

Ralph Zeitoun
FM Student's Commencement Address
June 4, 2021

President Khuri, Dean Zaatari, Associate and Assistant Deans, Keynote Speaker, Esteemed Professors and Faculty Members, Parents, Family, Friends, and Fellow Graduates of the Class of 2021:

Allow me to begin by expressing how thrilled I am to be here tonight, and how honored I feel to be addressing you.

Four years ago, as one of the first-year medical students joining from another university, I was naturally worried about blending in a new environment where almost everyone already knew one another, but this feeling did not last long, as you were all welcoming, and in no time, made me feel like I always belonged. Additionally, it was not long before I realized that this friendly and caring atmosphere extended to the faculty members as well. From the classroom to the wards, every professor and attending physician I had the chance to closely interact with took it upon themselves as their primary responsibility to ensure that us students get to benefit from all the knowledge and expertise they can offer.

In medical school, we are assigned to complete academic and clinical tasks in groups. We all remember sharing ideas and discussing explanations during TBL sessions; practicing physical examination on each other during Clinical Skills sessions; rounding together on the wards; dissecting patient cases during Morning Report; and the list goes on. Under the layers of curriculum design, we were being taught something much more essential than simple teamwork. The value of a collaborative environment was revealed to us as we advanced in our education, and a sense of community and belonging was being fostered.

I have seen my colleagues staying after hours to ensure that their patients receive appropriate care in a timely manner and that none of their tasks are handed over to the rest of the team. I have seen them coming in on weekends to provide free healthcare to those who cannot afford it. I have seen them staying long nights working at the bench or digging in medical charts with full dedication to their research projects. I have seen them rushing to the emergency department on the night of the Beirut Blast to help in any way they can. I have seen them living month after month away from their families so that they can attend to their clinical duties during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I have seen the light in their eyes as they all received their first dose of the vaccine. I have seen it all, I have been immensely inspired and I cannot wait to see what each member of this class will achieve in the future. Sharing this journey with you has been a constant reminder of the beauty of a career in medicine, and of what this honorable profession entails.

It gives me great pride to be graduating with you, Class of 2021, a class of brilliant physicians, researchers, leaders, and humanitarians; a class that has demonstrated, day after day, a remarkable ability to adapt in the face of adversity. Road closures, riots, an economic crisis, nationwide lockdowns, quarantines, the devastating destruction of our beloved Beirut, and yet, we are gathered here today. Class of 2021, as emotionally draining as it was, we made it!

For a while now, I have been ruminating on the hardest decision I have made so far, one that many have made before me, and that many after me most certainly will. The decision to leave the only home I have known for my twenty-five years of existence. It is with a very heavy heart that many of us depart from our families, in the hopes of a better future. While we are away, we can only hope to perpetuate the reputation that AUB has established in the Western world and around the globe, through its alumni, many of whom have become leading figures in their fields. I am confident that the sentiment is shared by many of us sitting here tonight when I tell you that my biggest wish is to be able to return to Beirut and give back to AUB all that it has given me.

I was recently asked if my experience in medical school was everything that I expected it to be. To simply agree with that statement would do great injustice to my time at AUB, a time that exceeded every expectation. Thank you AUB for giving me some of the best years of my life; for introducing me to some of the most inspiring professors, mentors, and role models; for allowing me to form friendships that I will maintain for a lifetime; and for making me cross paths with my better half Elizabeth. I would also like to thank every patient who has given me the chance to care for them, and who has taught me much more than a textbook ever will; your stories will continue to inspire me for a long time. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank our parents and families, and especially mine, for all the unspoken sacrifices that they have made, in the hopes of finally seeing us here today receiving our diplomas. For these sacrifices, we are eternally grateful. We hope that we made you proud and that we will continue to do so.

Thank you all, and congratulations!