Arianna Huffington speaks on failure, success and sleep

By Laura Johnston

MAYFIELD, Ohio -- At 26, Arianna Huffington's second book had been rejected by 36 publishers. She was broke and depressed, and doubting her career choice, she applied for a loan.

She got it.

"Failure," she told nearly 150 women Wednesday at a Female Entrepreneur Summit, "is a stepping stone to success."

The keynote speech was the first Northeast Ohio engagement for Huffington, a liberal pundit and founder of the online newspaper The Huffington Post. In a meandering, hour-long talk, she urged attendees to pursue their goals, no matter what they are.

"I want women to be clear about what they really want," she said. "I want society to remove all the roadblocks to her getting it."

Huffington spoke little about politics, The Huffington Post or the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for reporting her paper won this month.

Instead, she focused on inspiring the accountants, college students, consultants and small business owners who attended the day-long summit, which included sessions on negotiating, building brands and finding capital to expand businesses. Cleveland Business Connects magazine, Ursuline College, and University Hospitals' Ahuja Medical Center sponsored the event at 700 Beta Banquet and Conference Center.

She got big laughs for joking about her ex-husband, former Republican U.S. Rep. Michael Huffington, who said she still has her thick accent because she never listens.

But for years, she said, she listened to the voice in her head criticizing her wrinkles or too-tight jeans.

"We all have that obnoxious roommate in our head," Huffington said. "It's that voice which keeps us down."

Now, she said, "That voice only makes guest appearances."

Huffington, 61, is president and editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post Media Group, created last year when AOL paid $315 million for the news site, which also includes gossip and commentary.

A native of Greece who moved to England when she was 16, she has written 13 books and landed twice on Time Magazine's list of the world's most influential people.

"I'm a huge fan of Arianna's," said Candace Klein, an attorney and founder of Bad Girl Ventures, a microfinance firm for women-owned businesses. "She's one of the few women who has done it from beginning to end."

Klein led a session on negotiation at the conference, giving attendees a pep talk on achieving their dreams. But she wasn't above pressing a business card into Huffington's hands. She also liked Huffington's focus on sleep.

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The busy mogul encouraged women to disconnect from smartphones and take time to sleep. The message emanates from an experience four years ago, when Huffington was mired in the details of managing her fledgling online newspaper. She was visiting colleges with her daughter during the day and juggling her four BlackBerries through the night.

Then, she fainted from exhaustion, hit her head on a desk, broke her cheekbone and cut her right eye.

"We're so hyperconnected all the time," she said. "We're missing a connection to ourselves."

So Huffington has created two nap rooms in her Huffington Post newsroom and bought an old-fashioned alarm clock.

She's also given herself permission to quit commitments she doesn't find fulfilling. Like skiing, for example. Instead, she sits in the lodge, drinking hot chocolate and reading a good book.

There is no fairytale, she said. "We should look into the mirror and tap into our leadership potential with more gratitude, more joy, more wisdom and more sleep."