upon it with the way you delegate you know with World Fest but maybe something else? Maybe was starting your small business that you had for a while.

Omar Ayyash: Well

Kirt Jacobs: Could be anything.

Omar Ayyash: Well there's two thoughts that come to my mind. One is with starting a business. I am a believer that yes you need a business plan and you need a roadmap and and my education particularly has highlighted that for me and and I believe in that. But at the same time you cannot spend too much time dwelling on the details. You have to be an aggressive undertaker like when I opened Omar's. I had Omar's operating before I even had a bank account.

Kirt Jacobs: You just put it on the air but I'll leave that alone

Omar Ayyash: And it's one of those things where I believe that you sometimes have to get things rolling the ball rolling to move in that direction. There were parts of you know other programs that I've worked on that you know not all the Is and all that the Ts all the I's were dotted all the Ts were crossed and I believe in that. The second philosophy that I have is this tough love. And you know I particularly use that with my kids and that's where you love them dearly but you've got to instill a sense of discipline and then when you're going to get them to focus on issues and and I think you're have to take that aspect of your life with everything that you work on/ You know in a sense that you yes you can be loose on or around certain issues but you have to be focused on other issues and you have to instill the vision and the goal of making things happen and you have to be firm at times. But you have to show care and attention to that.

Kirt Jacobs: I like that. That's a very neat answer. This question we like to ask a lot of our guests is can I just throw this when I was a surprise question. If you were granted two weeks today let's say the mayor in this case said you know Office of International Affairs close for two weeks. We don't need you. Turn in your cell phone, Blackberry. No e-mail. No access to computer. No television maybe even no access to your family. You got two weeks to do whatever

you want. What would you do with those two weeks? Can be anything.

Omar Ayyash: Anything you know the first thing that comes to my mind is to go back to Jordan

Kirt Jacobs: Really.

Omar Ayyash: Yeah to to I just did that last September.

Kirt Jacobs: How long were you over there?

Omar Ayyash: I was over there for 25 days.

Kirt Jacobs: Good lord. That's a trip.

Omar Ayyash: It was a trip.

Kirt Jacobs: That's almost a sabbatical or something,

Omar Ayyash: I think it was sort of something that I needed. It was you know to re-energize myself and and come back and work on special software business and things of that nature and. You know when you get over there the first week you're not turned off. The first week you're still completely thinking of things and making sure they are happening.

Kirt Jacobs: Decompressing as they call it.

Omar Ayyash: Two weeks in between you're really off. And that's when you're you know rebuilding the soul and your connection with family and having a good time. And in the final week you're gearing to come back.

Kirt Jacobs: Right

Omar Ayyash: I I've I've done that several times in my career. I I also did that in '98 with rotary I went to Japan for four weeks. It was a group study exchange program where they take care young

professionals to different parts of the world and it was a four week trip where you study about your profession in the particular country in my case it was Japan. It was fantastic. Again to go through that cultural experience. Other thing in that aspect that I you know I'm a big advocate of culture shock.

Kirt Jacobs: I can tell. Japan, Jordan, now here Lexington Ky to Louisville.

Omar Ayyash: You know you're going to go through that even though if you've been to a place or even gone through that experience. Your body will typically go through that it is a four stage the deal. You know the first stage is sort of like the honeymoon, You're excited about the process, And then you go into shock. Did I really you know do the right thing or not? And then maybe deny. And then the fourth stage you're comfortable. You've you know secured yourself in your position. I believe it or not and my four weeks in Japan I went through all four ...

Kirt Jacobs: Really

Omar Ayyash: ...experiences in four weeks.

Kirt Jacobs: Well I want to do it quick 360 here because we always like to ask this question to our guests whether they are young and old. When the great day comes Omar how do you want to be remembered? You know God forbid something terrible happens you walk out of here. How would you like to be remembered?

Omar Ayyash: I want to be remembered as a great father.

Kirt Jacobs: That's great and I like that. I think you're on your way got two young ones.

Omar Ayyash: Yes

Kirt Jacobs: Well you're on your way. It's quite a pleasure having you Omar on Leadership Landscape.

Omar Ayyash: Thank you

Kirt Jacobs: Thanks for being with us you're a great asset to our community.

Omar Ayyash: Thank you

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Kirt Jacobs: Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at kirt@moxietalk.com or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at www.moxietalk.com