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Ahmed Enany: Booster Shot

Egyptian immigrant Ahmed Enany overcame his early dislike of the city and now enjoys working for the local biotech community and living downtown.



Photo by [Ringo Chiu](#)

Ahmed Enany in front of several self-portraits at his office in downtown Los Angeles.

By [Deborah Crowe](#)

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Entrepreneurs such as Al Mann and Patrick Soon-Shiong may be the public face of the biotech industry in Los Angeles, but industry insiders know another man as the region's Mr. Biotech: Ahmed Enany, chief executive of the Southern California Biomedical Council. The organization holds networking events, investor conferences and promotes the industry. His early life had no hint of his eventual position. Enany came to the United States in 1978 on a fellowship with the intent to earn graduate degrees in political science at UCLA and return to his native Egypt to teach. Deciding that an academic career would bore him, Enany switched to urban planning and eventually became caught up with economic development initiatives created after the 1992 L.A. riots. Enany, who as a child considered becoming a surgeon before losing part of his hand in an accidental explosion, was particularly drawn to the area's small growing biotech industry. Four years ago, he survived a rare form of cancer, which has made him only

more determined to make the council a success. We caught up with the 54-year-old biotech industry executive at his downtown L.A. office, where he still runs a mostly one-man show backed by one full-time assistant, and a bunch of volunteers and board members, including Mann. We discussed his life, career and how he developed a love for a city that he once disliked intensely.

Question: How did you come to the United States?

Answer: I came here on a fellowship to get my master's and Ph.D. in political science, and ended up staying. When I was young, I had wanted to go into medicine but I realized I couldn't become a surgeon after an accident when I was 15.

Part of your right thumb is missing. What happened?

We were living out in the country at the time. My brother found some wreckage of a plane that had been shot down and brought it back to the house. I was playing with it and there was a bomb inside. It exploded. In addition to my hand, I still have several pieces of shrapnel in my body. But I was very lucky – I should have been killed.

How did you rebuild your health?

I was pretty athletic. I had played soccer and later got involved in body-building. I joined the fencing club in Alexandria in high school and that helped with my physical therapy.

What was your childhood like?

I'm the oldest of three children and was born in a little village near my mother's hometown about 75 miles north of Cairo. We moved around a lot, mostly in the northeast part of Egypt. My father was an agronomist, who worked as a surveyor for a government-run company that did land reclamation. Most of my childhood was spent in the countryside, though sometimes I was sent to live with relatives to go to school in Alexandria, when we lived where there was no school nearby.

How did that kind of childhood shape you?

You had to be self-sufficient. We never really belonged. When we moved to the country, the people there used to make fun of our city accent, and vice-versa when we'd go back to the city. On the positive, it was good for my grades. I did well in school, in part because there wasn't a lot to do out in the country but study.

So you were a good student?

In Egypt, how you do in your matriculation exams dictates what university you can go to. I did well enough – ranked 80th nationally in 1973 – that I could go to Cairo University and receive a modest stipend to help cover living expenses as long as I maintained my grades.

Eightieth out of how many?

Roughly 100,000.

Why did you decide to study in the United States?

I was made a teaching assistant and was on a track to become a professor. I won a peace fellowship in 1978 that was created after the Egypt-Israeli peace agreement to study at UCLA. My idea was that I'd get my master's and Ph.D. in political science here and go back to Egypt to teach.

You didn't want to stay here?

I was really committed to going back home, especially since I initially really didn't like it here. But life has a way of changing things around. I ended up switching from political science to urban planning and it changed everything.

Why didn't you like it here?

I wanted to leave in my second year here because it was very alienating. I'm here in this huge city with my first wife and didn't know anybody. We had no car, so we couldn't go anywhere. Even with the fellowship I had to work extra jobs, and as foreign student I couldn't work off campus. I flipped hamburgers in the cafeteria. I worked in the library. I was a research assistant. My wife couldn't work and was stuck alone all day. We never left West L.A. It was like a prison.

It must have been particularly hard on her.

She eventually moved back to Egypt with our son and we divorced in 1988. My son, who was born here, is now a dentist in Egypt and we keep in touch. It wasn't until later that I really began to appreciate L.A.

How did urban planning change all that?

I realized I didn't want to have an academic career. I wanted to do something more exciting and practical, and have an immediate effect. I got a car, and eventually met my second wife, who was in the sociology department at UCLA. When I was doing my urban planning research after the riots, I was driving all over, studying companies, interviewing people outside the university and connecting. It led to my work in biotech. The economy wasn't doing well and the city was looking for new industries to support. I was recruited in 1995 to put together what became the Southern California Biomedical Council.

What was the challenge of building the biotech council?

A lot of people weren't convinced that biotech could do well here. At the time, a lot of companies were moving out of state in general and doing business in L.A. is complicated. Venture capital was lacking. And while the city supported what we were doing, we didn't receive a penny from them.

But you made it a success.

The council has grown from nothing to more than 250 companies, with monthly networking events, annual events and advocacy work. Biotech is now on the agenda of cities when they are thinking of ways to generate economic growth. We built the council on membership dues, sponsorship of events, and event tickets, with lots of volunteer help.

Did you ever get that Ph.D?

No, I decided I didn't need it.

What did you need?

I have good organizational capabilities and am a good multitasker and I can teach myself new skills quickly. I've had people say I bring a certain level of missionary zeal to the job without being threatening. For me and the people who volunteer, it's a labor of love.

What's a typical day like for someone with missionary zeal?

That depend on how close we are to an event. Maybe it averages about 80 hours normally, but four days before an event I just go without sleep. I don't need a lot anyway, I do fine on six hours. I'm usually up by 3 or 4 a.m. with a cup of coffee to check my e-mail and online sites to see if there is any news about our local companies. If I need to prepare any mass e-mail, send Tweets or do Facebook work, I do it then. Now that I live downtown I'm usually out the door by 8:30 a.m. to walk to the office, or in the car if I have a meeting elsewhere. From there it's just meetings at the office or around town until I go home.

Do you ever slow down?

I should exercise more for my health but I do walk a lot, especially since I moved downtown earlier this year. But by the time I get home, all I want to do it unwind by watching sit-coms – "Curb Your Enthusiasm," "Bored to Death," repeats of "Seinfeld" – moments of absolutely nothing to think about.

No hobbies?

Aside from hiking, I used to bicycle, but it's gotten too dangerous to do that in L.A. I used to do pencil and watercolor painting a lot when I had time, but these days I do

paintings every now and then. I do a lot of reading in politics and political economy, astronomy – I love stuff about black holes, dark matter, string theory – World War II, the U.S. Civil War and the history of technology. And I love old movies, especially Humphrey Bogart and Sergio Leone, and more recent ones like those by the Coen brothers.

How do you like living downtown?

I love it. I rent at the Gas Co. building, three blocks from my office here at Los Angeles Economic Development Corp. My only regret is that I really can't have a cat here; I think cats need to have an outdoor place where they can go. My ex has custody of our three cats in West L.A., but I do get visitation.

What happened that your second marriage didn't work out?

I had a tumor growing out of the side of my thymus four years ago, a very rare form cancer called thymoma. This tumor the size of a football was pressing against my left lung but I didn't realize anything was wrong until I started having shortness of breath. I thought I had a blood clot. I finally went to UCLA's ER and they caught it on a CT scan. I called my board, told them I was going into surgery and might not survive. But I did, and checked out of the hospital sooner than my doctors wanted. I was not a good patient.

So how did it affect you marriage?

It really put a strain on my personal life and finances, and contributed to my separation from my wife. The timing wasn't good. My wife was between jobs at the time, and the council didn't have a group health plan then. So we had to pay for all the operation, chemo and radiation costs ourselves.

Any positives?

It made me think about how I wanted to spend the rest of my life – if there was anything left – and how to make it as meaningful as possible. If anything, it made me more determined to make the council more of a success story. I don't have much of a social life right now, aside from socializing at council events. I focus on building the council.

Have you been back to Egypt since you first came here?

No, though I want to go visit my mother this year. My father died in 1995 and she lives with my sister. My mother laughs when I call because I now speak Arabic like a foreigner – English has a way of destroying other languages. I became a U.S. citizen in 2006. This is my home.

What changed your opinion about Los Angeles and the United States?

I started appreciating the culture here and its openness, the innovativeness and the acceptance the people here have. It doesn't matter where you come from, your ancestry or your religion. You are judged by the work you do.

AHMED ENANY

TITLE: Chief Executive

ORGANIZATION: Southern California Biomedical Council

BORN: 1955; El Mansura, Egypt

EDUCATION: 1978, B.A., Cairo University; graduate studies in political science and urban planning, UCLA.

CAREER TURNING POINTS: Being recruited to conduct an economic development study on the region's bioscience industry.

PERSONAL: Lives in downtown Los Angeles. Divorced from first wife, with whom he has an adult son. Separated from second wife.

