

Commencement Address

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Thank you President Khuri, Trustees and faculty members,
Excellencies, Distinguished guests,
Dear graduates and parents,

I am very proud to be among you today, at the American University of Beirut campus, a prestigious university that is particularly dear to my heart. I have dreamt for many years of pursuing my university education at AUB. Unfortunately it did not happen...

Dear 2017 graduates,

This ceremony is yours and the 3rd of June, 2017 will be a memorable day in your life. Your generation, marked by the revolution of technology and communication, is indeed different than mine. It's surely more challenging. This is why I am glad to share with you today my story with AUB and my experience in the social and humanitarian fields, knowing that the American University of Beirut focuses on moral values, dedication, culture and welfare...

My fondness of AUB started a while back.

26 years ago, when many of you were not born, we celebrated the AUB **125th Anniversary** of a Middle East beacon of Education and Health Care.

This was in November 1991 as I was in New York for a keynote speech at the Waldorf Astoria hotel. The Lebanese flag at the entrance of the hotel could not have been any bigger.

Yet a day before the New York event I had to change the draft of my speech. My husband President Elias Harawi called me; College Hall had just been subjected to a bombing. Elias rushed immediately to the demolished site and deployed several efforts to mobilize Lebanese communities in the process of relief and later reconstruction of this significant cultural monument.

From that moment onward, my relation with AUB continued on many fronts through my continuous support of the Alumni Association, the Middle East Assembly and scholarship funds.

My fellow degree recipients,

Yesterday, on June 2, 2017, my relation with AUB was further consolidated when President Khuri and the AUB Trustees granted me an Honorary Doctorate in Human Letters.

President Khuri and Faculty members,

I am very grateful and touched by this honorable degree.

Family circumstances kept me from studying at a university. Having lost my father at a young age, I was unable to pursue a higher education.

Dear graduates,

I would here like to touch on the importance of the opportunity you were given. Please do not take it for granted and be grateful to your parents that

have enabled you to join such a prestigious university. I had to work hard to educate myself. As you would imagine, the process was not an easy one. The journey was full of setbacks.

However, my commitment emanated from the heart. My innate optimism, strong determination and fighting spirit helped me reach objectives I had set for myself. This would not have been possible without the unfailing support of my late husband President Elias Hraoui, who firmly believed in me and encouraged me to achieve my goals.

In a country that had been torn by 16 years of a devastating civil war, a lot had to be done. Humanitarian relief was the priority.

I started searching for new means to alleviate the prevailing sufferings. This prompted me to work on improving the condition of the least privileged, the most needy and in particular children.

I have lost my first child, a lovely boy at the age of two after extensive medical care. It was devastating.

Since then, I always think of parents who cannot afford the treatment for their kids.

I believe in the right of every child to better health; it is my conviction in life and the reason why I founded in 1991, together with dedicated ladies, a committee tasked with providing displaced families with medical, social and educational assistance. After two years of volunteer work on the ground while in direct contact with hundreds of children suffering from chronic diseases

without proper medical treatment, the idea of creating a specialized center emerged.

A telethon, the first of its kind in Lebanon, was organized on May 1993. This fundraising event succeeded in mobilizing a whole nation and marked a significant social action and solidarity movement to support children with chronic diseases.

In 1994, the dream became a reality. The Chronic Care Center opened its doors to the children with Type 1 Diabetes and Thalassemia.

The Center is currently treating more than 3000 patients. Its mission embraces two main aspects: curative and preventive. The Center aims at maximizing the quality of health care for children and nurturing healthy future generations through extensive prevention and awareness campaigns.

Since chronic diseases put a heavy burden on families and patients, the center adopted a comprehensive approach through a multidisciplinary team that provides young patients with regular medical and psychosocial care along with the necessary medication. This approach empowers the patients to become independent and to face life's challenges with self confidence.

The Center succeeded in implementing a national prevention program that focuses on premarital testing, screening and genetic counseling, which led to a significant decrease of the new cases of Thalassemia in Lebanon.

All of this was accomplished thanks to a great team of dedicated Health Care professionals, many of whom are AUB graduates just like you.

In the last decade, our optimism grew at the possibility of offering our children a curative therapy.

After sending, in 2006, 35 young Thalassemics to Italy to undergo Bone Marrow Transplant, the Center started recently a joint program with the Ministry of Public Health to sponsor this procedure in Lebanon in cooperation with AUBMC. Until this day, 7 children are cured.

I am also proud to report that, over the 22 years of commitment, our children have grown up in a stimulating atmosphere and became productive members of society. More than 400 of them are like you, university graduates.

Our goal was and remains to optimize the quality of our services in order to become the benchmark in our field of expertise as well as a reference in excellence of service.

While I have spoken at length about our major project, the Chronic Care Center, there are many other Lebanese non-governmental organizations working to help and integrate orphans, the needy, physically and mentally challenged, drug-addicts and the “forgotten ones” into society...

We count on you, both men and women, to lead the way through working hand in hand with your fellow citizens... I know the road will not be easy, but just keep trying.

As Winston Churchill said “Never, never, never give up”.

Dear Graduates,

Allow me to humbly share with you my experience that extends beyond child care. It reaches into social and cultural fields in an effort to improve the status of Lebanese women and protect the Lebanese national heritage.

In fact, in preparation for the Fourth World Conference for Women, Beijing 1995, I focused on improving the state of Lebanese women with respect to gender equality.

Following the recommendations of the Beijing declaration, the National Commission for Women was established by the Lebanese government, which I presided as a first lady.

A national strategy for Lebanese women was elaborated in cooperation with the NGO Committee of Women’s Issues. It was implemented in light of the data bank published in 1997.

Some improvements have been registered in more than one area and some basic achievements recorded toward the elimination of discrimination against women.

Dear women professors and graduates present at this ceremony,

Your number reflects the empowerment we have attained over the last few decades where we can notice: an increase in the percentage of women enrolled at the various educational levels, a substantial growth in the participation of women in teaching professions and educational administration,

and an increasing number of women having access to higher education and liberal professions. However, we still find few women appointed to key positions. Their presence is symbolic in economic and political decision making.

I have to admit, though, that despite our accomplishments, we have not succeeded in achieving all our targets.

This does not mean, however, that we should give up. You should work hard to move forward, and keep in mind the importance of perseverance and team work.

Last, but not least, I always felt that Lebanon's heritage was too precious to be ignored. It was imperative to protect it, restore it and promote it. For that purpose, we founded the Lebanese Heritage Foundation in 1996 which is committed to safeguarding our national heritage.

Among its main achievements is the contribution to the rehabilitation of the National Museum (1996 - 1999), the restoration of the stelae of Nahr el Kalb and the creation of a museum of rural life in Terbol and Rass-Baalbek in the Bekaa.

I feel I need to stress that our National Heritage is extremely important; it reflects more than 18 prestigious and glamorous civilizations through more than 6000 years of history.

However, many of its monuments are constantly threatened not only by nature but particularly by human beings. We strive to continuously protect them by promoting their exceptional universal significance.

Our past is our identity. It's up to you dear young graduates present here, and to our civic society to preserve, develop and revive our natural, historical, artistic, cultural and human wealth for future generations.

Dear graduates,

As you would imagine a lot has still to be done. I have only begun a journey which seems to be endless if we are to achieve our dreams. Let us dream this evening of a Lebanon where human dignity, integrity and respect of diversity prevail. Where human rights, social justice and dialogue dominate. Where allegiance to our nation is a priority over all other considerations.

I did not have it easy growing up. I persevered to make myself a contributor to society. I try to help out as much as possible.

Believe me, after many years of work, we realize that the moments we truly lived were the moments when we had done things in the spirit of love.

Encouraging and motivating you is a duty I feel from the depth of my heart.

Life is a challenge. You should always thrive to be the best you can be and aim to achieve the highest goals you set for yourself.

Your graduation today is one of many achievements to come and paves the way for a new path.

Remain optimistic about your goals and never lose hope.

Remember great dreams are not forbidden to anyone.

Many of your dreams are bound to become reality.

Find the job you love, if you don't, create it.

Your education is like your pride no one can take it away from you.

It is your key to freedom.

Have faith in yourself, and consider your mistakes as learning experiences.

You will succeed if you believe in yourself and consider defeat a beginning and not an end.

The doors may not open easily after this graduation.

Having confidence, being real, transparent and honest are the way to success.

Rest assured that graduating from a distinguished University like AUB does not only imply having a degree, but makes you a more cultured person, tolerant to diversity, a person who believes in freedom of speech and cherishes democracy. You have all the skills to take on life while respecting others, treating them as equal, and using your knowledge to improve humanity.

Keep a corner of your heart for those who will need your help.

Doing it will give you great satisfaction and happiness.

Stay loyal to your university, teachers and parents and maintain your connections with your new friends on campus; this human chain is not easy to create or find.

You are today's Lebanon and you are the future of Lebanon.

You are needed.

Nevertheless,

"Your house shall be not an anchor but a mast", as says our Khalil Gibran.

Respect your roots, your homeland, your past and your family; but know that the mobile roots, the roots of the heart and the spirit - I mean the love, friendship and the weaving bounds we make through life - are the most valuable.

The world we live in today is very hard and difficult: wars, armed conflicts, violence, and terrorism are threatening Man, Earth and Stone.

I can only imagine the miracles that will happen when stability is achieved in our country, our region and throughout the world.

In 1992, one year after College Hall crumbled, President Elias Hraoui ended his speech during the corner stone rebuilding ceremony by saying:

“...every stone is a foundation for another stone, like the mission of Lebanon where every light has a shadow for a new light”.

And today on this 3rd of June 2017, I would like to end my speech by saying that each one of you, fellow degree recipients, is a foundation stone and a light.

Dear graduates,

To you, and your proud parents, my heartiest congratulations.

This day is surely a bridge to a better future.

Thank you.