

WE ARE #INITTOGETHER – COVID-19 UPDATES

Vienna

FOUNDER SPOTLIGHT: ROSA HALTMEYER FROM VIENNA HOBBY LOBBY

April 24, 2020 | Aneta Pawlik

When we talk about decreasing and closing the gaps preventing the achievement of social inclusivity in Austria, we often focus on barriers to accessing the job market, barriers to education for all, language learning and cultural integration. With today's conversation, we want to add to this list an important topic, explored by one of the participants of the 2020 found! program by Deloitte Austria and Impact Hub Vienna: barriers to leisure time.

As Rosa Haltmeyer, one of the co-founders of Vienna Hobby Lobby said, "Education doesn't stop when the school ends, everything is about continuing to learn and generating ideas." With that, I invite you to find out how this Viennese start-up supports children from disadvantaged backgrounds in learning outside of school.

** Please note that we recorded the interview in February 2020 and it doesn't directly address the current coronavirus situation. **



(Top row, left to right) Farah Saad (frida), Ariane Olschak (frida), Petra Aji (FoodStories), Rosa Haltmeyer (Vienna Hobby Lobby), Leila Salehiravesh (Ahl@n), (Bottom row, left to right) Valerie Mühlentburg (the CONNECTION), Diana Reuchlin (the CONNECTION), Denise Diex (ÖkonoWie?), Jasmin Abou Ahmed (ÖkonoWie). Photo © Lea Fabienne Photography – **View the press release announcing the 2020 cohort**

Hi, Rosa! Thank you for meeting me. To kick off the conversation, share with us your elevator pitch.

Would love to! We have to pitch all the time recently!

The Vienna Hobby Lobby offers free leisure courses for children in need. There are 400,000 pupils and teenagers that live in poverty in Austria and, as I started teaching in middle school in Vienna, I realised that almost all of them could not afford to go to dancing lessons or to a football game. We decided to offer these courses for free because we want all kids to be able to have free time activities and something to do after school. We want them to feel inspired, to get to know other kids in their communities and their districts. Leisure time activities should not be a privilege and we saw that it almost had become that in the last couple of years.

What I am hearing is that you have been a teacher before you founded the Vienna Hobby Lobby. What is your background?

Yes, although it is a little complicated! I attended fashion school in Vienna Hetzendorf, and then I switched to a BSc in national economics. During my undergraduate study, I started to get deeper into social policy and also migration and the educational system in Austria. I wrote my dissertation about the latter and this is how I got to know Teach for Austria, which is a great program through which you can teach even without studying to be a teacher specifically. I entered Teach for Austria. On top of that, and it sounds a bit cheesy, I always wanted to give back what I received. I received a great education and I had that possibility too to harness the opportunities given to me because my family always could afford that. Even though Austrian education is free, you still need your parents' support, for them to know about the system and how it works. To compare, getting a good education was much easier for me than for a child from Syria, that only got here three years ago and is facing different problems.

I always wanted to go in that direction, in the direction of supporting children that needed the most support.

It sounds to me that you are a multi passionate person!

That's correct! But it's often hard and a bit confusing! (laughter)



You are one of the four founders of your startup. How did you meet your co-founders?

I actually met them through Teach for Austria. I discovered that I had a student, let's call her Amanda. She always stayed late into the afternoon at my classes even though she had finished school already. Amanda did not want to go home because nobody was home, her parents worked a lot and they did not have much money left to afford to pay for some additional activities in the afternoon. This is when I realised that there are so many children that need something to do after school. I started talking about the lack of possibilities in the afternoon, the lack of support, anything that me and my colleagues always had as kids. Some colleagues, my co-founders, agreed with me that there were so many issues with what to do after school with these kids, who would come back from their holidays and say "It's great that we are back to school because there was nothing for us to do at home".

That's what connected us and we started working together. It's absolutely great to have them in our team.

From meeting your co-founders through Teach for Austria to getting into social entrepreneurship, that's a bit of a jump. What motivated you to turn this passion project into a business?

I always was afraid of becoming a social entrepreneur. It's honestly the thing that I never wanted to get into because I knew how hard it could be, how stressful and tough it can become. It's not always easy and it's not always as glamorous as we think. Social entrepreneurship is really hard to get into.

With the team, we had started already in my second year of Teach for Austria program and the events we organised attracted so many kids. The instructors, who were working with us on a volunteering basis, were so passionate about the project. Then, last year, we got into the Social Impact Award 2019 final and won, which meant we received some money to put into the idea. This is when I thought that maybe I should quit my job and focus on the project full-time. It wasn't the social entrepreneurship aspect that attracted me but the prospect of seeing my project grow into a bigger idea, a project that is accessible to children all over Vienna.

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make all children access that, develop themselves, have the same chances.

This motivation pushed me to take on this burden, become a social entrepreneur and pursue the goal, which is bigger than the job.

Tell me a bit more about the business side of your idea. How did you approach market research to further identify this market niche?

We already saw the gap based on our experiences. We performed an analysis, did a thorough desk research and found some projects that were doing similar things. For example, Wien Extra, which is amazing but doesn't reach the children we encountered somehow. We talked with a lot of youth centres and they saw the need for something with passion, something different, that would engage kids and not only fill their time but also connect with them.

We created a mini-pilot phase from March to May 2019 with seven courses and went into the schools and pitched our idea. A few kids came in the beginning and then more kids showed up. Actually, the demand was so huge in the end that we decided that this is worth pursuing. In our second phase, from September to December 2019, we launched 13 courses and we had more than 400 applications out of seven schools in the 10th district, in Favoriten.

Who is the target group of Vienna Hobby Lobby?

We actually have two target groups. One of our target groups are children, and then we also target kids from middle schools within the Favoriten district. Our kids come from different backgrounds; they are migrant kids and special needs children, kids from Austria, too.

There is another dimension to our project. Some of our instructors are also refugees, whom I met through different projects I was involved with. I got to know their problems and about their lives in Vienna, how difficult it was for them to get the permit to work. I suggested to them to join us and, in the past, almost half of our instructors had migrant or refugee backgrounds. They became these amazing role models for the children because they connected through their cultures and their understanding of various cultures. Everything works fine – the Turkish photographer is amazing with Serbian kids, Austrian kids and Turkish kids alike. The kickboxing trainer is from Damascus and he treats everyone the same but he also understands Arabic. They have so many different stories and they are willing to get involved with the project to gain more experience, to work with children.

So, this started as a program for children only, but now we also focus on our instructors too.

What would you say, as an educator yourself, are the particularly useful skills for someone working with kids with refugee or migrant backgrounds?

I don't think you need any special skill set, kids are all the same. They are amazing, they are impatient, but also passionate. Some are loud, some are quiet. You have these amazing small people, who are developing in their own kind of ways. What you need is what every teacher needs: they need to respect you, you need to know their boundaries, to have the cultural understanding of what they are going through. This is how we train our instructors as well, to see how to deal with conflict and deal with different religions and beliefs in one group.

It's way simpler than it seems.

In your journey to becoming a founder, you mentioned that you knew beforehand what challenges entrepreneurship brings. It sounds to me that you were already in the circle of social entrepreneurship.

Yes, we were already quite connected through Teach for Austria, they provide information about what to do after the 2-years fellowship program. When we started to create this pilot phase we also talked about getting funding, how to finance the project and what we will offer. Through the workshop with the Social Impact Award we connected to this network and we got to know Impact Hub Vienna too. Being in the SIA community we got to know found! and someone approached us and suggested that we should apply to the program. And this is how we qualified!

I also studied at the Vienna University of Economics and Business and knew a lot about their activities. Everything is so well connected and it's fantastic that you can get to know the people and information so quickly. There is always someone to help you out and suggest a new route or a new program, a grant.

I like that everyone is so helpful and supporting each other. Sometimes there are conflicts and jealousy. However, in general, everyone is cheering each other and working together rather than against each other.

What were the most helpful elements that propelled you further on your entrepreneur journey?

I think it is a little bit of everything. The people you get to know and the connections you make, the stories you hear. You meet these great people, everyone wants to help, has an idea or feedback. Sometimes it's absolutely horrible feedback, it really gets to you because the project is your baby. But this kind of feedback helps you even more than the praises that you get. The colleagues you find are another helpful aspect of being part of this ecosystem, you collaborate and form friendships. Finally, it's the methods and business skills that you learn during different programs. For example, writing business plans, how to pitch, impact evaluation, and how to think about your finances. I studied economics so I was fine with the business and financial sides, but had to learn more about applying this knowledge in a social entrepreneurship environment. There is so much to learn!

Now you are part of found! accelerator program. First of all, congratulations on being selected! Secondly, how has it been so far?

Thank you! It's amazing, even if we discussed some topics we have heard about previously, it also brought new interesting insights and perspectives. New ideas were generated and so many great people join you in your journey. It's one of the best aspects of the program that you get access to such smart people, who root for you and email you things to do, discuss with you. They cheer you on and are happy with you when you succeed, just like recently, when the Vienna Hobby Lobby received a 10,000 Euro grant from MEGA Bildungstiftung! This spirit of support is really something special.

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I just want to say that the Deloitte mentors are amazing! We have these three people, who are so deeply involved and share so much knowledge with us. It's such a privilege!

You have been running the Vienna Hobby Lobby for one and a half years now. What

would you say are the biggest lessons you learned in that period?

First of all, never give up. Our journey has been a constant of ups and downs, ups and downs, and after every lowest point there is an extremely happy moment two days later. It's a rollercoaster. Then, I would say, enjoy the team spirit. You can learn something new from everyone within the team, everyone has a talent, a strength, that is useful. It's amazing to see how much these different talents are needed within our team. The team spirit is everything, the project is only as good as the people who work on it. If you have a great team, you achieve bigger goals. Don't forget to celebrate the successes you reach.

Money is tight and this is true for everyone, who is an entrepreneur. You have to be creative, you have to think a little bit differently, to solve the issue of limited financial resources.

There is one question that I have been meaning to ask you. At Impact Hub Vienna we talk a lot about being an entrepreneur and entrepreneurs suffering from burnout. How do you manage when things get harder?

We talked about burnout and stress a lot during the Social Impact Award and back then, I still had my job and I wasn't a full-time entrepreneur. Once that changed, almost a month into it, I crashed. I had panic attacks, everything was too much because being an entrepreneur is very intense. I completely forgot what I learned during SIA, to put the project aside, take care of myself. It's really tough sometimes. I still feel very anxious, overwhelmed, and two weeks later I feel complete joy and happiness because the project is going well.

I think that fear of failure is a real issue and the pressure of everything happening at the same time. We should talk about this more openly, talk about coaching and therapy because you can't do it yourself. You need a coach, a mentor. I am super lucky because we had a great mentor during SIA and we got three amazing mentors now, through found!. It's really helpful to talk to people. I also have a coach whom I see on a weekly basis so I don't lose my sanity.

We should focus on these illnesses that we do not see easily, the illnesses plaguing my generation especially. Everyone is stressed all the time. It's really important to be at peace with yourself, listen to yourself and take time to recover.

You seem to be taking a very proactive approach now to manage stress!

Yes, now I am! It took me nine months to figure out how to manage my schedule, how I want to work, what my routine is, what my outlet is. I do yoga in the morning, before I go into the day, I will get up earlier if I have to because it helps me.

And there is one more thing that really helps me – budgeting. It really helped me to put a good budget in place, to really think about the future and save money. As an entrepreneur, you are responsible for people you work with and removing the financial anxiety helps so much. This realisation came to me during the found! program, as we are tackling the financial side of our venture quite intensively with the mentors. We have already had some successes thanks to the program!

Thank you so much, Rosa! It was lovely to chat with you and I wish you even more success throughout the found! program and beyond!

Photo by [Lea Fabienne Photography](#)

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I love marketing, black coffee, and reading. I work as a Content Marketing and SEO Manager at Impact Hub Vienna.

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