



Views of a Lifetime

The AUB benches, scattered across upper campus and framed by the wooded terraces, provide the most beautiful vistas of the Mediterranean. Students, alumni, friends, faculty, and staff have long cherished these scenic spots. The “Adopt a Bench” Campaign by the President’s Club ensures the perpetuity of those special memories.



Scattered throughout the campus, they can be found out in the open or tucked away under a tree or against a wall. Some are neglected and rarely used; others are never unoccupied. What are they? They are AUB’s benches. Recently, some of these old wooden benches suddenly acquired identity: discrete little plaques bearing cryptic messages, like “In memory of my parents” or “In honor of a friend,” began to appear on them. What was going on? *MainGate* decided to find out.

The plaques, it turns out, are the result of a campaign launched by the AUB President’s Club in 2001 to put the benches “up for adoption.” In the words of Laila Barood, the club’s current chairperson, “We are excited about the interest the campaign has generated and hope that it will encourage many alumni and friends to adopt an AUB bench. All the money raised by the President’s Club is used to benefit AUB students.” Since 1981, the President’s Club has contributed a total of more than \$2 million, which has been spent in a variety of ways, among them renovating tennis courts, air conditioning student dorms, supporting the choir, and creating “smart” (technologically-equipped) classrooms.

So far, more than a dozen people have participated in the Bench Campaign—like Laila Bissat and her husband, who say they adopted a bench because it gave them the opportunity to honor a longtime AUB faculty member and old family friend. When this individual insisted on remaining anonymous, the dedication was changed to read “In honor of a friend.”

Hayat Salam-Liebich was the first to adopt an AUB bench. “When my father passed away, I wanted to do something in his memory that I knew he would like,” Salam-Liebich says. She asked the President’s Club if she could place a plaque on one of the benches and suggested that there might be others who might want to do the same thing. “When I told the Dirliks what I was doing, they liked the idea so much that they immediately adopted a bench.” André Dirlik picks up the story: “My wife was in Beirut when she heard of the Bench Campaign and acted quickly to find out if our bench was available.” He remembers that he and his wife spent “certainly the most memorable moments of our AUB years between classes or after library hours sitting on our bench,” and explains that “it was exciting to cross the temporal divide and make



possible what appeared—there and then—to be impossible.” One can safely say that the Dirlik bench is the most popular bench on campus.

It is fairly common to run into someone who feels this sense of ownership about a particular bench on campus. Ramzi Kteily named his bench (the middle of the three benches situated between Marquand House and College Hall) for his parents. Many AUB couples have romantic memories associated with their bench—like Najib and May Mikati, who say, “This bench means something to us. It is part of our personal history.” The plaque on their bench reads: “People meet for a reason, a season, or a lifetime.”



Unfortunately, not all the memories associated with the naming of AUB benches are pleasant ones. Nadim Dimechkieh, Nabil Nassar, and John Waterbury named a bench in honor of Zena Tadmoury and Jihad Al-Farr—AUB students who were killed during the Lebanese civil war when a shell that hit the campus exploded nearby.

Jad and Daren Charafeddine, both AUB graduates, decided that making a contribution to the President’s Club was one way to “give back to AUB.” Imad Chebaro dedicated two benches to his father, mother, and father-in-law to give his children, who were born and raised in England, a connection with Lebanon. He says, “I believed that naming those two benches on the AUB campus would be an

ideal way to give them this feeling of belonging.” Fouad Malouf named a bench on behalf of his mother, Berthe Abu Haidar Malouf, for whom the AUB campus had been “an oasis of learning and tranquility.”

Rajaa Arab Salam saw the Bench Campaign as a way to honor Sunny Kirkwood, the wife of former AUB President Samuel B. Kirkwood, a woman who “changed my entire outlook on life and taught me everything there is to know about the landscapes and gardens of the Middle East that she loved so much.”

Although most of the inscriptions contain personal messages, there are some exceptions. Dr. François Bassil, chairman of the Byblos Bank, chose to place the following inscription on an AUB bench: “Lubnan ya’tamid alaykum” (Lebanon depends on you). Asked to explain the statement, Bassil says that it is intended as a message to the students who are sitting on the bench: “I mean that the future of Lebanon depends on them, on the next generation. Lebanon depends on their loyalty, their honesty, and their hard work.”



Elias Boulos and his wife Adriane were prompted to contribute to the Bench Campaign by the desire to express their appreciation and support of AUB’s mission to provide educational and health services to Lebanon and the region. “I want to be a friend to AUB,” Boulos says. Nabil Zeineddin echoes the same sentiment: “I hope my contribution to the campaign will help the University fulfill its role as a great educational institution in the region.”

There are still many more benches on campus waiting to be adopted.

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