Alumni

A New Tool for NYC Apartment Hunters

Openigloo, an app founded by three Columbia SIPA grads, invites renters to rate their buildings and landlords.

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|
Jul. 20, 2021



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Like most New Yorkers, Allia Mohamed ’18SIPA can tell a few war stories about finding a decent apartment. Her first address, in Brooklyn, where she moved in 2014, came with an unresponsive landlord and irregular heat.

The next time she relocated, Mohamed camped out in front of each prospective building, interviewing tenants. *How's the landlord? Do you like living here?* People were surprisingly candid. *It looks nice, but everything breaks.*

At the time, Mohamed worked in finance, and she was struck by the lopsidedness of the rental market. "Landlords ask for everything on a rental application — bank statements, W2 forms, employment letters, references, guarantors — you know, everything but the kitchen sink. Renters just sign and pay without doing any due diligence."

In finance, this would be a non-starter. "It's so funny that this is the status quo," says Mohamed. "It doesn't happen in any other industry."

Now, along with cofounder and chief technical officer Srujan Routhu '18SIPA, and chief marketing officer Lidor Bar David '18SIPA, Mohamed is ready to shake up the process with Openigloo, a startup that aims to bring more transparency to New York City's rental market. By combining data buried deep in old city websites — court records, outstanding violations, bedbug reports — with user reviews of buildings, the mobile app lets prospective tenants vet potential buildings and landlords.

"Our generation doesn't buy Windex on Amazon unless it's been verified and has over ten thousand five-star reviews," says Mohamed, a millennial. "We want transparency."

Growing up in Ottawa, Canada, Mohamed never wanted to be an entrepreneur. Her father ran his own business, and she saw how hard it was. "A lot of startup founders you talk to," she says, "they tell you they were running lemonade stands as kids or finding the arbitrage on Pokémon cards. That really wasn't me."

It wasn't until she started working in venture capital, after graduating from Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs with a degree in international finance and economic policy, that she began to think about striking out on her own. But she had two rules for herself: "I'm only going to be an entrepreneur if I can find something that I'm passionate about solving, and I'm not going to do it alone."

At SIPA, she was struck by how many classmates had struggled to find a decent apartment. "No one in the city would rent to some random international student without a credit score," recalls Bar David, who moved to New York City from Israel in 2016. His war stories include sharing an apartment with an extended family of mice.

Mohamed came up with the concept for Openigloo and went looking for a cofounder. A friend suggested Routhu, an engineer from India with expertise in finance and technology, whose travel plans had been curtailed by the pandemic. If they had to sit at home, Routhu figured, they might as well build a company. Soon after, Bar David joined the team.

Openigloo launched in the fall of 2020, prepopulated with a thousand reviews solicited from people in the founders' social networks. Users can rate buildings' water pressure, garbage collection, and pest control, among other metrics. After less than a year, the app now has twelve thousand reviews and more than 120,000 users — roughly two percent of all the renters in New York.

Going forward, Mohamed, who serves as the company's CEO, hopes to recognize the best landlords in New York. "These are the landlords that were flexible with rent payments during COVID," she says. In fact, landlords have already reached out, hoping to allow renters to connect with them directly on Openigloo. "Everyone deserves a responsive landlord, a secure environment, and decent living conditions," says Bar David. "That should be a given."

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