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MAKING THEIR MARK

Rayyan Abuhilal and Gabe Fiascone
turn a big idea into a national win

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Gabe Fiascone and
Rayyan Abuhilal
Photo by Victor Hilitski



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The Scent of Success

Meet the Oak Brook teens whose custom fragrance business
earned top honors at a national competition

BY JULIA MAZUREK | PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FIASCONE FAMILY

The conversation started like countless others between a teenager and his dad. Gabe Fiascone had his eye on a designer bottle of cologne. The price tag? Around \$200.

His father's response came without hesitation.

"Stone-cold crazy."

"If he wanted champagne taste on a tap water budget, he was going to have to get creative," Gabe's father Marty Fiascone joked.

For most teens, that would have been the end of the discussion. For Gabe, 14, it was just the beginning.

"What initially sparked my interest in fragrances was through social media," Gabe shared. "That's really what lit the fuse for me, and for my friends too." Those friends are classmates Rayyan Abuhilal, Joe Bilshausen and Ryan Joutras.

But after his father's swift "no", Gabe and his friends started asking questions. Instead of asking what they could do to afford an expensive fragrance, they asked why it was so expensive in the first place. How much does a bottle of cologne actually cost to make? Why do luxury brands charge hundreds of dollars? And if fragrance is so personal, why do we settle for choosing from bottles on department store shelves? Their curiosity led the boys to come up with a solution to fit the problem. "The two underlying principles were customizable and affordable," Gabe explains. "We wanted to use high-quality notes but offer them at an affordable price."

As the then-eighth graders developed their business plan for Butler Junior High's Business Professionals of America program, they hit an obstacle: Even if they could make custom

fragrances, how would customers know what they wanted? Most people aren't perfumers.

They set out to learn how to build an AI model to generate custom fragrance combinations.

Their explorations led to an idea they named Essence By You, an online shop for customers to customize their own personalized fragrance.

FROM CONCEPT TO COMPETITION

The boys presented their plan at the BPA's state level competition in February.

"The state competition was very structured and strict," Marty explained. "The boys had ten minutes to present their plan on Zoom and five minutes for Q&A, then it was judged through a rubric." This step earned the boys an opportunity to bring Essence By You to the BPA's National Leadership Conference in Nashville.

Gabe and Rayyan were proud to showcase the business at the event. Although teammates Joe and Ryan were unable to attend the event, "they were awesome teammates, helping us with prep, checking in with us, giving us advice," Rayyan added.

The conference attracted record-breaking attendance of nearly 6,900 attendees from over 1,800 middle schools, high schools and post-secondary programs across all 50 states and 5 countries.

Gabe and Rayyan left the competition as national champions. For the first time in the BPA's 60-year history, a team of 8th graders won the Overall National Showcase Best in Show. "We were shocked. We thought we had zero chance of winning," Rayyan said. "There were people there who had competed for many years prior. We never even considered that we'd beat the older kids."

FOLLOWING THEIR CURIOSITY

Developing a business plan was just part of the process. To learn more about blending fragrances, they watched YouTube tutorials and experimented with a 34-note fragrance kit Gabe received as a birthday gift - capable of thousands of possible scent combinations!

Making great fragrances, however, proved far more difficult than videos made it appear.

"So many of them smelled bad," Gabe admitted with a laugh.



Rayyan Abuhilal (left) and Gabe Fiascone (right) learn about fragrance as they build a business plan for selling customizable and affordable fragrances.

Rather than getting discouraged, the boys doubled down. They enrolled in professional fragrance classes at Workshop Apothecary in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, learning directly from experienced perfumers while continuing to experiment at home. Then another conversation with Gabe's dad suggested another component for them to consider: learning more about artificial intelligence.

Gabe enrolled in an online course to better understand how AI models could be prompted to solve problems. After putting in about 25 hours of coursework and weeks of experimentation, the boys developed a 20-question interactive quiz that asks customers about everything from personality and lifestyle to mood and occasion.

The system then recommends a customized fragrance recipe, explains why it fits the customer's responses, suggests names for the scent and even allows adjustments before purchase. Instead of asking customers to become fragrance experts, the technology helps translate personality into scent. The result is something that feels less like buying cologne and more like creating it.

Each bottle is then hand-crafted by the Essence By You team specifically for that customer.

"We're not just making fragrances," Gabe said. "We're making one that's unique to you."



Essence By You was developed by four Butler Junior High eighth graders Rayyan Abuhilal, Gabe Fiascone, Joe Bilshausen, Ryan Joutras.

WINNING OVER THE JUDGES

When Gabe and Rayyan arrived in Nashville, they weren't thinking about making history.

Rows upon rows of student businesses filled the showcase floor. Some teams presented advanced financial technology. Others demonstrated engineering innovations. Many competitors had participated in the national competition multiple times. "It wasn't intimidating because they were older," Rayyan said. "It was intimidating because everybody had great ideas."

For four hours, the students pitched Essence By You to professional judges while hundreds of fellow competitors stopped by to sample their fragrances and cast peer votes.

"I lost my voice for a week after giving the same pitch for four hours!" Rayyan recalls.

One after another, judges and peers completed the AI quiz, tested fragrances and asked questions.

When category winners were announced later that day, Gabe and Rayyan celebrated winning the Start-Up Enterprise Team division. They assumed the excitement was over. Moments later, organizers prepared to announce one final award: Overall Best in Show.

The honor recognized the strongest business concept among every showcase category and every age division.

As their names were read, Gabe and Rayyan sat stunned. They had won the entire competition.

MORE THAN A BUSINESS

Despite national recognition, Gabe and Rayyan are remarkably grounded. And are remarkably articulate about the business they created and will continue to grow.

They credit Butler Junior High for creating opportunities through Business Professionals of America, with support from the school chapter's sponsor Mr. Kenneth Shum and principal John Hamilton.

"All kids deserve a place like Butler, it's a special place," Rayyan said.

They also acknowledge that none of it would have been possible without parents willing to invest time, transportation and encouragement as the business grew from an idea into reality.

This summer, Essence By You expanded into local farmers markets, where the founders introduced customers to personalized fragrance, one conversation at a time. As the boys enter high school this fall, their goal is to continue growing Essence By You, making premium custom fragrances affordable for everyday people.

"We want to project our values of customization and affordability into the fragrance industry, which right now is lacking in this industry," added Gabe.

That mindset transformed one offhand comment during a family car ride into a business, a national championship and a glimpse of what can happen when curiosity is allowed to grow.

And as Essence By You likes to remind its customers: Stop buying their story and start wearing your own. ■



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