

## **Graduate Commencement Exercises Student Speech**

**Jana Kontar**

**May 31, 2019**

Khuri, Members of the Board of Trustees, Esteemed Deans and Guests, Faculty, Families, and the Class of 2019, I am extremely honored to stand before all of you today.

Five years ago, we have arrived here full of aspirations. Aspirations of what an education within these halls can help us achieve. We have arrived here with dreams about how our lives would change and how we can inspire change in our community. An unfaltering will to have life, and indeed have it abundantly.

I remember the first day I entered economics excited to learn about the issues I see daily all-over social media: financial crises, taxes and globalization. Only to later find myself working on issues that deal with much more than that. I saw myself working on research that empowers refugees and the poor, research that supports better labor market outcomes for mothers and research that empowers women to enter STEM degrees. I also realized how small changes in the environment, through a simple nudge, can influence behavior to the most positive and desired outcome. With each experience, I appreciated the full worth of my discipline and found my purpose in life.

As the days passed by, what started for us as a simple journey to seek knowledge has become a life passion and heartfelt desire to make a difference. Problems previously believed to be unsolvable quickly dissolved into new opportunities and challenges for us to take on and learn from. We became agents of positive change who sought constant improvement of the conditions and matters around us. Our clubs fight for human rights, our journalists fight for freedom of expression, our researchers fight for societal change, our elections fight for political justice. We came to realize that aspiration is the foundation of learning. Yet, graduating from this institution instills in us the obligation to spread our aspirations into our communities. This is our biggest challenge!

My fellow graduates, each one of us had a multitude of unforgettable and life-shaping experiences during our time at AUB. It might be as simple as a conversation we had in Jafet Library, a competition we took part in, an inspiring talk we attended organized by our favorite club, or a chat we had with students from different backgrounds and with different ideologies. Accumulations of people, ideas and life lessons that I hope we reflect upon and as we leave this academic haven, I hope we pass them on, we share them with the world and use them to build our influence.

Thank you AUB for taking our hands on this beautiful journey of change and growth. Thank you for being this environment of diversity, student activism and overwhelming love and support. You've been our safe refuge, our meditation retreat and the place where we really feel untouchable.

But now comes the time to test our resilience and vulnerability. Today, we enter a world drowned with its problems: from climate change, to inequality, divisiveness and social marginalization. I can understand that some might feel a sense of despair. I can understand worries about sustainable development, about the wellness of our democracy and civil society, about the future of our country. But we are the generation that will have to push for change and keep pushing harder. And I know we will because it was here that we learned to get comfortable with being uncomfortable and dare to dream and realize our dreams. Tonight, let's give ourselves the promise to work hard and keep walking the road, to take initiatives and get in the game, to be present, to be in the present, to take risks and above all to embrace change with passion, with integrity, with compassion and with love.

Finally, I cannot leave without thanking all the special people in my life without whom I could not be standing here today. My professors. My friends. My brothers. And most importantly, my parents Iman and Riad, you were my guiding light. Thank you all. Congratulations Class of 2019!