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## International Graduate Student Makes Mark with Massive Fundraiser

Iranian native Mina Esfahani raised \$700K to save child in home country

FEBRUARY 18, 2019 BY JUSTIN WHITMORE



During her time as a graduate student in the UM integrated marketing communication program, Mina Esfahani organized a social media fundraiser to raise money for a seriously ill child in her home country of Iran. The campaign drew in more than \$700,000 that was sent to the child's family to help with medical costs. Photo by Megan Wolfe/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

OXFORD, Miss. – Mina Ghofrani Esfahani was pursuing a master's degree in the University of Mississippi's **integrated marketing communication** program in fall 2017 when her compassion for a critically ill child in her home country prompted her to put to practical use the theories she was learning.

Esfahani was born and raised in Iran. She took to English quickly as a teenager, began teaching others the language before she finished high school and eventually majored in English and applied linguistics as an undergraduate student in that country.

After immigrating to the United States with her husband, an **Ole Miss** student, she learned that one of her former English teaching colleagues had a child born with type 1 spinal muscular atrophy, a genetic disorder that affects nerve cells that control voluntary muscles, complicating breathing and eating.

Esfahani, who also became a student at UM after moving to Oxford, was inspired by her passion and knowledge of social media to start her own campaign for the 9-month-old child, named Radin. In just six weeks on Facebook, the campaign raised more than \$700,000 that would eventually make it to the boy's family to help pay for the expensive treatment that would keep him alive.

"Let's confirm that borders cannot stop humanity," she said on the Facebook page. "Help him see more loving days with his loving parents. Don't leave them alone. Every dollar would count."

The online fundraiser appealed to donors with Esfahani's words of compassion for the child, who, she said, reminded her of three nephews back home that she missed dearly. Within hours of the first posting in October 2017, the campaign drew in its first \$1,000.

"It kept getting shared," Esfahani said. "I invited everybody I knew, and those people invited everybody they knew and it exponentially grew. Over five weeks, we had raised \$705,000 in the campaign."

"There was momentum. I would go back and see what's going on, and every time I checked there was more."

Robert Magee, assistant professor and director of the IMC graduate program, was one of Esfahani's mentors at Ole Miss. Magee said he was inspired watching Esfahani's compassion and ability to apply the theories he was teaching to a practical online campaign.

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OXFORD, Miss. – Peer recognition is a rewarding experience for anyone, but University of Mississippi researcher Amir Mehrara Molan was elated when an article he co-authored recently received the Most Cited Paper Award at the 102nd Transportation Research Board meeting in the nation's capital. The International Journal of Transportation Science and Technology presented the civil engineering

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OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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#### Reuters: Keep an Eye on the Money Supply

U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to

"I gave her ideas on the most effective types of messaging and, sure enough, she tried some of these and they were quite successful," Magee said.

Esfahani and her colleagues worked countless hours and made countless phone calls to find a country that would accept the child and administer the needed medication. The family eventually made its way to Belgium and through a U.S.-based nonprofit organization, the money made it to a hospital there that treated the child.

Esfahani said she is grateful to "the donors and supporters who invested their love, trust and energy in the campaign and had my back to the last stage of transferring the funds to the hospital." The campaign received donations from people across the globe, many from the Persian community. Donors from 37 different countries made contributions.

Nearly 70 percent of children with type 1 spinal muscular atrophy don't make it to age 2, but Esfahani said the boy is approaching his second birthday and all indications are that he is doing well.

### Longing for America

When Esfahani was growing up, she often expressed a desire to move to the United States. She learned English and started teaching it to others in less than one year.

"I wanted to emigrate when I was 15 or 16, but then 9/11 happened and that was the period to that story," she said.

She continued her education in Iran and eventually studied English in college, earning undergraduate and graduate degrees and serving as an adjunct lecturer. She met Vahid Ghomi, an Iranian graduate student at Ole Miss at the time, during one of his visits home. The two courted, their families met and they were married in July 2015.

Esfahani then successfully applied to attend UM as a graduate student seeking a second master's degree, moved to the United States and joined Ghomi in Oxford.

Her passion for communication, social media and effective messaging pointed her in the direction of IMC, and she reached out to Magee to inquire about a degree program in marketing communication.

"She's always been very proactive," Magee said. "She always had a practical orientation of what needs to be done. She's very focused and driven – very smart. She also has a lot of initiative.

"She's not the kind of student who will just sit back, take notes and leave class. She always has some kind of commentary or some kind of observation."

Esfahani quickly made a home in Oxford, she said.

"I was very lucky to have the chance to study here," she said. "I really didn't know what a wonderful place it was before I came, but now that I have gone to other cities and colleges, I realize how great a place it was.

"Everything is vibrant and lively. You see that people are really 'living' here at the university."

The university's **Office of International Programs** played a major role in her adjustment to life in the U.S., Esfahani said.

"They were very kind. I really felt at home with them," she said, noting that the office would keep her up-to-date on events to attend and organizations to join. "I said, 'This is not just academics; it's going to be a life here.'"

Esfahani said she is struck by how welcoming the university was of international students.

"The one way I would describe Ole Miss is 'all-inclusive,'" she said. "There's academics, health, sports, fun, events and, to a great extent, they really pay attention to diversity.

"When I was talking to other international students, they never complain that at Ole Miss you are disregarded or people don't know us. All of the events are for everybody."

During her time at Ole Miss, Esfahani never missed an opportunity to exceed expectations. The IMC master's program does not require a thesis, but she elected to complete one anyway. She worked on her thesis while also taking a full course load and running what equated to a full-time fundraising campaign.

As the money grew and the campaign gathered more traction, red tape began piling up. Dealing with international tax law, banking codes, international sanctions and organizing people and large amounts of money began to take a toll on Esfahani. But her support group in the IMC department and the Office of International Programs was there to help.

"She got a crash course in bureaucracy," Magee said. "She was dealing with tax treaties and all kinds of things, but she was willing to say, 'I don't know,' and find help from other people."

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Esfahani and other international students contribute to a more robust education experience for all students, Magee said.

"She has a perspective, coming from the Middle East, that always enriches a classroom," he said.

Since moving to the U.S. in 2015, Esfahani's only interaction with her family in Iran has been through social media and phone conversations. She talks to her parents daily and keeps them updated on her studies and life.

"I show them a lot (of pictures of Oxford)," she said. "My parents, like me, love cities with a lot of green with rain and nice people – calm, quiet – and Oxford is what they would like. I was sure if they were here, they would never feel depressed."

### Looking ahead

Esfahani completed her master's degree in August 2018. She and Ghomi split time between Jackson and Cleveland, where he is an assistant professor at Delta State University. She works as a research analyst for WDBD Fox 40 in Jackson.

The couple often visits Oxford. When in town, Esfahani frequently visits the Oxford Community Garden, where she spent a great deal of time as a student.

"I was lucky to find the community garden," she said. "Sometimes when I felt sad or bored, I would go do some gardening."

Ole Miss left its mark on Esfahani, but Magee said he feels she left her mark on campus as well.

"It's been a delight to work with her," he said. "I think she's made a valuable contribution to the program and to student life."

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