

Frederick Factor Season 2 Episode 12

Audi Nagi, Owner of Frederick Social

Ashleigh: Welcome to the Frederick Factor. My name is Ashleigh Kiggins and I'm the host of Season Two. Everyone who's lived in, worked in or visited Frederick, Maryland knows there's just something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible diverse community that continues to grow here. On this podcast, we bring Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs and community leaders into the spotlight to share their stories with you and find out: what's their Frederick Factor? I'm here today with the owner of Frederick Social, Audi Nagi. So welcome. Thanks for joining me today.

Audi: Thanks for having me.

Ashleigh:

Well, for people who don't know, we record in a studio at 50 Citizens Way, and they're located on the first floor of the building. And about nine times outta 10 when I can't get into this locked building, I cut through their space and just wave and say, Hey, could you please let me in? So, thanks guys for always letting me in. But I'm super excited to have you here today. Your business has blown up here in Frederick. It has become exactly what it is. It is a Frederick Social Place. My friends and I spend a lot of time there. So before we dive into the business, tell us a little bit about you, a little bit about your background.

Audi: Well, background, geez. <laughs>. I have a bit of an eclectic background. I've lived across the United States, with my parents, but also through schooling. I went to five different schools that ranged in California, Florida, Georgia, New York and through that my background is really eclectic. So I started in marketing. I got into paralegal work, fine arts. I was a starving artist for a little bit. Then I got into interior design work in New York City, which also led me into a sustainability background -- environmental and social and economic kind of work. Underlining a lot of that was in the retail and built environment. So I have a little bit of retail experience building in and operating them, aside from many years bartending.

Ashleigh: <laughs>. So you kind of took both of those and said, "Let's figure it out." So, first of all, how did you end up here in Frederick? Being cross country and all over the place, what made you say, Hey, Frederick is where we're gonna be and where we're gonna settle. We wanna open a business here.

Audi: It was a happy accident. So my husband and I -- our last place was in New York. We lived in Brooklyn and we were looking to get out. At the time, we had one child, we were looking to have another, and the cost of living in New York is really expensive. And, we were originally looking in Colorado and I found a job in DC at a nonprofit, and he apparently trusts me.

Ashleigh: <laughs>.

Audi: So I said, let's give Maryland a go. We, neither one of us have ever been in Maryland. Maybe we've driven past it through it, but actually never stopped in Maryland. And, it was quite an experience because we moved to Bethesda, one of the largest most expensive counties in Maryland. You go from expensive to expensive. We liked it. But we actually have a friend that lives up here in Frederick, and we were visiting and they brought us to the downtown area. And instantly we looked around and said, "oh my gosh, this place is so adorable." And so we ended up in Lake Linganore. I have tons of space, <laughs>. I can't touch my neighbors from side to side, <laughs> which is really wonderful. And we started spending a little bit more time in Frederick. And I was still commuting to DC for my job. And at some point, the both of us -- we're at a point in our lives where we're just like, we've gotta slow down. And Frederick is that place where you can feel like you can slow down. And we've been here since 2018, and this is our forever home. I can't imagine us living anywhere else. And this is me. I've lived in California, Colorado, Oklahoma, Florida, Georgia, New York. And I have to say of all those places, it's giving me the insight to know that this place here has so many unique qualities to it that it's gonna take a lifetime to really see all of them.

Ashleigh: I think that's how people sort of end up here, though. It's one of those things -- you have one little visit here, you kind of feel this connection to it. And I think 9 times outta 10, people say, "I can't imagine living anywhere else because it's just such a friendly community experience." I grew up in Northern Virginia, never knew anything about Frederick. I mean, to me, Frederick was like 19 million miles away and spent a lot of time in DC. And then when I came up to Frederick and moved up to Frederick, I'm like, well, I don't need to go to DC for anything anymore. I've got everything I need here. I've got great restaurants, I've got a community, I have activities, things going on every weekend. So, that's the beauty of Frederick. Now, Frederick Social -- so that is NOT nonprofit. That is not where Mike's background sort of lies too. So what made you guys feel like you wanted to open up this place?

Audi: So if you haven't met us, we are actually quite social. We thrive in being in social settings. I love to meet people and get to know them and, and know their story. Why are they here? How do they end up at Frederick Social? And Mike, whose title is the Chief Social Officer --

Ashleigh: Love it.

Audi: -- wears that title really well. <laugh>. There were a lot of things that we found in Frederick that we like -- the breweries, the distilleries, all these little nuggets. But none of them really had that piece where you can come in and you can work it. It's like a glorified coffee shop, except we're not pouring coffee, we're pouring booze. So you can come in with your laptop, you can work, you can bring your friends, you can bring your coworkers, have a networking event. It kind of fits all those boxes. It's not a restaurant, but we have tons of food, so it compliments the drinks set that are being served. And so we took all of those great things that we liked about all the places that we're visiting, kind of meshed it all together into what we've created at Frederick Social.

Ashleigh: Which is a really cool thing. I mean, obviously you guys went through the pandemic, which we'll touch on going through that whole "trying to open a business in the middle of a crisis" where from week to week, no one knows what is going to happen. But it does give you that opportunity to have this social environment where you do get to spend time with your friends. So for those who don't know and haven't been there, there are 50 taps and it's not just beer. They've got wine, mixed drinks, non-alcoholic drinks. I think kombucha is now there too as well. So it just gives this great variety for those groups of friends who you wanna get together. But they're like, "Well, you know, I don't like beer, so I don't wanna go to a brewery." Okay, no problem. This is a good spot for you. And I think we all have those friends in our group who say, "I don't like beer" or "I don't wanna drink." Hey, no problem. There's non-alcoholic drinks, there's food there. And you can hang out and play games and sit outside and kind of get that outside effect too, when the weather's nice. So I think that's a really cool thing. So obviously the pandemic kind of affected everybody a little differently. I know that you guys were originally, I think, looking at the space probably prior to the pandemic.

Audi::

So we were looking somewhere else. We were actually looking where all the breweries were condensed. There was a space there, the foot print was a little bit smaller than we were looking at. And, there are some criteria. So coming from my background in retail and my experience in real estate, there's a few things that we knew we needed to have. It needed to feel like it was a destination -- people could end up there. And part of that needed to have outdoor space, something beautiful to look at. And it needed to accommodate 50 taps. . So if you can imagine our keg room -- it is 35 feet long. Which is a decent size. So to have that variation, you need to have that back room space. And we had just met our lawyer who was working on our paperwork. Hank, great guy, great lawyer, and he connected us with VCRE, who had the space, and space was sitting vacant for six years. It wasn't the Green Turtle. The green turtle was right next to us.

Ashleigh: This was the bank space.

Audi: That was the bank space, right. It was Wacovia and then Wells Fargo. And then it sat empty for seven years. And, we presented our business plan, PowerPoint presentation, everything. <laughs>. And it was funny cuz it aligned well with what they were thinking originally. They wanted an event space -- something that they could hire somebody else to do, but it had that kind of feel to it. So instantly we all kind of meshed together and the concept/the ideas worked well to what the future of that corner could be. And we were working through the leasing agreement and the contracts and all those things, the loan, we were working through underwriting. And then...

Ashleigh: The world shuts down.

Audi: The world shuts down and watching it in slow motion as it's happening. And then the bank forgot our name. We called, we wrote emails, we called, we wrote emails months later. And so needless to say, it took us quite some time to get the capital. And that happened in March of 2020. But we were finally able to ink the paper, get everything going, and we opened in December of 2021.

Ashleigh: Feels like you've been open so much longer than that. And that could be just cuz I'm there every week. <laugh>. But it does feel like you've been open longer than that. But it's amazing for all the people who I know who opened businesses or were in the process of starting to open a business and then got extended. I mean, from the time you started in March 2021 until not being able to open until December 2021, which even like time of year things--

Audi: [March 2020 to December 2021].

Ashleigh: Oh yeah. But even the time of year -- I mean December is a different time of year. So it's not the same as being able to open in the fall where you can put up your garage doors --

Audi: Do you see my gray hairs?

Ashleigh: <laugh>. We were supposed to open in August of 2021 -- supply chain factory shutdown because of Covid, delays in the shipping, the backup in California where the shipping containers were lost or back out in sea, for God knows how long.

Ashleigh: Stuck in a canal. <laugh>.

Audi: Our garage doors were supposed to be installed in September. They didn't get installed until after we opened in February. So, you see it took us a year plus to sign the lease to get the money. It took us three times longer for this renovation project to get done and to watch the timeline shift over and over and over and over again. Finally in November, we said to our contractor, "Listen, do everything you possibly can so that we can open at the early parts of December so that we could at least be open during the holidays where people are out and about." And it was a blessing because the week of Christmas, it was 60 degrees.

Ashleigh: That's right. Yeah.

Audi: Right. And people were walking on the creek. We're on the creek. It's beautiful. And nobody knew that we were even there. And, we got business, just people walking in, on the week of Christmas. And it was interesting because this summer -- well in the spring, we're not barely in summer -- we've had a couple customers come in and say, "Hey, I haven't been here in a while. We were here the first week you opened."

Ashleigh: Oh, that's so cool.

Audi: You know, and to see the evolution from our menu and everything that we offer. [Meant so much] to have those conversations. Like, thank you so much for coming back and thank you for trying us out and when we first opened. And that's, that's Frederick.

Ashleigh: Well, and I will say one of the cool things with you guys too is because it is self-serve and because you can move a little bit quicker through everything. We'll put our name in at a restaurant and they may tell us, "Okay, it's a 45 minute to an hour wait." And we're like, "Great," And nowadays people call or text and let you know. So we'll head over to Frederick Social and we'll just say, "let's go grab a drink over there" instead of trying to squeeze into a packed bar. We know that we can go there. We can quickly get in and out when our table's ready. We can be there in five minutes. Cuz you just walk out, you drop your card in and you're done. You don't have to wait, you don't have to say, oh we need our check, we need to be able to get up and get out. And it's such a nice thing. We actually did that a couple weeks ago cuz it was just so easy. Instead of just saying let's, you know, stand and squeeze and feel like we're gonna touch everybody <laugh>.

Audi: It's hard to define Frederick Social cuz we're not a restaurant. At a restaurant, you see a hostess, they put you at a table, you meet your waiter or waitress who then takes your drink order. They go away, they come back 10, 15 minutes later with your drink order, then they ask you what you're gonna eat. And then, there's this whole process that you go through in a restaurant. That's not us. At a bar, it's a different experience. You've got a bartender that takes care of you, knows how many drinks you're drinking, you gotta wait for the bartender to come see you. We're none of that, but yet we are some of that. And so defining that to a customer is a little bit challenging. You just have to kind of experience it to then know how different it is, and then you make it your own. Like you said, you popped in and out, you did the express checkout. People stay there for hours sometimes. It's whatever you want it to be.

Ashleigh: It's very easy to stay there for hours. Lemme tell you. <laugh>. But I will say even with it being self-service, I mean, it is still controlled. Like you said, a bartender knows how much you're drinking. It still is very controlled because you, you know, you do get told you're pretty.<laugh>.

Audi: <laugh>. To give a context, our concept is tech heavy, so there's that other layer to it that's very different. We rely on technology. So Pour My Beer is the technology that runs the tap system. So when you come in, we swipe a card, we start a tab, you get a, a pour card essentially, and that'll allow you to pour from any one of the taps. And unlike a restaurant or bar, you get to decide, I just wanna try a whole bunch of stuff, so you can pour an ounce, whatever you like, or a full pour. That card also knows based on the alcohol that you're pouring, the BV percentage. So if you're drinking a light beer versus a barley wine, it's a higher alcohol content. If you're trying to pour yourself 16 ounces of barley wine the card knows. "Hey, beautiful. You need to see a craft ambassador. Because we wanna make sure that you're doing okay and you know, you're not talking sideways, not slurring." So there is that sense of oversight. But it really still gives you the customer that control over how you wanna consume your alcohol.

Ashleigh: Well, and I think that's a really nice thing to have though too, to be able to say, "Hey, you may have to check in with someone because it is a very family friendly place." I love that you guys have a kid section set up. I love that your kids are there sometimes too, and I think that makes it very comfortable as a parent myself. I mean my kids are older, so it's a little different. But I know when they were younger I didn't really wanna take them to breweries, things like that because it was like, well there's not much for them to do. I'm trying to -- I'll just give 'em a device and send 'em down and say best of luck. But there wasn't this [feeling of] I have to be worried about other people around.

Are they gonna be belligerent? Are they gonna be screaming, yelling, talking about things that they shouldn't be talking about around my three-year-old or something. So I think that's a really nice thing to have is that check-in. Cuz I also think it makes us check in with ourselves too, to be like, "Ugh. Okay. If I get told twice, maybe it is time to slow it down. Or maybe I should go find the lightest beer on tap or the non-alcoholic beer on tap."

Audi: Yeah. And it's not a bartender, somebody saying, "Hmm. You know, sir, ma'am, I'm gonna give you some water here." It's a gentle nudge and say hey, you know,

Ashleigh: Just check in. Just make sure you're good. Maybe order some food. <laugh>.

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Ashleigh: As we've talked about the obstacles you did overcome with Covid, obviously this is a woman-owned business too as well. And what challenges or even the opposite of challenges maybe, what support have you felt through the Frederick community by being a woman owned business?

Audi: So, the support is really ingrained in the community. And I say this with confidence because of the fact that in my other previous roles, I've worked with cities, I've worked with businesses that are struggling to understand how they can have more women-owned or minority-owned businesses in either their building or their community. What are the resources that they need to provide, but not just on paper. Like, here's a manual -- go forth. Which obviously doesn't work. The Frederick community has a tremendous amount of programs -- not

just the nonprofit organizations that are geared towards women in business. There's a ton. But there's also, in the city itself and the county and the community, there are programs. I've gotta give a shout out to Karen at the Maryland Women Business Center. She was my mentor and I met with her once a month before we even finished our business plan.

And she connected me to all of the many resources that were available. And it's easy to tap into 'em. I mean, you've got the county economic development group, you've got the Downtown Frederick Business Partnership. There's so many other organizations that are there at your fingertips. And I can tell you -- I've written an email and I would write it to one person, which was the wrong person because I could forget. There's so many that I would forget who does what. And I'd say, "okay, here's my problem." And instantly within like hours, they would connect me to right person, CC them and say, "Hey, can you help them out with this?" And that turnaround as a business owner -- a new business owner -- I mean, how much do you really know? To have that kind of network that instantly can connect you to the right person or provide you the resources or funding or whatever it is, without waiting months. That black hole, that other places you send an email to and you're like, "Well, should I send it again?" <laugh>, that's not Frederick. And, that's a unique thing and, when I was working at the nonprofit space and I've talked to city officials, I was like, you have to share your successes and how you've done it here with other towns and cities, because you're doing it so well. So many others could benefit from the process and the connection between the public sector, the private sector, and all the nonprofits that make it all work well.

Ashleigh: And that's very much the way Frederick is. I always say, there's such a personal aspect to being in Frederick. When I used to network in DC when I worked in DC I was right in the heart of downtown. My office was right next to Hay Adams, you know, a block and a half from the White House. It's a great spot. But when I used to network or even just connect out there, it was always kind of like, you know, "Well what's your job? What can you do?" For me, when I came to Frederick, it was the first time I had gone to networking events and I'll never forget it caught me off guard. People were asking me like, "Oh, well where are you from? What's your background?" Or like, "Oh you've got kids." And, and then I would see those same people a few days later or a few weeks later. "And how are your kids doing? Oh, I remember you mentioned your son had this soccer game, how'd that go?" And these are like higher up officials that are remembering these kinds of things to me. Whereas like, well, when I've worked in other areas, those were untouchables <laugh>, you know? So I think you're right. It's almost like -- you gotta bottle it all up and give it to other areas. But I think there's just something so connecting, especially when you're in an area too that has so many transplants. Cuz not everyone is from here. The majority of us are not from Frederick, but yet we've been made to feel like we are from Frederick.

Audi: Yeah. I'm so grateful that I'm able to afford to open a business. I'm a business owner. I own something. It's challenging, but it's very unique. Not everybody has that opportunity. And so we made sure when we opened our doors that, because it's one of the larger spaces in downtown -- we've got 5,000 square feet and another thousand outside of usable space -- we wanted to make sure that the community could utilize the space. The aspect of that is we've had a lot of nonprofits come in through our charity tap, but also we've offered our space to nonprofits

to do networking events, training, whatever it was that they needed within reason. And it actually allowed me quite selfishly to get to know so many people so quickly. So we open up this business and instantly we're reaching out and people are reaching out to us. And, these groups are coming in and I'm meeting so many wonderful women. I thought I was special. <laugh>. I thought I had some clout and I had this cool background and then I started meeting all these women and I was like, getting smaller <laugh>.

Ashleigh: <laugh>

Audi: "You're so much cooler than I am. And oh my God, you're so successful. And man, I just wanna sit and talk to you because I can, this is wonderful." And we're here and you're in my place. And you know what I mean? I've never had that in my career and I've had so many. And, it continues to grow. And that network and the small business space, and especially the women in small business. Man, this town is run by women. It really is. And it's super cool and it's really supported men and women and it's incredibly unique to be a part of that. As a first time business owner in a town that now I call home and my forever home, it couldn't get any more special.

Ashleigh: Well, and I think as someone who has been there for the charity events... So, for Mental Health Association, we did two events there almost back to back. I think it was within like a month or so of each other. Great turnout. It was so awesome because once again, you have this really nice large open space. Actually the Young Lawyers Bar Association was there one night during a happy hour at the exact same time we did one, which was even more fun because you realize how many people are on different paths. And we all started to kind of cross and talk and it just ended up being one large group basically. But you know, the charity tap is a great thing. I spend a lot of time in the nonprofit world and I think it's so cool that you guys have done this.

So for those who don't know, the charity tap is basically where you highlight a nonprofit every month. There's one tap, so one beer, and when that beer is sold, a percentage of the proceeds will go to that nonprofit. I think when we had our event there for the Mental Health Association, and we got so many people. Cause once again, everyone was excited that it was Frederick Social. They were excited. It was a place that they could have different options. But we made sure everyone did the charity tap as soon as they walked in. And I think we even tapped the keg pretty quickly there. It's just such a really cool way. And, in my opinion, it's actually ingenious from a business aspect, because this is a town that runs on nonprofits and what a genius thing to do to say, "Hey look, not only are you guys gonna be highlighting your nonprofit, but those nonprofits are now highlighting you too as well." And it's kind of like this very mutually beneficial situation.

Audi: Yeah. And you know, it's interesting because I probably was in the same boat. There are so many nonprofits here that are benefiting the community that most residents don't even know exist. And so nonprofits struggle oftentimes because there's not enough awareness about what they do, from a financial standpoint. But also from a benefit to parts of the community that really

need it. And so that's why we highlight them. Look, we're new. It's not like we can do a large donation every month, but at minimum what we can do is provide that awareness to the customers that come in through our doors. We also offer the nonprofit the space. As long as we can stay open for business, they can utilize it for training, a networking event, whatever it is that they're looking to do during that month. You know, they can use it and utilize that space. And I think that that mutually benefits both of us for various reasons. But also, it's getting our customers to understand, look, there's this organization. This is what they do. If you wanna support them, you can either do it by pouring yourself a beer from the charity tap. You can add a couple dollars when you check out, or hear a list of links that you can use to volunteer or, or find out more information.

Ashleigh: That's awesome. Now, what are you thinking? Obviously you guys have tapped so many different things. So if you walk into Frederick Social and you look up above the taps, all 50 of the taps, it has all the events that they do throughout the week. And I mean, they have something going on all the time, meaning they're still open for business. But because you do offer such a large space, you could have these multiple things going on at the same time. I know you guys have started doing private parties and we talked about baby showers, after parties for weddings cuz you can stay open later. Is there anything else that's next?

Audi: So I forget to tell you, we're a little crazy <laugh>. So Mike, my husband, and I work really well coming up with ideas. But that's also a problem because sometimes we just don't turn off the idea tap. So we are open seven days a week. So Monday through Friday -- Monday through Sunday -- we have stuff going on. Let's be honest. We've got trivia on Monday. We've got Double Points Tuesday for our socialite VIPs. Wednesdays, the chess club has been playing there for quite some time. So every Wednesday, whether you're a novelist or a beginner, or a master, there are chess players there all the time. Board gamers go every other week on Wednesdays. Thursdays we offer 50% off the food menu, which we haven't talked about. On Fridays we're gonna start up with some live music again. And then we've got brunch on weekends, and sometimes we have some live music. And we are now in the event space, so, pre-wedding welcome dinners, after wedding brunch, after hour parties, networking, corporate events -- kind of name it. We're not afraid of it. And we think that we can offer something unique for everybody. So it's fun.

Ashleigh: Well, and once again, if you have not been there, you're either really missing out or you're just haven't walked down the creek at all lately. So wrapping this up and we ask all of our guests -- what is your Frederick Factor? What makes Frederick Frederick to you?

Audi: I mean, the short answer is everything. <laugh>. I think it's the connections that we make. It's the local businesses. I mean, in downtown Frederick, there's one national chain that leases space. In the downtown area, just one. And that is super, super cool.

Ashleigh: And they've even adjusted their business, I feel like, to make it fit into the town. Yeah.

Audi: Yeah. And that is the power of the town, right? This community loves local and supporting local. You could, as a business owner, walk down or call a local business mate and say, “Hey, I got this problem” or “do you wanna collaborate?” Collaboration is a big one here. And it’s that Frederick socialization. It really kind of fits who we are. Yeah. And we are very grateful for that. We are very grateful that we found Frederick and that Frederick is our home and the community has entrusted us to support our business. And it’s allowed us to grow. There’s so many changes happening around the downtown area, but I’m confident that the community and those that are leading the community really have our interest at heart. And that will grow organically.

Ashleigh: A hundred percent. Now, before we sign off here, do you wanna give everyone your address, where people can find out information about different events, social media, things like that? We’ll go ahead and add the links to all your social media pages [to the Show Notes]. But if you wanna throw out your address for everyone and when they should come see you.

Audi: So we are on the corner of Court Street and Carroll Creek. It’s 50 Citizens Way. The entrance is on Carroll Creek. I know it can be a little confusing. We’re open for lunch every day, Monday through Friday, and into the night. Saturdays and Sundays, we’re open for brunch at 11. We do offer lots of food options. So if you’re vegan, carnivore, got tons of allergies, we can accommodate all of them. And you can find out information on all the events that we have going on on our website at Frederick-Social.com. We’ve got Facebook <laugh>. Trying to go through the list here. On Facebook, I think it’s Frederick Social Cafe. Instagram, it’s Frederick Social -- all of which you can find on our website. So if you don’t remember, just go to Frederick-social.com. That calendar also has an updated events page. It’s a lot going on. So every week just check in.

Ashleigh: A lot going on, but in a good way. I’m personally, like I said, happy to have you guys here in Frederick. I think you guys have been such a great addition to downtown and to the community just from opening up your business to everything that you’re doing and connecting to the community too as well. So I personally thank you for everything you guys are doing. And I hope that you never, ever, ever close. I hope you stay open forever because it’s my favorite spot to go hang out. So please stay open forever. Also one thing I will add too is that if you are downtown and you’ve got afternoon meetings and you’re in between meetings, they’ve got wifi available, you can set yourself up, you can find a little area outlet to plug in and maybe grab lunch or grab a snack or something like that. So, it does make a nice little workspace too, as well for you. So Audi, thank you so much for being here today and I really appreciate it. So this is Ashleigh Kiggins signing off.

You’ve been listening to The Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community that makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at www.frederickfactor.com. ‘Til next time.