

Commencement Exercises and Honorary Doctorates Ceremony 2014

Undergraduate student speech by Raed Riad Al Kontar

A very clever person brought a board to the graduating students' photoshoot with a title "I graduated now I'm ready to retire". This got me to think about all the things I've done in the past four years and all the experiences I can look back on, I truly feel I've done the work of a lifetime here at AUB. I'm not only talking about all the homework and all the tests and projects, though these were certainly enough. I'm talking about the entire experience of living at AUB.

I've heard AUB alumni describe AUB as a "little secure bubble" in which a person can forget all about the challenges of the country and the region. I've heard alumni say that AUB taught them idealism and open-mindedness, gave them a space to think radically, to really dream of positive change. AUB welcomed people of minority populations and minority opinions and inclinations and gave them a space to express their opinions without fear. After four years in this bubble, I have to agree.

I will always remember the AUB elections I participated in this year. In a country that is almost ripped apart each time an election comes up, I saw students of different ideologies and beliefs, students of different backgrounds, students with very strong opinions, campaign against each other using every trick in the book of democracy. I saw these students debate for hours, and appeal to their peers for support. I heard them in the dorms, smoking areas, in West Hall, in Jafet and the Green Oval and on Bliss Street. I heard and participated in heated and passionate arguments. I experienced the anxiety of election day, the fierce competitiveness for votes. I experienced the thrill of the winners and the disappointment of those who came so close. But most importantly, an image I will never forget: students from different sides walking calmly towards each other, congratulating each other, hugging each other and remaining friends despite everything. This is AUB, our bubble in a world where elections are tense, dangerous and uninspiring.

Nor is this generosity of spirit unique to elections in AUB. In the past years, I saw AUB students fight for their causes and their beliefs. I watched AUB students donate their valuable belongings and their time to help their Syrian brothers and sisters. I saw them organize fund-raising events and hold seminars in order to relieve the desperate suffering they could see. I heard voices raised in support of the Palestinian cause. I've seen the Lebanese Armenian community in AUB commemorate the painful events in the history of their people, our people. AUB students raised their voices against the rise of censorship in Lebanon. We supported bloggers and activists. We bravely discussed and debated controversial topics such as civil marriage and the domestic violence law. We called for a secular state and defended and promoted women's rights and the rights of minorities. In the Beirut Marathon, AUB students ran for the environment, for the children cancer center and for children with heart defects. Every single AUB student fought for something bigger. We even caused our administration a fair amount of trouble this year with our refusal to abandon our idealistic views.

Is it a wonder then that after years of looking forward to this moment, it remains a bittersweet moment? Life is hard. Today, we leave our warm bubble to a place where voicing a dissenting opinion can be dangerous. We leave a place where anything is possible to one where optimism, if it exists, has to be very cautious. But Lebanese society is in a state of revolution now. Everywhere, women and workers are demanding their rights. The Lebanese are demanding better salaries, better internet connections, better infrastructure, better laws, more extensive freedoms. The Lebanese are demanding a higher

standard of life. They need us and our experience of fighting for our causes. And, hopefully, we will not fail them.

Congratulations, class of 2014.