

Transcript of Podcast featuring Leah Ruiz

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Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Hi, I'm Vish Gopalakrishnan. And this is the Manageable podcast where we have in-depth conversations with students, faculty, staff, and alumni to give you a comprehensive picture into the life at University of Buffalo's School of Management. In today's episode, we speak with Leah Ruiz, a student in UB's full-time MBA program from Buffalo, New York. In our conversation, we talk about her passion for entrepreneurship, marketing, makeup artistry, and how the UB full-time MBA program is an ideal fit for people interested in pursuing careers in digital marketing. Leah, welcome to the show.

Leah Ruiz:

Thank you, Vish. Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here. And just a heads-up, I am a little bit sick, so I apologize if I have to cough a bit.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

You know what, that's completely fine. The weather's changing outside. The sun's finally out. So I am grateful that we finally get to start going outside and feel better about ourselves. So if you need to cough, that's completely fine. Don't worry about it. So let's jump into it. I learned an interesting thing about you and our research for this podcast. You come from a family of serial entrepreneurs. In fact, you were just nine years old when you started your first business. Tell us a bit more about Leah's Duct tape stuff.

Leah Ruiz:

So since I can even remember, I have always been very creative. And one thing I love to do when I was younger was get these art kits. So I remember shopping with my mom once and there was a duct tape jewelry kit. And I was like, whoa, that seems pretty cool. I tried it. I went on YouTube and I was like, what else can I do? Because I didn't really like the jewelry aspect of it. But I was like, this seems like we could do something cooler with the duct tape. So I went on YouTube, just spent hours searching stuff you could do with it. I found a video on how you could make a wallet, a functional duct tape wallet. And so I tried it. First one went horribly terrible.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wait, so this is a wallet that's just made out of duct tape?

Leah Ruiz:

Yes, just duct tape. Nothing else.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow.

Leah Ruiz:

Yeah, it was kind of crazy. So I made the first one. It didn't come out so great, but I was so determined. I kept trying and I kept watching hundreds of videos. And then I actually ended up getting really good at it, and it was something that I was really proud of. So I went to my mom and she was like, "We live in the Elmwood Village area. This is such in a creative area. People would love this. And I'm sure if you sat outside and sold these to people, they would love it. They would buy them all up." So that's exactly what I did. I had a little stand. I would sit outside my mom's job every single weekend and just sell my creations. And I had my own table and I would actually be making them in front of people. And people would love to just stand there and watch me and see how it's done.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow.

Leah Ruiz:

So yeah, and then it spiraled off from there. I started making journaling things, pens, more intricate wallets like a trifold, stuff with... I started incorporating Velcro, and IDs, and it was just... I loved it.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And everything made from duct tape?

Leah Ruiz:

Yes. I had about, I would say over a hundred different roles of different colors and designs.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. That's such a interesting. And it's a great way to use your creativity. I mean, a lot of kids that age, you have lemonade stands, maybe cookies, things like that. But this is so interesting. I have had many people on this show who have had a bent for entrepreneurship. And I think most have said that they come from families with a lot of entrepreneurs or have extended family with people who started their own businesses or aside hustle. Tell me, where does this entrepreneurial bend come from? What inspired you to do this?

Leah Ruiz:

So I would have to say the same. Both of my parents are entrepreneurs from the very beginning. So my mom, I think when she was about 17 or 18, she had a deep passion for hair. She loved styling, coloring, cutting, everything that had to do with hair. And so she would be working at Super Cuts, these chain... I mean hair salons. She didn't really share the same values with her bosses. She didn't agree with the way they were running things. So one day she decided, I can do this on my own. I'm going to start my own salon. And she actually did. And ever since then, it's been thriving for I think about 15 years now. And she loves it. She loves going into work every single day and she can never get enough of it.

Then my dad, same thing. I think he was a bit younger actually. I remember the story, I think he got a loan of a thousand dollars, something not huge. But he took that and ran with it, and he started a whole store. He would sell everything he possibly could. He would sell pagers, CDs, vinyls, phones, everything you could even think of. And to this day, he's always looking for new business venture. So he started a liquor store, which is still running and thriving. He's always looking to the future where he can go up and up.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. That's truly inspiring to have parents who find a passion and then stick with it. But entrepreneurship isn't the only thing that you're interested in. I was amazed to find out that you have also worked as a makeup artist and have a talent for creating art with makeup. How did you discover that you had a talent for makeup artistry?

Leah Ruiz:

So I would say I kind of got over the duct tape thing. It was kind of getting out of fashion. And then me and my YouTube, I was just looking. I would see so many videos of people doing these really cool makeup, different colored eyeshadow and all these different designs. And I know I would always look up to my older cousin. She loved makeup. And one day I got a hand-me-down makeup kit. I thought it was

the best thing in the world. And I took that and ran with it. I would follow all these YouTube videos and practice almost every night, I think. And I started to get really good. And I even created my own Instagram page where I would post the different makeup looks that I would do. And I really started to get awareness from people in the neighborhood, people in my school. And then my mom also would show her clients at the salon.

So they started asking, "I want her to do my makeup." And then so from there, it kind of grew into a professional thing because I started doing it in a salon. I started doing wedding makeup, I started doing makeup for all the bridesmaids, birthday makeup, anything you can think of, I would do it. And still to this day, I love the creative aspect of makeup and I don't think that's something I'll ever lose.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. I guess we all get started with our hobbies or passions when we are encouraged to do so by the people around us. You mentioned your cousin and also just people in the neighborhood were interested in the talent that you've displayed. I could talk for myself. Mine's not lucrative. I like reading. I know it's very boring and basic. But I got that from watching my parents devour our books, or newspapers and magazines every day. And it just kind of stuck with me. Even now, I can't go to sleep unless I'm reading a book. So I completely understand how you got started. And it's wonderful to see that you had the kind of environment around you that encouraged you to pursue this passion. And now, let's talk about your other passion, marketing. When people think of UB, they think big, huge research university with a massive focus on engineering and highly technical subjects like predictive analytics. How did you decide that UB would be a good place for studying marketing at a master's level?

Leah Ruiz:

Well, from the jump, from high school when I was even looking at colleges and deciding where to go, I knew that I didn't want to go anywhere far. I kind of was a little bit close-minded about it. But I knew, I think the farthest I was willing to go was Rochester.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Oh, this is... Okay.

Leah Ruiz:

An hour away. But it's not only the distance. I knew that UB had such an amazing business school. And from the jump I knew I wanted to do the 3+2 Program. So I knew that I wanted to go for my master's

just because I feel like in today's society, that's almost a standard now. It's not seen as something that's overly attractive. It's kind of like you need it. So I was like, I'm going to give myself the best shot I can. I'm going to get my master's. So yeah, I also had my best friend's dad went for the master's at UB. And he was telling me all these amazing things. He was saying there's so much scholarships, financial aid, the program is so welcoming and integrated, and they really make you feel like they want what's best for you.

He also introduced me to the assistantships. I had no idea what that was, but he was like you can get a graduate assistant position and they actually pay for your tuition. So I was like, oh my God, this is amazing. I'm going to apply. And so from there, I pretty much had my mindset on this school checks all the boxes for me, and that was it. I just decided to go.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

That's incredible. It's heartening to see just a positive connection UB has with the local community here in Buffalo. It is such a massive presence in so many people's lives. And if you go to any business locally, chances are that the person you're working with or working for definitely has some UB connection. Either they did their undergrad here or graduate school. But your journey with UB didn't start at the master's level. You mentioned 3+2. So you started as an undergrad. And if I remember correctly, you did your undergrad in business administration. And then through that undergrad decided to pursue a 3+2 program, which is essentially a way four undergraduate to also pursue a master's degree and graduate with both. So you have an interesting perspective in the sense that you have had that undergrad experience and also the master's experience right now. Tell us how is the Master's experience different from the business administration undergrad experience?

Leah Ruiz:

Oh, I would say they are night and day for me. I remember the undergrad, since you're in a lot of huge classes, I remember having classes with 300, 400 kids. It's not as involved as I would've liked. You would have group projects and you kind of felt the sense that the other students were just there to get the work done and get their grade. But in the graduate program, you are really involved, you're really incorporated, you know everything about your group. Everything about every single person in your group. And it's kind of like you form these long-lasting relationships with them.

And not only the group work, I feel that the teachers, they really want what's best for you and they really want you to succeed, which is something I've never seen before in other schools. And I remember just in one of my marketing classes the other day, I saw a student go up to the teacher just to ask him

how he was doing. And the teacher right away was like, "You know what, let's catch up over coffee. My treat." And I'm just like, wow, that is so... I've never seen that. That was just really mind-blowing to me because it's so friendly, it's so inviting. And so yeah, I would say I love it. It is a lot harder work, more heavy workload. But I would say it's so worth it because you get so many opportunities and you really feel like you're there, and people want you to be there, and they want you to succeed.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

You mentioned working very closely with your teams, which is a unique feature, not just of the graduate program, but the UB MBA program itself. There's something called Corporate Champions, which essentially is that you have a team. It's four to six people, they try to keep it to about four to five people. And your entire first year of the MBA program, you're working extremely closely with this group, especially the first semester. The second semester you add on a few more teams, it gets a little bit more complicated. But truly, if you have a great team and if you work on those relationships, they can be very rewarding. I can say that for myself, the team that I had was filled with professionals who taught me so much more. Even as an experienced professional coming into the program myself, I think I learned more from them than I ever taught them.

So the teamwork aspect is certainly great, and the small class sizes definitely helps. I don't think I've ever had a class in the MBA program that was more than 30, maybe 35 students. So you do get a lot of personal attention that way and interaction with professors. So you decide to pursue the full-time MBA as part of the 3+2 program. Let's talk a little bit about your experience in the program so far. You're just about to complete your first year, your second semester. What have been some of your favorite classes in the program so far and why?

Leah Ruiz:

Well, I like to gauge my favorite based on what my biggest takeaways were and what I valued from them. So my biggest takeaway I would say would be the first year management communications course. I've never been a really good public speaker. And that was one of the things that coming into the program I really wanted to work on because I know I've always heard that you're going to get hit with so many presentations. And by the end of this program you're going to be amazing at it. And I was like, yes, that is something I really need to work on. So this was the first course where we were actually hit with a pretty big individual presentation and I was really nervous for it. But the teacher, Marianne Rogers, she made it so easy. She made it so that you could present about whatever you want so that you would feel more comfortable.

And so I presented on the lack of diversity in the beauty industry just because that's one of my passions. And I was so nervous, but at the end I was like, wow, that actually wasn't that bad. And I just felt so proud of myself. And so that was just amazing. And then another course, just because of my background for entrepreneurship. The intro to entrepreneurship course I thought was really cool. Just because the teacher, he, himself, was an entrepreneur and he was so ready to back these students up. He was like, "If you guys have an idea and you think there's really a job to be done in the market for it, and it would really just really do well." He was like, "I would invest. I be there for you the whole way." And I was like, wow, that's amazing. So yeah, that was another really interesting to learn those concepts.

And then lastly, I would say marketing research, which is what I'm taking now. At first, I really did not like it because statistics is not one of my best subjects. I have never really liked that and I did not know that this class would have such a deep background in statistics. But the teacher, he makes it so easy for you to learn. He really walks around, makes sure every single student understands what they're learning and that is just something new to me. And he's making it easier and more fun to learn the concepts.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. So are you taking it with professor Andrew Neel?

Leah Ruiz:

Yep.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. Yeah, I remember that experience too. Especially learning SPSS. Yes. Statistical packages for something-something. I don't remember. You have the full format.

Leah Ruiz:

I don't know what it stands for [inaudible 00:16:17].

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

But it is an IBM product and fairly complicated one. And well-used in marketing research. You mentioned entrepreneurship class. And I just wanted to touch upon that and talk a little bit more on it. One of the most interesting things about that class is that you actually work on a real business idea with your team. So if there's 15 teams, 10 teams in a cohort, everybody comes up with a new business idea that has some viability and you spend the entire semester doing the research, kind of doing some

empathy interviews, putting it all together into a nine-minute presentation at the end of the semester where you present in front of actual investors. They're not necessarily going to invest in the business itself, but they're there to bring in the kind of questions and background where they ask you extremely pointed questions like, "Okay, go back to your financials. Can you explain how you came up with these numbers?"

And it's almost like a shark tank kind of experience and a great way to learn the intricacies of business in general. You also mentioned communications, the most dreaded class by a lot of people because on the very first day... And I don't know if I'm allowed to spin the beans here, but on the very first day you're going to go to class thinking, oh, we're just going to talk about the syllabus, and the midterms, and finals, and all the deliverables. Oh, no. Oh, no. There's a surprise. And it's not a surprise that everyone enjoys. But definitely a great class because it helps you build the confidence to now if I have to present in front of a hundred people, it's not a big deal. I can just stand up and talk.

And I know a lot of my friends in the cohort who were not great public speakers are so much more comfortable now in crowd. And they at least have now the tools they need to prepare so that they can feel confident. Now, you mentioned at the beginning that you know, were interested in marketing, I think I mentioned it. Especially digital marketing and specifically social media marketing or content marketing. You also have an Instagram page for your makeup artistry. So why social media in particular? Why that aspect of marketing in particular?

Leah Ruiz:

Well, I think creating my own Instagram page... Just because at first in my undergrad, I didn't know exactly what subject of business I wanted to do. But in growing my Instagram page, I kind of fell in love with marketing because in a sense, I was marketing myself, I created my own brand identity and I spreading this brand awareness to others. And that was something that I really enjoyed. And also in following so many makeup companies, I was seeing their advertising promotions, and how they would sell their product, and how they would advertise. And I just thought it was so interesting. So in the sense I was marketing myself without even knowing.

And another reason that I really enjoyed this idea of social media marketing was that in working at Karma Salon, I kind of catapulted the idea of the salon is pretty traditional, pretty old-fashioned, it would really benefit from getting on all the social medias. So I started that whole process. I got them on all of the social media platforms and it really benefited from that. They got so much more sales, so many more clients, and it's like business has really just been booming from there. So that's just something so rewarding for me, and I feel like that's something I would really enjoy doing as a career.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. It's great that you were able to learn as you went along and learn by doing essentially because you had this business idea of your own, your mom's business. And you were able to learn as much as you could online and then apply those learnings to actually make a difference if the business sales increased, if engagement increased, that's incredible. And I'm sure classes and courses in the program, especially digital marketing analytics is one, marketing research is another one, are going to give you the tools you would need to further that journey and bring in a lot more knowledge into how to run those businesses. So it's great that you're already focused on social media and doing so much in it.

As a second semester MBA student, you're probably in the middle of figuring out what you're going to do over the summer. We get about a hundred days between the first year and second year. A lot of students choose to do internships, some students choose to pursue certifications, others just like to explore because it's maybe a new city, a new country, and you haven't had the time to do that. Can you walk us through what are your plans for the summer? And what type of resources has UB provided you to help you chart out what your journey is going to be when the school is not in sessions?

Leah Ruiz:

Yeah, so I'm actually so happy to share that I actually got internships already with Mattel Fisher-Price. And I'm really excited for that. And I would say one of the best things that helped me was the career resource center at UB. Because I remember specifically Pam reached out to me and she was like, "I see you have this internship, the interview coming up. Please come in and we can do a practice one-on-one. I can help you. Whatever you need, I'm there for you." And she actually sent me some practice interview questions. She really gave me everything I needed to succeed in that interview. And I just thank her a million times because I really feel that without going to her for help, I don't think I would've gotten that internship. And so I'm so blessed and so happy to share that. She is the main reason I got that. And yeah, that was really...

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Yeah, the CRC definitely has a lot of deep connections with a lot of companies, especially big companies locally. I know they work very closely with Fisher-Price that often comes to UB to get their summer MBA interns. M&T Bank is another one, a large organization that's also locally based. There's a few others that come to mind. So it's incredible. Not just the resources in terms of cover letter writing workshops and resume workshops. But also the personal involvement of a lot of the CRC academic advisors or

career advisors who, as you mentioned, they chase after you and they're like, "Hey, we want the best students to go to this internship because this is a repeat customer for us. This is someone who comes to our campus to get candidates every year." So they invest a lot of themselves in helping students get in. So CRC, absolutely great resource, especially if you as a student, apply yourself and have a concerted effort in using the resources that they have now. So you're almost one year through with your graduate MBA experience, right?

Leah Ruiz:

Yep.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Overall, how has the UB MBA stacked up to the expectations you had about personal growth and professional growth when you decided to pursue it as a 3+2 student?

Leah Ruiz:

Honestly, it has exceeded my expectations because even coming into the graduate program, I was fully expecting... I was doing a deep dive for scholarships and figure out how long I was going to pay for this. And again, they reached out to me with the graduate assistant position, which came with a full tuition waiver. And I just feel that they give you so many opportunities and I'm just so grateful for those. I feel that not only with financial aid, but networking. They give you many opportunities to meet new people and make those connections. And you never know who you meet now who's going to give you an opportunity in the future. So it's all about making those connections. And I'm so excited to see what else they have to offer. There's always a new opportunity every day.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Networking is one thing. There's so many resources available, there's so much happening, which can be intimidating for a lot of students. But it's also exciting in the sense that you can chart out what you can pick and choose what works best for you and go from there. So those are the positive things. If you could change one thing about the program and your experience in it so far, what would that be?

Leah Ruiz:

For me, honestly, I think I would love to see a little bit more involvement in the marketing department, especially because going into my second semester or my second year. I was a little saddened to see that

there's not many courses offered in the fall. And this is really what I want to do. I wanted to take marketing classes the whole year and because I'm just so interested in it. And so yeah, that was a bit of a bummer to me. But hopefully, I'll get more options in the spring. And then another thing, I wish the material was a bit more involved in a sense, say for digital marketing, I kind of wish we had our own social media, we had our own business that we were marketing for. We would get hands-on experience with, or we would reach out to companies who may need help. And instead of just learning from textbook or learning from just listening to a lecturer, I really appreciate more hands-on work.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. I think that's a great point. And definitely one of the thoughts that's currently being evaluated in the program is the possibility of taking the entrepreneurship class and the business that students create as part of that and extending it across multiple courses to try and see, because that's an actual real business idea. Yeah, maybe it can be used for digital marketing and other things. But digital marketing especially is a field where you learn a lot more by doing. And Facebook business manager and Google Analytics are the kind of things that you can read about them all you want. But once you get into the backend and once you start exploring what's available, you learn a lot. And I know that one path of the digital marketing course, you actually do get to experience that. You do get to see what Meta business manager looks like and play around with it.

But yes, absolutely, if you had a real business idea, it would've been a much different experience. Now I know you didn't just attend classes while in school. You mentioned graduate assistantship, so that that's an on campus job. And you've also been an active student ambassador in the Dean Student Ambassador Program, which is this highly selected program where students are handpicked to represent the university with prospective students. Tell us a little bit more about your work as a graduate assistant. What is it involved and what do you do?

Leah Ruiz:

Yeah, so currently I have a graduate assistant position in the School of Management's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. So in this job I just help with implementing different D&I programs. I assist with creating events. We just had our multicultural awareness event last month. I assist with coordinating meetings, handling communication. And I am also the liaison for the student committee, the D&I Student committee, which involves working together, brainstorming on what we can do to better serve the community and solve problems. And identifying different areas of improvement.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Sounds like an extremely important and interesting job. But working part-time and then also attending classes can get a little bit challenging, especially considering that the first two semesters in the MBA program are quite intense. What tips do you have for students listening to this podcast on how to manage time and work life better?

Leah Ruiz:

So the biggest thing for me is keeping a physical planner with me at all times. So I not only track my schoolwork and things I have due, but I also track my work with D&I, I track any appointments I have. I like to keep everything in one calendar so that, you never miss anything. And then along with that, I schedule in times for me to do my homework. So say I have a three-hour gap in between two of my classes, I would block that off, not plan anything else in there, and just sit down, and really force myself to work for those three hours. And so that way, you're forcing yourself to get your work done and also get ahead. And so that has really helped me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Wow. Yeah, I think having a planner, if it's calendar, if it's a physical planner, definitely helps keep track of everything just considering there's so many deliverables, not just for work, but also academically. So that definitely, definitely helps. We could keep talking for many, many, many, many hours. But let me ask you this one thing. What advice would you give to our listeners who are thinking about applying to the UB full-time MBA program?

Leah Ruiz:

Major thing I would give is that really do your research on scholarships and financial aid. And because there's so many ways that UB will help you pay for your MBA. And payment is one of the major things that drives people away. They think, "Oh, this is way too expensive. I'm just not going to get my masters." And I really don't like when people think like that because it's such an investment in your future and there's so many ways that you can help pay for that. And another thing is specifically if you're an EOP student, I know you can get the application fee wave, you can get certain deliverables waived. You can get a few things in there for you. So yeah, just really do your research and know what you're entitled to pretty much.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Right. I think that's great advice that do your research. There's a ton of resources available, not just in terms of scholarships but also external resources. If getting a masters degree is the aim and you've kind of settled on that, and financial aid is the only reason why you're thinking that's not an option, UB definitely has a lot of resources available for students who can benefit from that. Leah, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us and sharing your experiences. If our listeners want to follow your journey, where can they find you?

Leah Ruiz:

Sure. You can find me on LinkedIn. My, it would be Leah Ruiz, so that's L-E-A-H-R-U-I-Z. Or if you'd like to follow me on Instagram, same thing. Leah Ruiz. And yeah.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

Leah, thank you so much for taking the time and this has been very insightful and I'm sure there's a lot of gems in there that our listeners would benefit from.

Leah Ruiz:

Yeah. Thank you for having me.

Vish Gopalakrishnan:

And thank you for listening to Manageable podcast produced by the Office of Strategic Marketing and Enrollment Management University at Buffalo. For more information on our programs and offerings, visit management.buffalo.edu. If you would like to be featured on the podcast or you would like to share comments and suggestions, please write to us at gopalak2@buffalo.edu. That's gopalak2@buffalo.edu. Thank you, and we will see you in the next one.