

Transcript of Podcast featuring Gabriella Akopyan

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Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan and this is the Manage-A-Bull podcast where we have in-depth conversations with students, faculty, staff, and alumni to give you a comprehensive picture into the life at university at Buffalo's School of Management. In today's episode, we speak with Gabriella Akopyan, a student in UB's MS in Business Analytics program from Armenia. In our conversation, we talk about her love for tennis, growing up in four different countries, and how the UB MS BA program has helped her develop her analytical and leadership skills. Gabriella, welcome to the show.

Gabriella Akopyan:

Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

All right. So just to get the ball rolling, we discovered an interesting fact about you in our research for this episode. I believe you are an amateur car racer and have participated in competitive races in the past and continue to do so even now. How did you discover that you had a passion for racing?

Gabriella Akopyan:

So, I think it came from my dad because me and my dad were practically best friend. We have a very interesting dynamic. I can just call him and talk to him about any random stuff. And my dad is a great driver, and since I was very, very young, I don't know, I would always see him driving and that's kind of... My passion developed. And I think I was very young. I was eight or nine, and my dad took me to drive in a very empty spot for the first time. And since then it was kind of something that we bonded over. And every time I would perform really well or win a tournament, that was my gift, to drive a car. And the older I got, the more I got into that. And I don't know, I just speed. I like the thrill of competition that also comes from my athletic occupation. Yeah, I think it started from my dad, but now I'm just so into that and I think the thrill for speed is something that gets me going.

Right.

Gabriella Akopyan:

I just love driving.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

That is such an interesting thing. And competitive driving is its own... As you said, it's super thrilling to be behind the wheel of a car, especially in a competitive environment. And you are no stranger to competition, right? We could spend hours talking about how many accolades you have won in the past, both for athletics and for academics. But I would like to focus a little bit on UB's women's varsity team. Tell us a little bit about the team and what's your role with them.

Gabriella Akopyan:

I mean, it's such a gift to be on this team because we're practically a family. We were randomly selected from so many countries by our coach and became just best friends. Almost all of us live together and we spend all our time together. And I don't know, it's just so amazing to be on this kind of team where you can create such deep and meaningful connections. I know when I will graduate and move on with life, we will all still be friends and probably attend each other's weddings and all of that. It means the world. We actually had an amazing win yesterday. We just started our conference play for this year. And this year I'm also the captain of the team. So it's just a great experience of being a leader, but also learning from people from all different countries, their perspectives. And all of my teammates are absolutely incredible smart women. It's just learning from them every day is just such a blessing. I could not have asked for a better team that I have.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And this isn't the first time. You mentioned that you're the captain of the team, but this isn't the first time that you've taken on a leadership role in your student life, right? You have been, just to state a few, the vice president of the Mid-American Conference Council of Student Athlete and the MAC conference, NCAA Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. You've had so many different roles in positions where you've been a leader. What is the underlying motivation for taking on these leadership positions? Where does the motivation come from?

Gabriella Akopyan:

Think that it started off with me just being very outgoing and just talking to so many people and feeling that I can actually influence people in a good way, that I have a lot of stuff I can share with them. And I'm coming from a place where people face a lot of adversity, I would say, and just I have a very big passion for making a change and making the difference. Because I really believe into the fact that all my experience within athletics, meeting people from many countries, living in different countries will help me to do so. And I just really want to leave this world better than I came into that. So, I would say that is my biggest motivation.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And that's such a wonderful way to look at it. You mentioned you come from a place that has seen conflict. And culture can play a very strong role in guiding people. Some cultures emphasize competition while others encourage collaboration. In what way did growing up in four different countries, Russia, Spain, Belarus, and Armenia, influence your drive to compete at both the national level and the international stage?

Gabriella Akopyan:

Yeah, definitely. All the countries I lived in, they're so different and the mentality's so different, I would say. I was originally born in Moscow and I spent the majority of my life there and my parents still live in Moscow. So, I would say in Russia we approach leadership in a very different way. I think that we have a more authoritarian approach, which obviously I was used to that and that's something I've seen my whole life. But then moving to Spain, for example, I encountered absolute different mentality. And I think it was just great to see how... As you say, culture affects us in so many different ways.

And now being here in the US and seeing how... For example, I think in US we have a more collaborative approach. And I think when you learn so many different perspectives to leadership, it helps you to grow as a leader and become a better leader because you meet a person from Russia, you know what is the best way to approach to that person, and then you meet someone from US and you know how to approach them better. So, it's just a really great learning experience to be able to encounter leadership in so many countries.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And I think you mentioned, that's such a perfect way of putting it, that you can learn so many different types of leaderships that help you in different circumstances because I think people make the mistake of thinking leadership is this one thing, that if you behave in this particular way, that's leadership. But culture plays a big role. Different people react to different leadership styles. And that is something that we learn here at UB also in the School of Management, that when it comes to leadership, there are many, many different layers to it. So, let's expand a little bit further on that and your interest in leadership. Why do you think it's important to develop these soft skills, especially when the world is becoming so much more numbers driven, it's becoming such a quantitative world? It's almost feels like people are taking a second seat sometimes, right? Why do you think it's important to develop these soft leadership skills?

Gabriella Akopyan:

I think that we need to... As you say, our world develops and shifts towards machine learning and all of that. I think it's important to remember that at the end of the day, we're all humans and we have emotions and we have feelings. And while, yes, some of us are better in quantitative fields, some of us are better public speakers, but at the end of the day, that's what unites us, being humans and having emotions. And we think that also we can learn how to count in two, three days or in a short amount of time, but you cannot become a good leader in one day. You need to learn it throughout your life.

And I don't think that there is any point in life where you can say, "Oh, I'm an amazing leader. There is nothing else I can... There's no areas I can improve on." I think for me, every day even... I will bring an example on my coaches. Every day I learn from them. Every single day I can see how I can become a better leader. And here at UB, we're so lucky to have so many amazing leader. Professors, faculty staff. I mean, just even students. So many great leaders to learn from. Yeah.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah. So many great leaders to learn from. I'm really thankful that you mentioned students too, because oftentimes leadership or learning about leadership seems like a top-down activity. Oh, you learn from your professors, your coaches. But there are such great examples of leaders just peer to peer that are great sources of learning at UB, and I completely concur with that. But taking on so many leadership positions, captain of the varsity team and other student organizations, it sounds like a lot of fun, but it is a lot of work. So, what does a typical day in your life look like? Because you have such a unique profile from all the other people that we interview on this podcast, I'm really interested to know, how busy

does your schedule get and what does a typical day look like?

Gabriella Akopyan:

Yeah, sometimes it gets pretty overwhelming and busy, especially during the season because we travel a lot for matches, and combining studies and extra curriculum activities and traveling to the tournament is really hard. But usually in the beginning of the semester, my plan is to wake up around 5:30 AM. I would say that toward the middle of the semester, that changes a bit because waking up at 5:30 is not [inaudible 00:10:32]. So usually I wake up around 6:00, 6 30. I have a conditioning session with the team, then I usually have some time for meetings, and then I have tennis practice. And then obviously, I have classes, which I need to... It depends on the day because I have different schedule every day. Yeah. And then just meetings, [inaudible 00:10:55] to Zoom, that now we can have virtual meetings and you don't really have to go everywhere all the time.

Yeah. And then just trying to do as much schoolwork as possible. Sometimes I stay up so very late, which is not a good habit to have, but it is what it is. You got to get the job done. But sometimes it gets really overwhelming. And I think everyone always asks me, "As a leader, how do you keep up the balance?" I think it's important for people to understand that sometimes leaders themselves, they struggle with the balance, and I think sometimes people need to have more understanding of that. I would say that that is an area in my life that I am trying to work on and how to find proper balance between work, studies, and personal life.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. And you mentioned Zoom and how that can be such a blessing because we save so much time traveling to and from meetings. What are some other tools that help you stay on track? Because I'm sure it gets difficult just keeping your head straight in terms of all the school deliverables and all the things that you need to do for other teammates. As a leader, there are expectations that you would be more prepared for a meeting, let's say, than the average person. So, what are some tools other than Zoom that you utilize in your everyday life that help you organize your day?

Gabriella Akopyan:

So, first and foremost, in the beginning of the semester, I always go through all of my due date assignments and I have a separate calendar, which is on my wall so I don't forget, I color code it. That's number one thing. Without that calendar, I don't think I would be able to survive. I'm also pretty old

fashioned and I like to write stuff. So I have a notebook where I have everything written down for the day, "Okay, this is what I need to do today, this is what can wait till tomorrow." And honestly, I'm also very lucky because I'm a part of the Athletics family and we have a lot of resources to help us, academic advisors and just supervisors who help us to manage our time a bit. And I would say I just have amazing teammates who sometimes remind me to do some stuff. But usually, it would be the calendar and the notebook. I just like to write stuff down. I don't know if you will believe me. I don't have a Google Calendar or any online calendar that I put stuff in.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. I find that so difficult to believe, especially in the digital world that we live in. Because I live off of my calendar. If it's not on my calendar, I won't remember. I'm actually so bad that I would forget my own birthday if it's not on my calendar. So, that is quite shocking that you're still very analog in keeping track of things. But I think the benefit of actually writing something down, it does kind of imprint something in our mind so that it certainly is a better activity because it involves more effort in some ways.

Gabriella Akopyan:

It takes more time, but definitely as you say, it makes me remember stuff more.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. It's a great thing that you mentioned the support system that you have around you, not just as an athlete, but also as a student at UB. Coaches and peers are, obviously, one of them. So let's shift gears and focus a little bit more about the academic aspect of your experience here, right? The business analytics program. Now, you did your undergraduate in business administration with a focus on, if I remember correctly, marketing. How did you decide that business analytics, which it seems like such a tangential jump, was an area where you wanted to focus next after marketing? And essentially, why choose the MS BA over, I don't know, let's say an MBA, which would be a much more natural path forward from a business administration undergrad?

Gabriella Akopyan:

I think that for me, a big thing was to come out of my comfort zone and learn something new. Because I had couple conversations with faculty and my friends who were already in an MBA program, and I

thought that there will be plenty of things I can learn, but I didn't feel that I would get more of a technical background, which I was lacking. And also, my last semester as an undergraduate student, I took, I think, analytics class and I just fell in love with that.

I realized that this is my weakness, and since I want to be a leader and I want to be a change, I thought that knowing at least basics of every aspect of business will help me to be a better leader basically. And this was a great decision. Honestly, it has been really challenging because till last year's August, I never in my life even thought I'll be able to code something. So it was a lot of new stuff, but I definitely went out of my comfort zone. I mean, it was a great decision. I just owe a lot to our faculty who are so helpful. Anytime I have any question, I can go and ask them and it's amazing. So, I'm very happy that... I chose the right program for me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So growing as a professional, being able to look at a problem from multiple angles was a motivating factor in deciding to go after the MS BA program. Looking back to almost a year ago, because you're almost through with the program now, how has the MS BA program helped you grow both as a person and as a leader?

Gabriella Akopyan:

Mean, as I said, I think there was a lot of tactical skills that I gained that definitely helped me to grow as a professional. But I think I had a chance to meet people who already had experience in industry, and honestly, I learned so much from them. I realized that as a person who just graduated from undergrad, never actually worked in industry, I realized that it is a different environment. And just listening to all those stories from my friends, that has been amazing. And I also think that I just met a lot of great people and I'm a very people-oriented person, so that just... I don't know, I just like to talk to people and to get to know them. So having so many people from different countries and different perspectives, again, that helped me to understand other cultures way more and that also helped me to grow as a person a lot, I think.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So, from what I'm hearing is the experience has been very fruitful and it has achieved a lot of the things that you set out to achieve through it. Personal growth, leadership abilities, quantitative abilities, meeting new people. Was there anything that surprised you, a learning about yourself that you didn't

think was possible before through your experience? Tell us about one thing that surprised you during your time in the MS BA program.

Gabriella Akopyan:

Honestly, I think that I never... I already brought that up before, but I never thought I would be able to code. I never thought that that is a possibility for me. I couldn't see myself doing it at all, and it seemed like it's such a big deal. I remember when I coded the first thing in my, I don't remember, predictive analytics class, I think, I was literally taking a video and sending it to my dad, and I was like, "Oh, [inaudible 00:18:34] to code, and then this works and this works." I was so excited. So I think that is something that I was surprised is that how fast it was actually possible to learn it and to have not only basic understanding, but maybe even having intermediate level of certain languages such as Python or SQL.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So from my conversations with students who are also part of the same program, the thing that often comes out is that it is quite intense. The learning curve is quite steep. You're taking classes in predictive analytics, in database management systems, in data modeling. These are very heavy subjects, right? They sound like there's a lot, especially for someone who doesn't have a background in that. A lot of the students in your cohort would obviously be people with a lot of work experience. They either know the language, they've done SQL before, they know Python, they're subject matter experts in one technical field or the other. Tell us a little bit more about the class experience of sitting next to someone who knows a coding language extremely well. Was that a detriment to the learning process for you as someone who was a novice, or was that beneficial?

Gabriella Akopyan:

Think for me was very beneficial because as we already understood, I am a very competitive person. So, having someone knowing something better than me kind of motivated me to actually study even better. But to be real, I think that I met really good people who were willing to help when I would be stuck with an assignment and they wouldn't know how to do it, and I would just ask for the help and they would always... I have never encountered anyone to say, "Oh, no, I will not help you." They were so kind to me to just sit down and explain. And in my program, we have two more tennis players, and one of us is really proficient with all those things, so he was a great help. And my teammate who is on UB women's

tennis team, we've been through all of this together. So it was very fun to always having this study buddy, and that's kind of motivating both of us to become even better. So, I think it was beneficial for all of us.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right.

Gabriella Akopyan:

I think we kind of set each other up for success.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So the business analytics program tends to attract people who are comfortable with numbers, right? Large majority of individuals who apply or who get in are people who come with a lot of industry background, they have that kind of mindset already. What would be your advice to our listeners who are also considering the options for doing an MS BA, but may not necessarily be very comfortable with quantitative fields or may not have a background in them?

Gabriella Akopyan:

I think that I can be a good example of not having the background and still doing it. I think that I was very stressed in the beginning of the program because I remember I had conversations with the faculty director about, "Do you think I need to prepare myself in some sort of way?" And just take that risk and you will not regret it for a fact. You will learn so much. And faculty is just amazing. Even if you have absolute zero knowledge, you will still get so much out of this program because I think the classes were constructed in a way that the first couple of sessions would be introductory and for people who had no idea that was some sort of a warmup. And even for people who already knew all that stuff, it was good for them to revise that. So, I think that if you are scared, not sure, just take that risk and you will never regret it.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Great. I think that's a great piece of advice. Just take that leap of faith and you won't regret it as long as you have the attitude that I'm here to learn. The program is structured in such a way... As you

mentioned, it introduces you, it lets you kind of wet your feet a little bit, just test out the waters a little bit at the beginning, and then it ramps up very quickly. So it's always best to have that support system around you, and I'm glad that you were able to find that.

This is a little bit of a different question, but you're in a unique position to answer it, so I want to ask. You've been with UB for quite some time, right? You've done your undergraduate here, you've been involved very heavily in organizations, in Athletics. You are True Blue. You are what we consider this is UB, this is the face of UB, right? How has the experience of growth been for you as an international student who, just fresh off the boat, you came here? How has the experience of A, being in Buffalo been like, and the experience of growing as a person within the UB environment been for you?

Gabriella Akopyan:

I just think that something that makes Buffalo unique and different from any other place I've ever been are the people. And no matter when, no matter what time of the day, no matter what happened, I knew that I have people who I can call and ask for help. And I think that was the biggest difference. And honestly, when I came to UB in the fall of 2019... So, I've been through a pandemic with UB. That was the best decision in my entire life. And again, my team is just my second family. They are just amazing. My coaches, whole UB Athletic staff, all UB School of Management staff. Never have I ever encountered a misunderstanding. Faculty stuff was always very understanding when it came to games, matches, and busy tennis schedule. So people made you be so... Not made. Make UB so unique. And coming to UB, probably best decision in my entire life, and if you ask me if I would do it all over again, I would say that I would still choose UB.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. It's interesting to me that no matter how many conversations I have on this podcast with people, the unique thing about just how helpful people in Buffalo are and just the culture of Buffalo that is very... We mentioned collaborative leadership in the beginning. People are genuinely very helpful. I don't know if it's because we have such terrible winters sometimes that you rely on complete strangers to help you get your car out of a ditch. But it is definitely truly unique to Buffalo, just how wonderful the people are. And I can speak for myself as an international student who knew nobody coming in, just within a span of a year there's so many people that I met, so many people who have become lifelong friends that I would keep in touch with for the rest of my life, whose weddings I would attend, as you mentioned at the beginning.

Gabriella Akopyan:

Exactly.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

So I can talk to you for hours about leadership and about the experience at UB, but let's try and summarize this conversation. What advice would you have for students who are starting their very first semester with us, both, let's say, as an undergrad, and how would that advice be different for someone who's starting their first semester in the MS BA program?

Gabriella Akopyan:

Honestly, I would say it will be a general advice. Just, as I said before, take the risks. Don't think, "Oh, I cannot do this." Just believe in yourself no matter what. You just can do that. As soon as you are into this, you will be able to do it. You will have people to help you out. And just work hard every day and everything will come to its place. Buffalo is a great place to be and will set up you to further success. So long as you're willing to take some extra steps, you will always come out on top. So just believe in yourself and work hard, I would say.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Stay organized. Use a diary. That's-

Gabriella Akopyan:

Exactly.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Rather than the Google Calendar. And stay on track and keep your head down and work hard. I think that's a great piece of advice and a good piece of advice for anybody coming from any place and in any sphere of life. Gabriella, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us and sharing your experiences. If our listeners want to follow your journey, if they want to see what you're doing academically, professionally, or even in athletics, where can they find you?

Gabriella Akopyan:

Thank you for the conversation. I enjoyed it very much and I hope that some of my insights will help our listeners. And you can find me on Instagram, [gabriella_akopyan](#). And you can find me on LinkedIn as well, just my first and last name.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wonderful. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Gabriella Akopyan:

Thank you.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

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