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Lessons from Fort Worth to Afghanistan drive Station Texas' new leader Riffat Manasia

Nonprofit aims to encourage and support innovation and entrepreneurship statewide



Image: Austin Business Journal

Riffat Manasia of Station Texas.

DAVE CREANEY



By [Brent Wistrom](#) – Assistant Managing Editor, Austin Business Journal
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After leaving MIT, Riffat Manasia found one of her first big opportunities in the investment banking world at Goldman Sachs through a summer internship program focused on international markets and currency commodities. It's the type of prestigious position that a lot of students and grads desire.

But it wasn't the right fit for Manasia, who grew up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. She resigned. But shortly after that, while she was still in New York City living on Gold Street, she saw the second plane hit the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. Then, the towers collapsed.

"I could actually see the people jumping out of the towers. And that is pretty incredible at 21," she said. "That change, that event, was so cathartic, not just individually, but to the world. It changed everything for us. It shook me. I remember going up Fifth Avenue and the tanks coming down Fifth Avenue. I remember getting on a boat and being taken over to Jersey with our servicemen. And I remember clinging to that uniform of these men. It was very, very powerful, and it stayed with me."

That set in motion a life of work mostly in nonprofits and mission-driven organizations that took her to far-flung places such as Afghanistan, Syria, Rwanda and Switzerland. Those experiences were part of the path to her most recent endeavor, leading the newly established nonprofit Station Texas.

Station Texas, [launched in late 2024](#), has its roots in the [2017 Texas Manifesto](#) that Austin-based startup accelerator Capital Factory developed to encourage

founders, investors and organizations to think of Texas as a single destination, as opposed to thinking of Austin, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio as competing entities. The idea is that, if more people lean into the Texas brand, it will help everyone, and it also supported Capital Factory's expansion to those cities.

Over the years, that evolved into a plan to seed a nonprofit that could help connect the big, medium and smaller cities in the state, as well as attract grants from federal and state agencies and corporations and individuals who share the vision of better connecting the state's tech and startup communities. The nonprofit has been seeded with donations from Capital Factory, but it operates independently and has its own bylaws and leadership.

At its core, Station Texas is designed to encourage and support innovation and entrepreneurship statewide. Its focus includes almost all tech verticals, but it has highlighted biotech, space tech, energy and defense as sectors it is especially interested in.

"Innovation and entrepreneurship are happening everywhere, and it's our job to connect it," she said. "In many ways, Texas is almost like a constellation with stars of different sizes, but we are a constellation that makes this state. I think that's a beautiful thing."

Following the analogy, some stars, like perhaps Austin, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio, tend to shine brighter.

"How can we make sure that the smaller stars are also seen in this constellation and that the others don't eclipse them?" she said. "I won't say that it will be proportionate. Obviously, if we have 1,000 entrepreneurs in one place and 10 in another, we may have to spend a bit more time [on the former]."

The nonprofit won't be able to immediately have a presence in every part of Texas, but it aims to get there through partnerships with local chambers and business organizations.

Check out this list of [Austin-area incubators and accelerators](#)

Manasia said she plans to learn what different cities and regions want most and build partnerships based on those local needs. That could be educational meetups to talk about raising capital or networking events to build connections across cities or regions.

It's that community building and connectivity that helped make Manasia a prime candidate to lead the organization as executive director.

After seeing the events of Sept. 11, she went to Harvard University to study business and urban planning. There, she saw generals returning from the war in Iraq, speaking candidly about their experiences and the future of the country. She started to focus heavily on post-war Afghanistan. Harvard helped send her to Kabul in the summer of 2004. She arrived with a single suitcase and a lot of ambition.

"That's really when I fell in love," she said. "I came back to Harvard, finished a semester early and went back with a one-way ticket and four suitcases. Four, that was everything I owned."

While she eventually returned after becoming a mom, the experience changed her perspective on the military, nation-building and how American reservists were connecting with the Afghan communities around them.

"They were out there, our soldiers, our reservists, playing volleyball with the children. They were building roads. They were doing vet care and medical care," she said. "I saw such a humanity and the genuine desire of these actual individuals."



Riffat Manasia

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That drove her to launch her own research and consulting company, MRA Associates, to help the U.S. survey and understand Afghanistan in a more detailed way. She led a staff of 650 interviewers and researchers operating in different languages and with different ethnic groups. She traveled the country, sometimes with cash strapped to her body because there was no banking system, and learned what specific communities needed – often more security to access electricity, transportation and food.

Her work there led her company to branch out to other post-war development projects. But as she was raising a family, she recognized that she had already had too many close calls. She loved the intensity and opportunity but loved her family more. Manasia moved to Houston and took a job leading the American Ismaili Chamber of Commerce in 2016.

More recently, she joined the [University of Texas](#) as director of research coordination and partnerships at the UT Energy Institute. She then transitioned to leading strategy and engagement for UT's IC2 Institute, which focuses on rural entrepreneurship.

It turned out to be a natural segue to Station Texas, which named her as the founding executive director in May.

"She's done the hard things – in war zones, boardrooms, and startup labs," Capital Factory CEO Josh Baer stated at the time. "She knows how to connect the dots between ideas, institutions, and innovators, and turn that into action. Riffat doesn't just talk about impact – she builds it."