The IC experience: Of magnificent mentors and unexpected friends

International College keynote lecture June 18, 2016

President Fadlo R. Khuri

Students, parents, faculty and staff, and the graduating International College class of 2016, greetings and congratulations on this 18th day of June, 2016. My name is Fadlo Raja Khuri, and 35 years ago, I stood where you stand today, albeit in the American University of Beirut's Assembly Hall. Like you, I was a soon-to-be IC graduate, 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 that I had entered as a seven-year-old in second grade.

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

When I joined IC in the summer of 1970, entering summer school to improve my deficient Arabic language, I endured constant remarks from so-called friends about how my Arabic was "like the Armenians!" I had an instant response, after spending that summer in a laboratory full of Armenians. "What," I asked, "is wrong with that; the Armenians are the only people in this country that ever build anything?!" That experience and admiration for Armenian culture would culminate in a four-year collaboration in high school with my friend, Alex Bessos, with whom I started one of IC's early rock bands. It was called “Minus Infinity”! We were the first IC band to play the hallowed Assembly Hall, and the first to record an actual hit song live in the studio with the great Ziad Al-Rahbani. As band manager, my job was to make sure no one flunked out of IC, which was not always that easy… Alex was one of many unusual friends that I would have the privilege to get to know over my years at IC. A reticent son of our biology teacher, Alex initially approached me and Philip Ashkar because of his interest in football. I believe we were the first friends Alex made at IC, an experience that applied to many of its more shy and intellectually gifted students.

IC 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 future wife Lamya Tannous to conspire with my friend Bassil Fuleihan 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. The late, great Bassil Fuleihan was a close friend with whom I had the privilege of sharing the same school and the same city for 15 of 18 years. We studied together at IC, AUB, Yale, and Columbia. In one of our rare years apart, Bassil wrote me a letter, one of many, in which he complained about my letters cluttering up his mailbox. This insider
joke implied I was remarkably poor at keeping in touch, the opposite of the late Bassil, a true leader and role model, but most of all a matchless friend.

Among my eclectic but irreplaceable company at IC was the great football player and engineer Malek Wehbe, my first IC friend, Sari Malak, and other remarkably accomplished people including Mona Khalidi, Sari Acra, Mona Salameh, the late Lina Kanj, Wadih Nasrallah, Elias Melhem, Ibrahim Iliya, Shafik and Ramzi Kaawar, Ahmad Jarrah, Imad and Ziad El Khalil, the late Maher Daouk, Dr. Walid Alami, and many more. They became doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, and creative souls, all admirable and inspiring in their accomplishments. But, while at IC, we were stretching our creative and social limits, troubling our parents with our mini-rebellions, in my case the rock band and starting a football team, which we called Dynamo Beirut.

What does this litany of names mean to you who are graduating here today? Simply stated, it is a list of individuals, diverse and accomplished, irrespective of gender, religion, career and life, or social status. They came from among the wealthy and powerful families and the poor and disadvantaged. But we all had a growing sense of purpose, heightened by the onset of the Lebanese Civil War. 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. These are among the many opportunities your great school has provided for you.

I was fortunate to be guided by some magnificent mentors. Mrs. Julia Said, taught me to believe in myself and know I could face any problem, intellectual or social. Samir Sifri taught me always to struggle with data until I was convinced. Along with my parents, he helped shape my thinking as a young scientist.

When the war came, I felt fortunate and empowered in an unusual way. I had grown up in a community that was truly mixed here at the school: 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, the mathematician Soumaya Makdisi Khuri, asserting all men and women were created equal. This influence from my mother 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 the school. 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. 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 our teachers. They too were diverse. My favorite history teacher, Miss Nada Marmoura, was Palestinian, a single woman, strong-willed, but incredibly gentle. Miss Marmoura answered every one of our questions with patience, treating us as young colleagues, not vessels to be filled
with dogmatic learning. Mr. William Smathers, my wonderful English teacher, 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, Mr. Nadi Nader, from North Lebanon, 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 IC students.

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 at IC 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.

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 a single figure, the most important figure in my IC experience, by far my closest friend until I would meet my wife. I entered IC 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 IC’s most record-setting student, an individual of singular excellence who proved his intellectual prowess by winning the highest awards from the Lebanese government in the baccalaureate, 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 at IC 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, that is proof 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 one I charged you with when I spoke to the graduating class in November. Remember to appreciate those around you. Teachers and mentors, parents and friends. 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, IC 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!