

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Aline Sara. She is the co-founder and CEO of Neta Kellum, an award-winning social enterprise that turns displaced persons and refugees into location independent freelancers by hiring them as online tutors, teachers and translators and then pairing them with online learners from around the globe. With nearly 80 million displaced people in the world today, many of them skilled professionals who left behind their careers and are now restricted from working locally in their new host country, [NaTakallam](#) empowers them to earn remote income from anywhere, regardless of their location and status and regain the support, dignity and opportunities that they deserve. [NaTakallam](#) has been patronized by over 10,000 learners and clients from over 100 countries and has distributed millions of dollars in self-earned income to displaced persons and refugees and their host communities.

Aline, welcome to the show.

Aline Sara: Thank you for having me.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here. You have been doing such inspiring work that I have been following for quite a while now. So, it's great to have you on the show. But let's just start off by setting the scene and talking about where we are recording this from today. Unfortunately, we are not in person and the fact that we have agreed to make this a wine night. So, let's talk about what we're drinking as well. I am actually in Buenos Aires, Argentina and I have just opened a bottle of Malbec from Mendoza which I will be drinking through during this interview. Where are you today and what are you drinking?

Aline Sara: So, I am in Paris and I am drinking a wine from Bordeaux which is Côte de Montpezat. And I am not French. I'm not a wine expert, so that will be the extent of my detailed account there.

Matt Bowles: Your French is pretty impressive though, I must say, and I'd love to use that as sort of a segue to go way back and talk a little bit about your background and where you grew up, your cultural background and the languages that you were surrounded with growing up. Can you share a little bit of that and how that shaped your identity?

Aline Sara: Yeah, of course. So, I am originally Lebanese. My parents are from Beirut. They left Lebanon at the height of the civil war in Lebanon. They came first to Europe, then to New York, where my father was actually completing his medical residency. And so, the war was so violent that they chose to stay in the U.S. So I was raised in New York, safe and away from the violence. I went to a French school. I grew up in a French speaking household with Lebanese Arabic dialect spoken. And of course, I was in New York. So, I grew up hearing these languages and actually traveling back very often to Lebanon when the war wasn't too strong, and also to France, because many of my family members immigrated to France.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk a little bit about your interest in travel and when you think back to those early travel experiences, what was that like for you, reconnecting with Lebanon as a kid who was living in the United States and going back there and also to France and to other places?

Aline Sara: Yeah, I mean, I love traveling. I love diversity and culture and discovering cultures around the world. Of course, as a Lebanese born and raised in New York, just in and of itself, I was exposed to multiple cultures, especially the fact that we would travel back to Lebanon. And my parents made sure we stayed very attached to our roots and to our origins and the fact that naturally we'd also swing by France on our way there. First of all, because there's no direct flights from New York to Beirut, so that had to happen anyways. But also because my cousins were there, so going to a French school, so there was this natural

expansion, exposure to multiculturalism, to very different cultures, because Europe is different from the Middle east, is different from the U.S.

And I think also just being in New York City, which is such an incredible international, diverse hub, and also going to the French school in New York, which was also a school with a lot of foreigners, many students who were coming from background, their parents were diplomats, et cetera. So also having that exposure. So, I think that naturally propelled me into this much more global exposure that I actually loved and kind of naturally made me become someone who's very much interested in travel and discovering other cultures.

Matt Bowles: Well, you and I also have in common a background in human rights and international peace and conflict resolution. I would love to hear as well, when you think back on that particular trajectory, how did your social and political consciousness develop? And can you take us a little bit on that path into that career direction for you?

Aline Sara: You know, my parents got married under bombings, for example. And we grew up in a household where when you'd call your grandparents, sometimes you'd call them to check in on them because you heard a bomb had landed in our neighborhood at that time. So, I think most people who immigrate during war and leave family back home, they're naturally, they understand and know what war is from up close. Even though compared to some of my cousins who were stayed in Lebanon and who didn't manage to leave the country, they had a very different, much more up close and personal experience of war. But we were in this kind of interesting. And you know, sometimes people say, like when you're far, it's almost worse because you only imagine the worst and you hear what's going on and you're feeling the fear because you're far from your family and you want to check in on them. So, you know, we grew up when I was little in that, some of that context. There was still some heavy war going on when I was still a child.

I also think that my parents had an approach to Lebanon and to talking about war that was different. I would say my parents did not hide the war and the difficulties of war. And we grew up and my father would take us to school, we would drive. Actually we lived in New Jersey for a couple years, so we'd have to commute. And those car rides every day was my dad would share another story of him working in the Red Cross and going into a Palestinian refugee camp and having to evacuate while there were Christian militias and sharing about his experiences when he was in the hospital and he would go across the hall to get a medicine for the patient and then a bomb landed in that patient's bed.

And so, you know, we grew up with these very strong stories of war, war and survival, which I would say really planted the seeds of both my consciousness of what it means to grow up in a war zone and my drive for trying to make sure there's not more wars in the world because I heard what my parents and my cousins and my grandparents were going through. So, I would say the Lebanese factor and the fact that my parents made us stay very close to the country and did not actually hide the stories, but actually share with us, the stories was probably what propelled me into that space and that sphere of interest.

Matt Bowles: And then as you grew older and you became an adult, you eventually chose to move back to Beirut. Can you talk a little bit about that decision and then what that experience was like for you when you moved back?

Aline Sara: Yeah, so, I mean, actually I wanted to move back in 2006 after I graduated from college, but the war broke out in July 2006. There was a small month-long war between Hezbollah and Israel. So that first plan didn't work out. So, I stayed in New York and I worked in a nonprofit that does conflict resolution work

between Israelis and Arabs. And then I ended up going to Lebanon the year after. I had been in Lebanon every summer for the holidays. This was my first time living there. So, it was different experience, of course, because I really got to know the country in a very different capacity. I really got to know the different parts of the country, the different regions of the country that are very much sometimes aligned with the different religious groups of the country.

So that was obviously an amazing experience. You are coming into a country that is coming out of a civil war. So many remainders and remnants of war and things like that. Although it's funny to talk about that now because Lebanon is so far away from its civil war compared to its neighbors now into countries like Syria, which are still knee deep in conflict. But of course, being in the Middle East, you are in a constant state of political tension and turmoil, very different from other parts of the world.

Matt Bowles: Well, I know you also spent some time in Syria before the Arab Spring. Can you talk a little bit about that trip that you took in 2007? Backpacking, I think you said you started from Athens and then you went through Syria and Turkey and eventually over to Lebanon. Can you talk about that travel journey and what those experiences were like for you?

Aline Sara: Yeah, I had been to Syria a few times already while being based in Beirut because it's right next door. It's a two-hour drive from Beirut to Damascus. And then I did have one amazing summer trip with my best friend who is Greek, French Armenian, and her and I just traveled from Athens all the way to Beirut, going through the Greek islands and crossing into the south of Turkey, crossing Turkey, then crossing into Syria. And we actually went to Aleppo and skipped Damascus because she had to get back to work and had much less time than I did. So, I mean, of course there's nothing like traveling first of all locally, like locals.

So, we chose you typically budgeting, you're typically traveling with the Locals because it's cheaper. It's also much more intimate and cultural immersion. Syria is amazing. It's a beautiful country. You really have the experiences of the souk. I mean, the people are amazing. People are so generous people, so sweet, so welcoming. It was very interesting also being in Turkey because Turkey is also seen as this country between the east and the west and Europe and Asia. I'm assuming that you've been there.

Matt Bowles: I have been only to Istanbul, but it is one of my favorite cities in the world and I want to go back and spend a lot more time in Turkey for sure.

Aline Sara: Yeah, I know it's a beautiful country. Regardless of the region you travel in. I think just traveling in general and traveling not as like the tourist that goes to a resort, but really just going there to immerse yourself, just to meet the people, to meet the culture. I think the feelings I have are almost always the same. It's just so fascinating. It's so exciting. Each culture has its different way of expressing warmth and welcoming. I mean, you go to Latin America, it's more kind of through the music, the dancing, the celebrating. You'll go to the Middle East. It's kind of a different type of generosity and energy. Pretty much all my trips, they're amazing, all of them. And they're fascinating, each in their own way.

Matt Bowles: Well, I want to ask you about a couple others because you have traveled very extensively. I have spent probably about two years total on the continent of Africa. But you have been to some places that I have not been and I want to ask you about them. And let's maybe start with your experience in Mozambique, if you can share a little bit about that, because I haven't been there.

Aline Sara: Yeah, I mean, Mozambique was actually a week-long program for social entrepreneurs. So, we were actually kind of on this little island or peninsula. It wasn't that much travel within the country, but just being in that nature, we were right on the water and it was kind of like the jungle and the water at the same time. So, it was beautiful. We did have some time in Maputo. I would say it wasn't as much as an experiencing the country as it was experiencing the location for a specific type of retreat for social entrepreneurs. But the setting itself was beautiful and Maputo was a very interesting city of course. All of these countries all have such fascinating history. History that we typically ignore, I think until we go there.

For me, I feel like as much as I'm fascinated and curious, it's only until I'm there and I'm a big fan of always googling the free walking tour or the walking tour options available, going on that walking tour, talking to the guides, becoming friends with the guides, going for a drink and a live music show with them after, which is exactly what we did in Maputo with my friends. So. But of course, Mozambique is beautiful scenery. Speaking of the African continent to me, and specifically sub-Saharan Africa, I spent more time in Cote d'Ivoire. I spent two months in Cote d'Ivoire doing work and then also I spent a month with my partner in DRC Congo.

Matt Bowles: How was that? I was in Cote d'Ivoire, just briefly in 2019, I spent about three months in West Africa. So, we did about a month in Nigeria, a month in Ghana, a month in Senegal, and then Cote d'Ivoire just kind of got a four-night sort of pass through. We kind of went to Abidjan and then kind of went and, you know, just kind of kicked it on the coast for a few nights. And it was lovely, it was delightful. But I would love to hear about that. Like, how was Cote d'Ivoire for you?

Aline Sara: Yeah, no, Cote d'Ivoire was amazing. Again, the music and the energy. There's something, I think, so jovial about this part of the world. The energy. I feel like when I think of my time in Cote d'Ivoire, it's just full of smiles, smiles, dance, music, positive energy, joking, of course. I was doing research, I was doing work, a project while doing my master's. And it was on deforestation and evictions, forced evictions of populations who are living in parts of the country that were considered classified forests. And so, they had managed to settle there because the government let them. And then now the government was telling them, now we're going to kick you out because the country is losing all its forest. So just mess after mess after mess and just going deep into corruption and politics and injustices.

So, I mean, that was also very interesting work and research. I feel like when I'm in these places there is such less consumerism and technology also in a positive sense. And of course, things have changed. I mean, I was there in 2013. Many things are also related to socioeconomic development in countries. So, I think our experience will be different because we're coming from such a hyper developed, hyper consumerist, hyper commercialized, hyper technologized or whatever societies. So, for me, there's kind of a feeling of peacefulness. I feel like I go back to basics when I travel and it's nice, it's really nice.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And I agree 100%. The music scene in West Africa and the nightlife and just the pulsing of Afro beats through every part of the streets in daily life, I mean, it's just amazing. And just the life and the spirit and the kindness of people there, I mean, it's just an amazing. It's such a special region.

Aline Sara: Yeah.

Matt Bowles: But tell me a little bit about DR Congo, though, because I've never been there. What were you doing there and how was your experience?

Aline Sara: So, I actually just spent almost a month visiting my partner. He was working for the UN. Like a lot of people in DR Congo are big NGOs, so that was more kind of staying there with him. We did visit the Bonobo Farm. They're a type of monkey and they're. They're very smart. And so, we visited a reserve of Bonobos because they believe they're endangered. We went to some waterfalls and seeing that similar passion for music and this drive for this feel-good energy from music, from being so, I don't know, in tune with oneself. Obviously, you know, it's a country that's dealing with conflicts and major socioeconomic challenges. So, there's always going to be scenes that are difficult to watch. But for me, just the energy was also amazing, despite the difficulties of that part of the world and that country.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, I agree. I mean, the more I spend time on the continent of Africa, the more I want to go back and the more of it I want to see and the more places I want to go. And it's just incredible on so many levels. You also spent some time in South Africa? I have spent probably about three months or so in Cape Town, which is such a special city. But where were you in South Africa and what was your experience like there?

Aline Sara: So, yeah, that was actually a vacation, a proper kind of vacation. So, we just did about 10 days. We did Cape Town, the coast, we did the penguin reserve. I love penguins. So that was a very fun moment.

Matt Bowles: Yes. When you go down towards Cape Point and they had the whole penguin colony, which is crazy because if you've never seen penguins or if you've only seen cold weather penguins or images of cold weather penguins, which is the association that I had. And then you go down there and these penguins, these are warm weather penguins that just like roll up out of the ocean, out of the beach, and they're like chilling on the sand.

Aline Sara: Yeah, that was amazing. I mean, we did some wineries, we were up in the mountains, we were on the coast and of course, just the wildlife. We visited an OSTRICH Farm, of course, we did Table Mountain. We visited Mandela's prison. That was, I mean, all of the history, the human rights, the social justice themes in South Africa, of course, are incredible. Just from both the nature perspective to just the sociological and historical meaning of South Africa and everything we visited there. And a lot of people making parallels between South Africa and Israel and Palestine. And I mean, that was obviously fascinating for me as well.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. The Palestinian solidarity in South Africa is just amazing and so heartwarming and just wonderful to see all of these Palestinian flags flying. And then when they do the Israeli apartheid week and they do a whole African continental solidarity against Israeli apartheid and all this kind of stuff, I mean, it's really heartening to see how obviously people who experienced apartheid understand apartheid when they see it, and people who experienced colonialism understand colonialism when they see it. And so, all of these international connections. I'm Irish American, for example, and I lived in Ireland for a year, and I've spent a lot of time doing activist solidarity work in the north of Ireland, which remains under British colonial occupation to this day. And what you find when you go to West Belfast is Palestinian flags flying all down the Falls Road, and you have murals to the Kurdish hunger strikers in Turkey. And you see all of this solidarity because oppressed people that are either currently under military occupation or have previously struggled against colonialism or apartheid or any of that kind of stuff, I mean, they understand it immediately. Yeah, right. I mean, it's just entirely clear. And so, these types of global solidarity are always so inspiring for me to see.

Aline Sara: It is, yeah, very much. Definitely.

Matt Bowles: All right, so I am in Argentina at the moment, and I know you have been down to this part of the world, too. So, I have to ask you about your experience in Chile and Argentina and Patagonia. How was your time in South America?

Aline Sara: Yeah, so me. My time in Chile and South America was actually because I chose to study abroad in Santiago, which I'm really excited I chose that. I remember my father telling me, Aline, you want to practice Spanish, but you. You can easily go to Spain because it's Europe and you go to France. So go to Latin America, go to Chile. So, he was right. Where I should have listened to him was to say the year, because I only did a semester, which I regret. So, if any students are listening and you are a traveler, don't do a semester, do a full year to really immerse yourself.

Matt Bowles: Hundred percent agreed with that advice.

Aline Sara: Yeah, it was amazing. I think there's a lot of parallels between Latin America and the Middle East in a certain way. And a lot of similarities between the Mediterranean countries and energy and South America. So, I felt very close to my kind of Chilean entourage. Chile is also fascinating from a political perspective. Their history, Allende-Pinochet, I mean, super interesting from a historical, cultural, human rights perspective as well. It was an amazing proper study abroad immersion. I was living with a Chilean host family and when you study abroad, you sort of take the light course load and then you spend your time traveling. So did lots of weekend trips, would take the bus up the mountain, up the Andes and down to go to Mendoza, for example. I did Patagonia, which was absolutely amazing trip. I did not actually make it to San Pedro de Atacama, which is the desert. So, I do still have hopes of making it back there one day. It's so rich. It's so much to see. I did end up traveling to Peru. I've been to Colombia, so I've done a bit of Latin America. Each country, it's fascinating. I would say, you know, Argentina and Chile feel a bit more European, right. They have a little bit of that kind of European influence as well. So that's interesting. But at the same time, the indigenous community, still the Latin American vibe, the music, the food, the family values, it's lovely. And the nature, I mean, all of these places have incredible trips in nature and amazing things to see.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And Chile, to what you were saying about the political dynamics there, first of all, they have the largest population of Palestinians the world outside the Middle East.

Aline Sara: Absolutely.

Matt Bowles: Which is amazing, right, to see that culture. And it was incredible because I was on one of the free walking tours, right. That you mentioned and my tour guide's name was Omar. And I was like, bro, are you Arab? He's like, no, I'm Chilean Catholic. But, you know, my parents just named me that because there's just so many Arabs around here. That's unbelievable.

Aline Sara: There are Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrians. Huge number from who migrated in the early 1900s. Actually. It's fascinating. Actually, I had written a piece when I worked as a journalist on the Latin American the heritage of Levantine heritage in Latin America. And it's funny because they assimilated, but they still are originally from that part of the world and it's throughout all of South America.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And talk about the cohesion of like so much sort of anti-colonial solidarity. One of the first things I learned on the same walking tour, by the way, about the Chilean revolution against the Spanish. Right. The anti-colonial independence movement in Chile. Irish folks Basques, yeah. All of these people that were down there that were like, at the front. Right. You still have to this day, Bernardo o' Higgins

Boulevard and Park, you know, named after these Irish people that were involved in the Chilean anti colonial war against the Spanish, right. And so, it's just an amazing way to see that global solidarity that we're talking about. And all of this merging of people from all these different cultures and struggles around the world, they're now all of a sudden in Chile. So, you just go down and visit Chile, it's like, wow, this is amazing history.

Aline Sara: It's so fascinating that it's the second largest community of Palestinians outside of Palestine, and they have Palestinians in their parliament, I think, or in their political representation. And yeah, it's very interesting.

Matt Bowles: It's totally amazing. So. All right, I want to talk a little bit about your journey to becoming a journalist and particularly being in the Middle east during the Arab Spring. I was in Egypt. I was there for a couple months in 2012.

Aline Sara: Yeah.

Matt Bowles: Which was right after the overthrow of Mubarak in the period of the scaffold rule, before Morsi was elected. And then I was back for about nine months in 2014 and was there for that whole rise of CC and all that kind of stuff. So, I was kind of in and around the region, but I have friends in Lebanon, and I was visiting people in Beirut, and I was sort of in and around that region a lot during that time. But I would love to hear your experience and sort of just your journey in terms of deciding to become a journalist and then what your experience was like during that time. During the Arab Spring.

Aline Sara: Yeah, I mean, I feel like I never decide things, they just happen. So, when I first went to Lebanon, I interned with Human Rights Watch. Actually, in Lebanon at that time, I was working on migrant domestic worker issues, always working on general issues related to human rights of Palestinians, street children. And I just decided that I wanted to become a lawyer after that internship. But then I realized that I would never, ever manage to do the LSATs and get a good score because I'm really not that type of person. I hate standardized tests.

Matt Bowles: I'm with you. I'm with you on that.

Aline Sara: So, you know what we have when you're in your early 20s and you're trying to figure out your life. And then I moved back to Beirut, decided to drop the whole law school plan, and someone wrote to me about a job opening for anyone who's a fluent English speaker editing news tickers for this small Lebanese publication. So, I was working with this small publication, editing, doing news editing. And this was kind of. I was 25. I wasn't sure what to do with myself because the whole, like, law school plan fell apart. So, after a year, I had written one or two pieces for fun, and then they offered me to just join their team of reporters. So that's how I did it. I had never decided I wanted to be a journalist. I kind of always felt like journalism was a very cutthroat type of profession with everything becoming commercialized. I do look at journalism with a lot of concern and sadness, but when I ended up doing reporting, I loved it. It was fascinating. I mean, for people who like to travel, like to be in the field, or like to be there on the ground, it's. It's an amazing.

And when you like people, you want to hear their stories. You're curious. So, I do love journalism in general. So, I ended up working as a reporter. And then two years after the Arab uprisings happened, and that was the most amazing moment in history for people who believe in human rights, for youth from the Arab world. It's impossible to describe the feeling that I think Arab youth felt and that part of the world felt. Of course,

Ben Ali and Tunisia was something, but Egypt was the real, kind of the real moment of wow. And of course, when Syria started to see the beginning preliminary protests. So, I mean, how can I describe that feeling? I mean, I think I was at a party in Beirut when Mubarak fell. Like, it was just, like, absurd, and it was fascinating. And a lot of my friends in Egypt were in the streets on the ground. Was there everything happening on social media? Here's the power of social media. I mean, it was very much related to the mobilization through social media.

I remember my friends telling me about how everyone was connected to Twitter because they would hear about an emergency, someone disappearing, a truck taking away, a bunch of protesters trying to make sure that they were being followed so that they could be released. All the makeshift hospitals, all the ambulances out of cars because people were on the streets. I think it's just incredible to remember those moments for this part of the world, what it was. And I mean, I think it's hard to remember it because the high that everyone felt and the complete plummeting and descent into extreme violence, to even worse regimes, to even more repression. But I do think that the whole uprisings and what those moments meant and people holding hands and people from complete different political horizons and religious spheres being there, being on the ground, being a journalist at that time. That was an incredible experience.

Matt Bowles: I remember it well in all of the sentiment that you're expressing, because the first uprising was Tunisia and then people were just blown away and inspired by that. But people were like, there's no way this could happen. In Egypt, the second largest recipient of U.S. aid, a U.S. backed dictatorship. No way a decentralized popular uprising can oust a dictator that's that heavily backed by the United States. And then all of a sudden, Mubarak fell. I remember that. Just those emotions were just unbelievable at the time.

Aline Sara: I mean, were you there? So, you got there, what in.

Matt Bowles: I was there for two months in 2012. So, it was after the overthrow of Mubarak. So, it was before the election of Morsi.

Aline Sara: Right.

Matt Bowles: So, it was during that interim period with the SCAF rule. And then I was out of Egypt and then you had the election of Morsi and then you had the coup. And then I came back in 2014 and I was there for nine months. And then that was where all the really depressing stuff started that you were describing. Started to happen with the rise of CC and everything that went from there.

Aline Sara: Yeah, no, I mean, I still remember they would have these makeshift theaters where they'd come and bring a screen and just have evenings where they'd project scaffold violations on screen. I don't know if you knew that people would just come and watch this. It was just amazing. It was incredible. Just the people taking over. And of course, there was that interim period with no rule, like official rule, right. But people were ruling. Egypt was really incredible. It was an amazing period. Definitely very nostalgic of those times and that experience. And then by 2012, summer 2012, I moved back to New York for my master's. So, then I went back to school for my master's in international affairs.

Matt Bowles: So, let's talk about that a little bit and your trajectory from there. So, you go back to New York City, you do your master's in international affairs, and then from there. What was the path like from there to the founding of [NaTakallam](#)?

Aline Sara: I had a tricky exit from my master's. Actually, I had a profile of a reporter at that time. And then I was trying to work kind of go into the more NGO space. And so, I did a lot of election observation work with the Carter Center. So that was actually through my partner, he was doing that work as well. So, this is when you're deployed into different election settings and you're observing and similar to journalism, you're investigating, observing the whole process, which is really interesting and related to economic, political, democratic developments matters. So that was really interesting. I did that in Tunisia, obviously that was interesting. Also coming out of the Arab uprisings, et cetera. I did it in Haiti as well. I did it in Guyana. I

continued to do a bit of journalism here and there. And I was trying to get larger jobs, more stable full-time employment with either, you know, Doctors Without Borders or UN et cetera. Not much luck. So, to all those who are listening and who are struggling in their job hunt, it really happens to everyone. So Allende Pinochet or then I was actually looking for ways to practice Arabic while I was in New York. And that's when I came up with the idea for [NaTakallam](#). It was a combination of things that made me think of that. O Allende Pinochet obviously the Syrian war was in its third year. A very perpetual flow of Syrians coming into Lebanon. Obviously with my knowledge of the region and my knowledge of Lebanon and with Lebanon becoming now the country that was hosting the highest density of refugees, the weight of Syrians coming in to Lebanon, a fragile state. And I say fragile state back then because now Lebanon is broken down state today.

So, I was thinking, I understand that the Lebanese government is concerned about giving a million plus Syrians entering Lebanon, a country of 4 million work permits. But at the same time, these Syrians don't really have a chance to get formally resettled, right? It's about 0.5% of refugees who are in displacement in countries that are neighboring conflict zones. Their chances of getting to like Europe or to Canada or to the U.S. formally resettled is tiny. This is the scenario, right? You have about a million Syrians in Lebanon. They don't have a right to work, they don't have a right to live. Basically, no dignity. They're not very liked by the Lebanese population. We have a complicated history with Syria and at the same time they've gone through so much. Their country has been completely destroyed. Many of them have probably been tortured, have family members who disappeared. You know, just thinking, imagining and seeing actually all the Syrian youth who had stood up to the Assad regime.

To me, which represents kind of the ultimate admiration for me. Any of these individuals around the world who will stand up to a regime that you know will just clamp down you, crush you. For me, it's very sobering to me. And again, I think that all of these individuals are heroes and not sub burdens or the way they're spoken about in the media. So, to me it was just very simple. It's like we have a recipe for disaster. We're also being very inhumane to look and let other. So many people who've just been forced to flee their homes out of extraordinary circumstances and also very often out of heroic action to find themselves in a place where they're not allowed to work. They have no chances of actually fleeing the country in which they are, in this case being Lebanon, besides taking a treacherous migrant route where they're at risk of dying.

So, I was just thinking to myself, well, we have to find a way to help these individuals or to support them. I had actually always dreamed of going to do Arabic in Damascus, because in Lebanon, in Beirut, you kind of mix English, French, Arabic. I spent several years in Beirut, but my Arabic had not gotten to a level with which I was satisfied. So, it was kind of just thinking of all these factors and I was just thinking to myself, well, there's all these Syrians in Lebanon. They're not allowed to work, but they're incredibly skilled, they're incredibly inspiring. They probably have stories to tell me in their language in Arabic, which is also somewhat my language. But all these factors together and I just came up with this kind of light bulb idea

which was like, all right, well, you have refugees, Syrians, very qualified. They can't work in the local Lebanese economy. But there's this thing called the freelance digital world. Online language learning.

What if we created a program where anyone who's like me, who wants to learn a language, who's fascinated and wants to hear the stories of people who have fled conflict, who stood up to regimes who are, just for me, the most inspiring people out there, what if there was a program where I could meet them, learn Arabic from them, and pay them so they get an income and that. That could be a way for them to access an income, access some restored sense of dignity and purpose after losing everything and just a way to bridge cultures by doing that because it's happening online. And so that's actually when I came up with the idea for [NaTakallam](#), which I then pitched at a couple of competitions. And it was from there that I then had to create a pilot of [NaTakallam](#), which then eventually I asked people to share about it. And it got picked up by a couple of bloggers at the same time as funnily, again, social media coming up again, timing being a major factor.

It was actually right at the time of the photo of Ilan Kurdi, the little Syrian boy who was washed upon the shores of Turkey. That went viral, that I was pushing [NaTakallam](#) to people. And I think the combination of factors did that out of nowhere. About three or four thousand people had shared about [NaTakallam](#). And we had like 300 people sign up for [NaTakallam](#). And this was actually a year later after I came up with the idea, which was September 2015. And that's pretty much what effectively launched us.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. I want you to share a little bit now about sort of the direction that it's gone and how it's grown. How was that initial pilot program in Beirut and how has it grown since then?

Aline Sara: Yeah, I mean, the initial pilot was just like about six or seven Syrians that we invited to just be on this symbolic platform that did not exist. And us just reaching out to our network of friends in journalism, Middle Eastern affairs, conflict resolute Allende-Pinochet ion, and inviting them to sign up. And of course, since then, [NaTakallam](#) has kind of become a full-fledged social enterprise, a small social enterprise that has its struggles with limited resources, as many of us do. And we're very good at being scrappy and resourceful at [NaTakallam](#), but we do have pretty much three business lines. The first one is the core language learning, which originally started with Syrians teaching Levantine Arabic. Now we have about eight Arabic dialects with refugees from across the Arab world. Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, Egypt. Sadly, there's a lot of choices.

Also, we've added Lebanese dialect, so host community members are also now teaching their language. We added Persian with Iranian and Afghan refugees, Spanish with Central American and Venezuelans, and French with Francophone Africans. And this is like both individual and small group sessions. We also provide this to B2B customers. So those who are mostly interested tends to be NGOs that are approaching us to work with us just because of the alignment in the mission. We have a B2B program with schools and universities where we bring in [NaTakallam](#) as a complement to school classroom programs, either language study. So, if you're studying Arabic and your teacher will request that you practice with one of [NaTakallam](#)'s tutors, or we have programs called Refugee Voices, where the refugees Skype into the classroom.

And it's much more of a virtual speaker type of event where you're studying human rights. You'll have Syrians who talk about their experience as activists in Syria. Or if you're talking about Venezuela and what's happening there, we'll have some Venezuelans who share their story about how they left, about the situation on the ground in the country. So really bringing to life the content. So, it's like a very dual type of

impact because it's Immersive, experiential, emotional learning. At the same time, nothing is done for free. Because our goal is livelihoods to displaced persons, so they are paid for what they're doing. We ensure we get the payment to them regardless of where they are, in a camp, in a country where they don't have a bank account, et cetera. And then our third line is interpretation and translation services run by immigrants, refugees, and specialized translators as well. And that's also for anything we do. Document translation, we do subtitles, et cetera. And that's mostly B2B.

Matt Bowles: That is so amazing. I love that. And you and I actually met through our mutual friend [Lamar Shambley](#), who has been interviewed on The Maverick Show. So Maverick Show listeners know Lamar. If you haven't listened to that episode, you should definitely go back and listen to it. But Lamar runs the Teens of Color Abroad (TOCA) program in Brooklyn. And during the pandemic, since, of course, folks can't go abroad, the students in his program started using [NaTakallam](#) and learning languages, learning Arabic from Syrian refugees. And so, the teenage students of color in Brooklyn, New York, were having regular language lessons with Syrian refugees, and not only learning Arabic, but having that cultural experience and learning about the lived experience of Syrian refugees and sharing their experiences, Teens of Color in Brooklyn and having those connections. And we had that discussion on our podcast just about how fundamentally transformative that was for his students in his program, and that's how you and I eventually connected to do this interview.

Aline Sara: Yep. The TOCA and [NaTakallam](#) partnership is so amazing and so cool. It's even hard to kind of describe how brilliant and that fusion was. It was an amazing. It is still an amazing partnership. Lamar is incredible. His work and his mission, admirable. And I'm sure you've seen the videos. But both our Syrian tutors and Lamar students, I think it's some of the best experiences they've had working together.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, for sure. It is just, like, amazingly inspiring to me. Just absolutely incredible what's going on there. So let me ask you this. Just for folks that don't speak any Arabic, can you translate [NaTakallam](#) and explain what that means and why you chose that for the name of the enterprise?

Aline Sara: So [NaTakallam](#) means we speak. We came up with the name because it was about speaking the language. It was about speaking Arabic. And the original goal of [NaTakallam](#) was around conversation. It was to practice conversational Arabic, because Arabic is complex language. There is the formal modern standard Arabic, which is a very heavy type of grammar that, you know, you'll hear Modern Standard Arabic in the news. It's the official, official language for all of the 22 Arab League states. But you don't speak Fusha, you don't speak Modern Standard Arabic.

Matt Bowles: Right.

Aline Sara: And the goal was to create a program where you're learning the speaking version of Arabic. And I think it ties itself to the whole energy and goal of which is to build bridges, to create conversations, to speak beyond just learning the language, to hear each other, to get to know the other.

Matt Bowles: It's a really important thing to clarify as well, because I have studied some Arabic in the classroom. And when you study Arabic in the classroom, you learn Fusha, you learn the Modern Standard Arabic. And when you do that, you will be able to write and you will be able to read a newspaper and you will be able to listen to a formal news broadcast. And that is all because there's zero people in the Arab world in any country that speak Fusha in a conversational manner, right. And so, in order to actually communicate with another human being from the Arab world, you need to learn spoken Arabic, right. And

that's what these folks are teaching people, depending on what country they come from, right. If they come from the Levant or if they come from Egypt, or if they come from the Gulf, or if they come from the Maghreb and Morocco. I mean, these are all totally different Arabic dialects, which is important for folks to understand that if you want to go to one of these countries and actually speak Arabic, you have to learn the local dialect. And you have teachers at [NaTakallam](#) from those countries that are able to. To teach people the spoken dialogue.

Aline Sara: Exactly. Yep.

Matt Bowles: That's awesome. Can you talk a little bit about who these teachers are? What has been their experience as a displaced person refugee? What were they doing in their country maybe before they were displaced? And just give a little bit of background about who are the people that [NaTakallam](#) hires as their teachers.

Aline Sara: Most of them were just like us, people who had their lives, people who had their studies, had completed their degrees, architects, artists, doctors, nurses, teachers, people who had travel agencies, people who'd study econ. It's individuals who were, I would say, mostly kind of in that middle class community. And a lot of them were people who, depending on the country they were in, did take a political stance. A lot of them also were just people who happened to be in a country that a war broke out and they had to flee because they were living in a war zone and were really literally at risk. So, I think the common denominator is these individuals Resilience and humility and work ethic. And I think they're inspiring.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, that's so amazing. And I think that just the incredible thing about [NaTakallam](#) is that you found and been able to connect with these folks that are restricted from working locally in their area as a displaced person or as a refugee. And you've empowered them to be able to work online, digitally and teach people from all around the world and basically become a location independent freelancer who can make that income internationally, which I think is completely amazing. Can you talk a little bit about how you have actually connected with these human beings? How have you found and vetted and hired and built this incredible infrastructure with all of these teachers? Like, what was that process like for you?

Aline Sara: It's been a combination of people referring individuals and also U.S. collaborating with NGOs on the ground that refer individuals and people who work for us will refer people they know who are displaced with them. We have students sometimes who've recommended people, so it's really kind of a whole combination. And now we have the whole setup and network and they go through an application process and an interview process. So, in that sense, it's like the normal job where you'd also be interviewed that way.

Matt Bowles: Awesome. And then what is the experience like for the learner, the customer, the person, the student that wants to learn Arabic or wants to use one of the other services of [NaTakallam](#)? How does that work? Like, let's say there's some listeners right now of The Maverick Show that are like, wow, like, I really want to learn Arabic and what a cool way to learn. Like, that would be really more amazing than sitting in a classroom to be able to do it that way. What is the experience like for the customer and how would they go about learning Arabic through [NaTakallam](#), for example?

Aline Sara: Well, you know, they just go online, they go to [natakallam.com](#) and then they can follow the website, sign up for the language of their choice, go through the process. We're going to ask a couple of questions to help us match you, because we're not a marketplace. We actually match you based on your

requests and your interests. So, there's actually an added level that makes us different than other tutoring platforms where you're choosing your tutor. And so, then you'll fill out that information, you'll buy your sessions, and then within, I think, two days, we'll be introducing you to your partner and then you guys will connect on your choice of medium, you know, Zoom or Skype or WhatsApp.

Matt Bowles: Can you clarify as well all of the different options that [NaTakallam](#) offers, the services that people can patronize, the different languages. If people need translational work done. What is the service offering of [NaTakallam](#) right now?

Aline Sara: So, if you are an individual or if you are with a group and you want to learn a language, you can do that. And we have, as I mentioned, Arabic in eight different dialects, French, Persian, Spanish, Armenian and Kurdish. And we do offer that also for corporates, for groups. So, if you run an organization and you are part of the professional development program and you want to invite your staff to learn a language in a very different way than usual, it's highly encouraged. Also, we also have an Arabic curriculum which is a 25-hour program that brings in both the dialect and the modern standard Arabic. And that's a much more structured curriculum than the one-on-one tailored language sessions. So that's kind of for the people who want a much deeper dive into Arabic or quite serious about their learning.

The second option is if you're a teacher, if you're a student, if you're in the administration of any school or university, you can bring [NaTakallam](#) as experiential learning through our Refugee Voices programs. The other program we have in schools and universities is as a complement to just traditional language learning. So [NaTakallam](#) is pretty much like a language lab. So, if you're studying a language in a classroom, your teacher can request that you complement your language learning by practicing with one of [NaTakallam](#)'s tutors over the Internet. And then finally we do all types of translation, document translation, website translation, film transcripts or subtitles. So that's available as well as virtual interpretation. Any type of conferences that you want to be able to provide to people who don't speak English. With virtual interpretation, you can reach out to [NaTakallam](#) and we'll provide you with a virtual interpreter. So that's kind of the third business line, which is interpretation and translation. Again, much more on the corporate side and B2B clients.

Matt Bowles: So awesome. And I know that there's all different pricing structures depending on what people are doing. If they just want to go class by class, if they want to buy one of those bigger packages you mentioned, if they want to do the translation stuff, and it's all on the website. So, what we're going to do is we're going to link everything up with [the show notes](#). And I understand that you might even have a special discount for Maverick Show listeners that that are interested in getting involved with some of that To Callum stuff. So, what is that discount about? And then we'll link it up in [the show notes](#) so folks can go there and grab it.

Aline Sara: Yes, yes. We would be delighted to provide a 10% discount to anyone coming through The Maverick Show.

Matt Bowles: Well, we will link it up in [the show notes](#) so folks can just go to one place at [themaverickshow.com](#), go to [the show notes](#) for this episode and there you will see links to everything we talked about in this episode, including the way to get your 10% discount on the [NaTakallam](#) services, which are also going to go a long way in supporting refugees and displaced people and just provide such an amazing experience. What a way to learn a language and get your translation done and all that good stuff. That's incredible.

Well, Aline, I think you're doing incredible work. I think this is a great place to end the primary portion of this interview. Are you ready to go in to *The Lightning Round*?

Aline Sara: Yes. Oh, my gosh.

Matt Bowles: Let's do it. All right. What is one book that has significantly impacted you over the years you'd most recommend people check out?

Aline Sara: For me, it spoke a lot to me because it was a book written by a Lebanese who was born and raised in Paris. I believe the translation is the [Deadly Identities](#). It's by an author named Amin Malus, and it is about the complexity of identity for one who is from a country, born and raised in another one, and identifies with such a multitude of cultures, religions, nations, and how to position yourself kind of, I think a lot of what third culture kids will talk about and deal with. So, it's Amin Malouf and it's the [Deadly Identities](#), I think is the English title.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. We will link that up in [the show notes](#) as well. Aline, what is one travel hack that you use in your world travels that you can recommend to people?

Aline Sara: I feel like you. You never realize what you can get from an airline until you ask and until you ask to be passed on to another agent. So, I would say I feel like I'm pretty good at getting penalties waived for just various reasons and kind of calling up agents and having a sincere conversation with them. And also, I think in general, from a traveler's perspective, I will always file a complaint if there should be a complaint and get compensation for that. The tip here is always call, always ask to speak to someone, and if it doesn't work with that person, I call back sometimes. And agents can vary in their personality and what they're willing to accommodate if you need to change your dates or something like that.

Matt Bowles: Or ask to speak to a supervisor or escalate or things like that. And certainly, I agree. I have gotten many an upgrade in hotels and other things like that. If there is a customer service problem, when you handle it professionally and say, hey, there was this problem, I understand that these things sometimes happen, but I'm a regular customer and would be really meaningful to me if you could compensate me for that by some sort of complimentary upgrade. Would really mean a lot to me and continuing my business and being passionate about recommending this hotel to other people. So, it's that simple.

Aline Sara: And I don't even know if that's a travel hack. I feel like that's just basic business.

Matt Bowles: It's a life hack, right? Yeah. It's like a regular thing in life and you just do it and you're polite about it and you're professional about it and they understand that something went wrong and they want to compensate you for it and continue to have you as a customer. And you just have that professional, polite exchange. And oftentimes you will be amazed. All right, Aline, who is one person that's currently alive today that you've never met that you would most love to have dinner with. Just you and that person for an evening of dinner and conversation?

Aline Sara: I think I would pick Ed Snowden.

Matt Bowles: That would be an amazing dinner. Wow. Good pick.

Aline Sara: I'm a big fan.

Matt Bowles: All right, knowing everything that you know now, if you could go back in time and give one piece of advice to your 18-year-old self, what would you say to 18-year-old Aline?

Aline Sara: I would say travel more. Travel even more than what you're traveling before life gets complicated.

Matt Bowles: I love that. All right, what are your top three favorite travel destinations you've ever been to, you'd most recommend, other people should definitely check out.

Aline Sara: I think South Africa would be up there. I'm going to not be humble here. I would say Lebanon.

Matt Bowles: Do it. I've been recommending Beirut to so many people on this podcast, so I'm glad to hear that.

Aline Sara: And number three, let's go with Brazil.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. All right, last question. What are your top three bucket list destinations? These are places you've never been highest on the list you'd most love to see.

Aline Sara: So, I would like to go to Vietnam. Still haven't made it there. I would like to go to Costa Rica. I've also always wanted to go to Afghanistan.

Matt Bowles: Nice. Amazing. Awesome picks. All right, Elaine, I want you to let folks know how they can find you, connect with you, follow you and [NaTakallam](#) on social media and let folks know once again if they want to check out the offerings from [NaTakallam](#) and consider either as an individual or as a business to connect with and patronize some of your services. How should people come into your world and find more about what you're up to?

Aline Sara: Yeah, so [NaTakallam](#) is on most social media. [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#). We're not on TikTok so you can find us there. And then I think the best way to get in touch with me personally, I would say [LinkedIn](#) is a safe bet. And then also for any general inquiries about [NaTakallam](#), about our services, about our discount, I would email info info@natakallam.com that's the best.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. We are going to link all of that up in [the show notes](#) so if you're listening to this just go to one place at themaverickshow.com go to [the show notes](#) for this episode. You're going to find all the social media handles, you're going to find that email address, you're going to find the URL and you're going to find the discount code to get your 10% off at [NaTakallam](#).

Aline this was so amazing. I am such a big fan of what you're doing. Thank you so much for coming on The Maverick Show.

Aline Sara: Thank you for having me.

Matt Bowles: Good night, everybody.

Aline Sara: Take care.