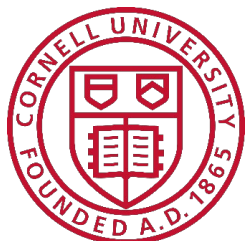


# Cornell Cooperative Extension | Erie County

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*This article is the thirteenth in a series focusing on vendors who are selling their wares at the Western New York Welcome Center's **Taste NY Market**. Thank you to Seema and Fahim Mojawalla, for meeting with me to share the Seema's Naturals story and some business and marketing experiences, tips and strategies.*

## Spotlight on Seema's Naturals

On March 9<sup>th</sup> of 2021, I met with Seema and Fahim Mojawalla at the Island Ship Center on Whitehaven Road on Grand Island, New York. The Island Ship Center is also the home of Seema's Boutique and Seema's Naturals. Seema's Naturals is one of more than 125 local, regional, and New York State businesses currently selling products at the Western New York Welcome Center's Taste New York Market. The Island Ship Center, home of Seema's Boutique and Seema's Naturals is just a little more than a mile to the east of the Welcome Center.

As we visited about the history and relationships of the three businesses, the obvious common denominator was Seema and Fahim's enthusiasm and commitment to their businesses, their family, their "guests" (which is their term for clients and customers), and their "team members."

Seema Mojawalla is quick to say she doesn't make medical claims about her line of body care products. But the inspiration for her soap making came directly from her motherly efforts to help her then six-year old daughter deal with the embarrassment and discomfort of severe dry skin in our Western New York winters.

[SEEMA'S NATURALS VIDEO 1]

*[Seema] So in 2013, I started making the body care products. And it started off with my daughter having severe dry skin and especially her nose, from blowing her nose constantly throughout the winter. So she was red, it was chapped and the tissue kept on, like, just rubbing against her nose. I thought it was the tissue so we went and got Kleenex, then I tried like the*

*Lotion Puff tissues, that didn't work, to the point that it was like all scabbed. She was so embarrassed in public she would just walk around, she was six years old at that time, so she would just walk around with her hand over her nose, embarrassed. My heart poured out to her, and I took her to the doctors. They were like, what can we do? What's... I mean, her nose isn't healing. And they said, we might have to do steroids for her, and me being like a whole naturalistic person, especially a mom not wanting to go the steroid route. We... And I started doing a lot of research, and one of my studies I found that mineral oil is not one of the most, best product to heal damaged skin.*

*Along with that then, more research. It took me, well, a couple of weeks to come across different recipes and stuff. And one of them was by using coconut oil on damaged skin. And I started using that. It didn't really help her, besides the fact that her nose got all greasy. nd then I just tried different different recipes coming across anything that I could come across that would help her skin heal. So I came across, learning that one of the lotions that was helping people was beeswax, olive oil and coconut oil. The beeswax was actually creating a barrier from the moisture, and it also like a healing agent. So I tweaked that recipe a bit and then used it on my daughter. We were trying all these different things. When that recipe actually, within half a day her nose had healed, and that's how it started I guess, that little journey from her.*

*Then, during that dry winter season, I would just... All the guests that would come to the store had like cracked hands and dry skin and I was just giving it away to everyone. I told them, "Hey, try this it helped my daughter. Hopefully it'll help you as well". And after a couple of days, they were like, "That really helped. It healed my skin." It really did work, to the point that after giving away a lot of it they were like, "You know what Seema, we're not gonna take it away from you anymore, you have to sell it to us. You have to carry this product in your store and I'm gonna buy it."*

*I had one lady, she would actually order like a huge jar of it, it was like a five cup jar that she would bring in and she liked it. It was like about... whatever it was, but she would come in and say, "Can you make this for me? And this is the only thing that I use." So, I mean, it was just something that made me happy to be able to see that, the product was healing someone.*

Seema grew up in northwestern Pennsylvania where her father worked as a laboratory technologist but also ran a small farm. After high school, Seema completed her formal education in International Languages in India. Fahim and Seema met on a blind date, got married, and began their lives together in New York City. Fahim completed an honors degree in Economics with a minor in Business Management at SUNY Stonybrook while commuting from their residence in New York City, working, and supporting his family. Seema, Fahim and their four children at the time including a new baby, along with Fahim's mother, relocated to Western New York, moving straight to Grand Island in 2005. Seema said she very much wanted her young family to be able to have the kind of experiences she had as a child with more access to green space and the natural world. Grand Island was the geographic compromise; staying in

New York State while being closer to Seema's family as well, with good business prospects and affordable housing opportunities.

Their Creative Leather Concepts business was initially operated out of their basement. The business then shifted to storage and office space on nearby Baseline Road before the Island Ship Center business was launched in 2006.

Fahim said the first 7-9 years of the shipping center experience was like "swimming upstream" because they, "didn't have the right mentors, people, or processes." In 2013, Seema joined the Island Ship Center daily workforce full-time and began expanding the Island Ship Center storefront options beyond shipping and packaging materials. At first this was limited to small gift items. The Island Ship Center also had a relationship with Fahim and Seema's original online business, Creative Leather Concepts Inc. which remains the legal parent company for the Island Ship Center, *d.b.a.*

Creative Leather Concepts was an early example of an online sales-based business model, as Fahim says, "way before e-commerce was popular or even known." They were making ends meet with online sales but not doing as well as they had hoped with the shipping business, "predominantly because we didn't know how to do it properly and we didn't have a connection or a network across the country," said Fahim. "We were just by ourselves as an independent. We didn't have much training. We didn't have much software. We didn't have a process. And that was very frustrating to Seema when she came on board."

In 2015, Seema said, "I can't do this anymore. We have to sink or swim." The main operational side of the leather business was shut down in 2013 with "drop-ship" model, online sales continuing until 2015. Fahim said, "I've always been a relationships guy. What really has gotten us through is relationships." Building on that, Seema and Fahim used their tax refund and even a small loan, shut down their store for a week, and attended the annual meeting and workshops of the Association of Mail and Business Centers which happened to be in Las Vegas that year.

Fahim said they were "energized, inspired, motivated and rejuvenated." He said they both felt they should "continue, grow the business, and achieve the potential. We needed the extra push. That show did it for us." Seema said they even sketched out a business plan on the airplane on their return trip to Buffalo, which included Seema's brainchild of adding a business center.

Working closely with their landlord, Fahim and Seema expanded the boutique including the inclusion of Seema's Natural products, added 24-hour access mailboxes, and additional printing and other services. Fahim said their landlord acts more like a behind the scenes working partner and family member in responding to their ideas and needs for space modifications and expansions. Seema worked with the front-end aesthetics and sales inventory of the boutique.

Fahim worked on digital marketing, social media, and continuous postings to draw attention to the business, to bring in more “guests,” and to take advantage of their proximity to Canada. “Who would have known back then that we would be that essential business that didn’t need to close during COVID,” he said.

In 2016, when Seema and Fahim went back to the trade show in Las Vegas, Fahim had been invited to teach two classes based on how their inspired efforts had already begun paying off. He said he was able to share some important lessons. He said he had learned the importance of cutting his losses, owning up to mistakes, and especially recognizing quick pivot opportunities. He said, “That’s make or break. People don’t realize if you don’t cut your losses and move on, you’re going to drown. Ego is the enemy. You gotta let it go in order to grow.” You can listen to a collection of Fahim’s marketing and business planning videos on his YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/clcleather/videos>.

Since 2015, Seema and Fahim have been writing down, step by step annual business plans and using them to guide their business development and expansions. They also regularly consult trusted mentors around the country. Fahim emphasized that marketing and sales are two different things. “Marketing is my being,” he said. “I live, eat, and breathe marketing. It’s all about relationships, collaboration, empathy, grit, gratitude, generosity, grace. People don’t come to the ‘Island Ship Center.’ They come to see Fahim and Seema and we’re very thankful that’s what’s happened.”

Seema’s Naturals came into the business collective in 2013 as Seema mentioned earlier. As Seema’s Boutique within the Island Ship Center expanded, along with other business services and offerings, Seema expanded her product line and sales. The body care products were born in Seema and Fahim’s kitchen. When marketing opportunities grew beyond what could be done in their kitchen, production moved to their basement. With major additions to the Island Ship Center space in 2016, Seema was able to transfer production to her “soap room.” The Seema’s Naturals name itself came in 2018 after first being called “Island Bliss.” Trademarking of the new name is in the works.

Seema’s Naturals has its own, dedicated space within the Seema’s Boutique area of the Island Ship Center building. That’s part of the planned branding of Seema’s Naturals as a related but separate enterprise. The web pages [www.SeemasNaturals.com](http://www.SeemasNaturals.com) and [www.SeemaBoutique.com](http://www.SeemaBoutique.com) are Seema’s two online sales sites. Regarding business structure, Fahim and Seema are co-owners of Seema’s Naturals and Seema is the sole owner of the Island Ship Center.

“With COVID, the shipping business has actually grown during the pandemic,” Seema said. Some of the plans for Seema’s Naturals business expansion have been on the back burner with no shows, expos, farmers markets and other in-person promotional opportunities. More pivoting, as Fahim would say.

Two team members now help with production, packaging, and marketing of Seema's Naturals products. Seema says "they take as much joy in making the products as I do." Fahim also explained that "team members" is an intentional choice for what they call their employees. Currently, the business collective has "five full-time and 8 part-time" team members, including Seema and Fahim. Anyone who walks in the door is a "guest." That's part of Seema and Fahim's business and personal philosophy as well. Fahim said, "We're extremely particular about semantics and word usage." He said, "It matters! If we start from our place here, we can make a difference." That extends to guest speakers brought into team meeting every other month to address topics like motivation, personal development, and bringing clarity and discipline into the work place, and trying to focus on 21st Century leadership. Fahim says team members tell them coming to the Island Ship Center isn't "work." Rather, it is a respite from their stresses. That's the joy Fahim and Seema share as engaged and empowering business owners.

Fahim and Seema are now recognized as trailblazers in the very same organization that inspired them and helped them grow. Seema just completed a term as a board member and Fahim remains on the Board of Directors of the Association of Mail and Business Centers ([www.AMBC.org](http://www.AMBC.org)). The non-profit organization represents 1100 plus independent mail stores, shipping and business centers.

Fahim and Seema credit the AMBC with helping them to "grow, be relevant, engaging, authentic, and to be greater than they were before" by adding new services and business ideas, learning from each other's experiences, and by taking full advantage of the positive effects of new marketing materials, relationships, and business synergies.

The Island Ship Center is authorized by FedEx, UPS and the USPS. "It's rare to have all three authorizations" in one location but "we like to collaborate," Fahim said. "This gives our guests plenty of shipping and receiving options, all under one roof, with the added benefit of the boutique and Seema's skin and body care products."

It's a complementary approach with "spa-like products" in a "spa-like shipping place." It's not a corporate, franchised store-front. The combination of the Island Ship Center with Seema's Naturals and Seema's Boutique creates a truly unique experience and environment, so much so that Seema and Fahim brand their business as the "Spa of Shipping" with a web site under that name, [www.spaofshipping.com](http://www.spaofshipping.com) and a Twitter account, #spaofshipping.

This branding and marketing align uniquely with Seema's Naturals body care products business. The natural fragrances that greet guest as they enter the shipping, mail room and business center are all part of that experience. Guest interactions influence the fragrances in Seema's Naturals product lines.

Seema's Naturals products include handmade soaps, body creams, hair treatments, lip balms, liquid soaps, deodorants, unscented body care products, and Seema's popular "shower steamers."

Insert Seema's Naturals Video 2

[Seema and Fahim]

*[Seema & Fahim] ... shower steamers, I've been making these for about five years now. And this year recently during COVID, right before COVID Vicks started advertising shower steamers. And Fahim and I looked at each other and, we're like, they came up with that? And now I have like people coming in and they're like, "Oh Seema, do you have that little stuff that you put in the shower and it helps you breathe?" And I was like, "Ah yeah." (laughing) So... Interesting. I mean, and they've been a really good product just in natural organic growth. She made it for our family and then we tested it out and people were trying it, and we gave little pieces of samples.*

*No one really has time to take baths anymore. But, in the shower ... one of them is called 'Breathe' which has got eucalyptus. It's for morning showers. And at night our girls take night showers. And the lavender is great for that. That's called 'Relax.' because it's got lavender in it. And they love it. And then in the morning, it's good for... the eucalyptus is really good for sinuses. Once again not making any medical claims. It helps... The menthol crystals, they do like... It has a nice strong fragrance to it. Yeah. It's good. So we like it, and people like it a lot.*

Seema's soap room is where the small scale, artisanal soaps and other products are made.

Insert Seema's Naturals Video 3

*[Seema] So these are my specialty oils, and then my fragrances, and my essential oils. This is what I use in the body care products. I solely use... most of the time I use Crafter's Choice because I love their products. I've tried different fragrances and I think for the body care, like especially the soaps, this gives a nice scent throw to the products. They are premium quality products. Those here are all like dried botanicals, like lavender, rose. I have cornflower petals, and I believe it's like calendula, as well.*

As Seema said, most of the time she uses "Crafters Choice" supplies but the recipes and blends are her own based on her research, personal experimentation, experiences, and requests from her customers, or "guests" as Seema and Fahim would say. The honeysuckle fragrance line is an example. By responding to special fragrance requests when possible and by using high quality, though costlier fragrance sources, Seema's has been able to meet or exceed customer expectations and build product loyalty. Bees' wax used in Seema's products is sourced from local apiaries. She cleans and renders it herself before blending it into products. Some base materials can't be obtained from local sources, like coconut and olive oils, but Seema gets as

much as she can from local suppliers. Seema is her own quality control officer. “I will only sell it if I use it. If I’m not satisfied with it, I’ll not sell it.”

The goal for Seema’s Naturals is “to have body care products that will actually make someone feel healed.” Seema is quick to say that’s not a medical description. It’s about “inner beauty and not being embarrassed about dry skin.” As was said before, Fahim and Seema are very careful not to make medical claims although many of the users of Seema’s Naturals products are happy to share their experiences in product comments and reviews. Seema also tells guests that they should do their own research about body care products, visit with their doctors and dermatologists, and find what works for them since everyone is different.

With respect to sales at the Western New York Welcome Center, Fahim said COVID-19, “was a perfect storm.” Fahim said “People are still learning about the Welcome Center and Taste New York Markets. First, they didn’t know about it. Then traffic, and especially cross-border traffic was shut down. Let’s see what happens.” If COVID-19 allows, Seema and Fahim and team members plan to do more farmers markets this season to bump sales and expose more people to the products. One of the COVID pivots was to get the Seema’s Naturals website operational. “The only products that were really selling on the Seema’s Boutique website were the body care products.” The younger team members felt that switching the e-commerce from Seema’s Boutique to Seema’s Naturals clarified the marketing priorities and realities and better reflected the current popularity of artisanal, natural body care products. Both web sites remain operational but web traffic is being redirected to the Seema’s Naturals web page. It is presently an informational web site but it will be fully transitioning to the official e-commerce site over the next few months. In the interim, [www.SeemasNaturals.com](http://www.SeemasNaturals.com) will still connect shoppers to e-commerce opportunities. Fahim said, it is Seema’s “personal brand. It’s who she is. What she does. And how she operates. Everything has to be with excellence because mediocrity doesn’t sell in the marketplace. That’s really who we are and what we do. We don’t settle for less than at least trying to be the best.”

“We have a new logo” for Seema’s Naturals, designed by our team member, Theresa Dudkiewicz. Seema and Fahim look forward to promoting the Seema’s Naturals brand under the new logo. Since printing services are among the many, many services available at the Island Ship Center, design and printing of labels for packaging can all be done in house. While Seema’s Naturals doesn’t have the advantage of economies of scale for production and marketing purposes, the integration of the multiple enterprises provides many other opportunities for cost-savings with respect to marketing, printing, and sharing of labor and ideas across the businesses.

Seema’s “bath “truffles” were featured in a recent TikTok video that had “something like 800 or 900 views the first day,” Seema said. Before COVID, Seema used to have free samples available at the counter. That’s currently not an option but may be again as the pandemic comes under

control. For now, guests can make their shopping choices based on conversations with Seema, Fahim, or other team members, along with product descriptions and the olfactory and visual appeal of Seema's Naturals Products. Word of mouth and social media are also important including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Tiktok.

So much happened since 2005 on their entrepreneurial journey. Seema says they love the Grand Island community and the community loves them. They've continued to watch their family grow, with a fifth child born after their relocation to Grand Island. Seema also spent four years as a professional henna artist. In 2018, Seema received the Zonta Club of Grand Island's "Zonta Yellow Rose Award" for "Outstanding Leadership and Service to the Community." Fahim was the recipient of the Grand Island Chamber of Commerce's "2015 Citizen of the Year Award for Community Leadership." He also received the 2015 "Excellence in Education Award."

With respect to the future, Seema said, "I can't just keep making the same product over and over again. I don't want to get locked into a product. I like using my creativity. I like using different colors; different fragrances, which is why in the store every time our guests come in they see a different fragrance. They see a different color or color combination." These are handmade products so each batch looks a little different by design and intent. Seema said that does leave her struggling a little with the website and product promotion, though. She finds herself constantly uploading new images. It's also part of the reason Seema doesn't have plans to push her product out into lots of other retail venues. She said she and her team know what's in their products and guests can just ask them about it. Other retailers can't represent it the same way. Brochures, marketing materials, even product labels are not the same thing as personal conversations and product descriptions.

Thank you to Seema and Fahim Mojawalla and team members Theresa Dudkiewicz, Adam Saif and Musa Abdullah for taking the time to visit with me about Seema's Naturals and Seema's line of locally produced, small batch, all natural, handmade, artisanal soaps and other body care products. Seema's Naturals products are available at the Taste NY Market at the Western New York Welcome Center, at Seema's Boutique within the Island Ship Center, and online through Seema's Naturals' web page.

Seema's Naturals is another example of how family-run small businesses in Western New York and throughout the State are continually adjusting to changes in the economy and markets and is one of the many businesses working to make locally grown, manufactured, or processed and packaged foods, beverages, goods, and services available to consumers in the region. The next time you are on Grand Island, I encourage you to visit both the Western New York Welcome Center and the Island Ship Center, or as Fahim and Seema would say, "the Spa of Shipping."





Taste NY at the Western New York  
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**Cornell Cooperative Extension  
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