A voyage of self-discovery and self-awareness
Brummana High School keynote lecture - June 25, 2016
President Fadlo R. Khuri

Students, parents, faculty and staff, and the graduating Brummana High School class of 2016, greetings and congratulations on this 25th day of June, 2016. My name is Fadlo Raja Khuri, and 35 years ago, I stood where you stand today, just about to graduate high school, excited about my future but apprehensive about what would come next. Along with those sentiments, I felt a sense of deep gratitude to the school—a modest little establishment you may have heard of called IC—which I had entered as a seven-year-old in second grade.

In my 10 years there, interrupted only by a one-year sabbatical my parents took in the US, I had undergone a transformative experience. I had gained knowledge, expanded my perspectives, accumulated not only confidence, but a rich company of lifelong friends.

School was for me a voyage of self-discovery. I was never one of the cool kids. In fact I was decidedly un-cool. My graduation picture remains a commentary on my inability to match my clothes while wearing colorful combination of various teams’ football scarves. My sartorial challenges eventually led my friend Bassil Fuleihan and my future wife conspire to rearrange my entire wardrobe in our time together in New York in the mid-1980’s!

I initially made a small circle of friends that continued to expand from second grade to the end of high school, many of whom I have kept in touch with over the course of my life. Among my eclectic but irreplaceable company at IC were the a group of remarkably accomplished people too numerous to mention here. They became doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, journalists, businesspeople, and creative souls, all admirable and inspiring in their accomplishments. While in school, we were, like you, stretching our creative and social limits, troubling our parents with our mini-rebellions, in my case starting a rock band called Minus Infinity and a football team, which we called Dynamo Beirut. With my lifelong friend and now colleague at AUB, Yousif Asfour, we showed movies to the younger children, and worked together to tutor the disadvantaged. We immersed ourselves in sports, culture, political thought, and learning, and in service to the community. Many of you here today have had similar experiences, experiences of stretching your intellectual and social capabilities. These are among the many opportunities your great school has provided for you.

Life has some strange twists and turns. In the summer of 1978, as the Lebanese Civil war raged, my parents considered moving my brother and I to an international school in London with a strongly American flavor. Having walked your beautiful campus with my relatives and BHS graduates, the Cortases, my brother and I made a counter-proposal to our parents that we would rather move to a British school in Lebanon, namely Brummana High School. And we planned on going back to Lebanon to the safety of Brummana, but the fighting died down and we wound up going back to IC. As Al Mutanabbi said: “The winds blow in directions that the ships may not desire.”
So, what relevance does my talking about friends and schooldays from long ago mean to you here graduating today? Simply stated, we were a generation which lived with diversity and adversity. My peers and friends came from wealthy and powerful families and poor and disadvantaged ones, from different religious groups, ethnic origins and nationalities. Although the Lebanese Civil War was brewing, and exploded, during my schooldays, we felt a shared sense of purpose regardless of those superficial differences among us.

When the war came, I felt fortunate and empowered in an unusual way. I had grown up in a community that was truly mixed: Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Yemeni, Iraqi, Armenian, British and American, among others. As I entered high school, we were delighted to be joined by female students (yes I am that old!), and every possible religion was represented! I grew up with a strongly feminist mother, a mathematician and educator by profession, asserting all men and women were created equal. This influence resulted in my writing my essay during my parents' sabbatical year on the equality and perhaps superiority of women!

That brings up one of the great advantages of growing up in a school whose values are based on peace, equality, and mutual respect. In the prewar years, we had no idea what anyone’s religion was and could only guess from accents at one's national origin. That sense of comfort with all carried us through the war years as a closely-knit group of secular friends. Keep that in mind as you make your own friends. To paraphrase, Martin Luther King, judge them on the content of their character, not on their wealth, their fame, or least of all their sect or their religion or lack of religion.

The sense of openness, fairness and transparency was reinforced by my teachers and mentors. My elementary school languages teacher taught me to believe in myself and know I could face any problem, intellectual or social. My intermediate school science instructor taught me always to struggle with data until I was convinced. The diversity of staff members reflected the pupils’. My favorite history teacher was Palestinian, a single woman, strong-willed, but incredibly gentle. She answered every one of our questions with patience, treating us as young colleagues, not vessels to be filled with dogmatic learning. My English teacher was from the US, and he taught me to listen to the sound of my own voice, to love, appreciate and in turn create poetry and lyrics, to write with confidence and daring. His influence on me endures to this day. Our astounding mathematics teacher was from Koura in North Lebanon, who taught us to think of mathematics as a language and a thing of beauty. His logic and generosity inspired all of us, and he remains a role model for generations of students. However, as you finish your time at Brummmana High School, the beneficiaries of your parents’ support and your teachers’ wisdom, take a moment to think of those who do not have these same wonderful opportunities. Among those that I got to know while in school were some children far less fortunate and privileged than I. Some I befriended and others I taught, whether in the Palestinian refugee camps or the Southern suburbs of Beirut. I felt great nobility in these individuals, in their determination to make a better life for themselves and their parents, and felt enormously privileged for the opportunity to befriend those in my age group and to tutor those younger. Avail yourselves of the opportunities to reach out to those whose lives you can genuinely impact when the opportunity affords itself. As someone who has devoted his life and
his work to the service and betterment of those who are most in need in society, from cancer patients to the most underprivileged young people seeking education, there is no greater calling, no more rewarding undertaking. And do it confident in the belief that as these individuals derive great good from their interactions with you, so too do you derive a transformative and even existential sense of purpose from your interactions with them.

So what can you, 35 years later, take from these wanderings down memory lane, the thoughts of a lifelong academician and healer, who has decided his greatest contribution today can be through the leadership of the region’s preeminent university? Many of you will enter AUB and other universities in search of your own story, wondering how you can contribute to making the world a better place. As you do so, you may ask yourself; did I use my years in school wisely? Did I make the friends who could help me grow and whose growth I could participate in? Did I listen to the quieter voices, which are often the most inspiring? These are questions to ponder, but not to despair from. Life teaches us many lessons, including that the same lesson can represent itself in many different ways. Wisdom is rarely tied to a single moment you must learn from, or forever be cast into the outer darkness.

That is a lesson you should have learned at Brummana High School, which has much to do with the origins and the ethos of the school. Founded in 1873 by Quakers or Friends from the United States, the school was built on the principles of enlightened education and a strict adherence to non-violence. It took me much of my life to learn the importance of abiding by this principle that you are taught from your youngest days in this school. But it is this very principle that drove great leaders like Dr. King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela among others to liberate their peoples and it is these very principles rather than those of armed conflict that can propel your generation finally to make of Lebanon a modern nation of citizens and not the feeding trough of warlords and other opportunists. Remember the lessons you have been taught in this most unique of schools. Know them. Understand them. Live by them.

And so I close with the most obvious lesson of all, but one I only recognized as the years in our beloved school passed. I came to see the influence of the single most important figure in my schooling experience, by far my closest friend until I would meet my wife. I entered school with a shy, quiet, stocky little fellow, flat-footed and nearsighted. Supremely confident in knowledge but less so in social matters, this individual stood by me through all my trials and tribulations. He remains the International College of Beirut's most record-setting student, an individual of singular excellence who proved his intellectual prowess by gaining Lebanon’s under-17 national chess championship at the age of 14, one year after picking up the game, finishing first in the Lebanese baccalaureate despite taking the exam one year after finishing high school, graduating with the highest distinctions from Yale and Princeton, and gaining the rank of professor with tenure in an astonishing four-and-a-half years!

You see it took me, who am entrusted with the mission of making the Arab world's greatest university even greater, the length of my years in school to fully appreciate the little man at my side, my younger brother, Ramzi. His courage in dealing with people in his socially direct, politically incorrect manner became more evident and more inspiring
to me as we grew together at the school. If it took me all of my time at IC to fully recognize the extraordinary qualities that made my own brother genuinely great, there is hope for me. And thus there is most certainly hope for you to learn life's subtle, more mysterious secrets!

My final lesson to you is this. Remember to appreciate those around you. Teachers and mentors, parents and friends—and yes, especially brothers and sisters, if you have them, older or younger! They all matter. Every one can teach you something. Take time to grow in knowledge and understanding as well as in compassion. These qualities will help you contribute to a society that badly needs you. Equipped with a wonderful education, with opportunity, with confidence, with friendship and with mentorship, start to realize your own untapped potential. The next phase, university, will help you further broaden your perspective. Seize the opportunity to grow. Do not step back from life's challenges. The world awaits you, Broumana High School Class of 2016. Congratulations and go forth, in confidence and competence, and with the mission and a steely determination, not unlike that which we had 35 years ago, to leave the world a better place than you found it. Congratulations to you, your parents and your teachers!