

Kamel Wehbe
Student's Commencement Address
September 3, 2021

Class of 2021, we're not here only to celebrate ourselves, but those who made this journey possible.

My grandfather Kamel Wehbe lived in our small village, Mahrouna at a time of little opportunity for those in the South. He opened up a clothing shack- 1 by 2 meters- in Downtown. This paved the way for my father Ali who at 18 years old, opened his own business in Bulgaria, finding opportunity in all corners of the earth but his own. He married my mother Bahya, the greatest leader I know, who founded Rayhana, a social relief organization, so that others can not only aspire of a 1 by 2-meter stand, but of an education and equal opportunity.

I say this because I couldn't have been standing here without their leadership, and I wouldn't have been standing here without the sense of purpose their leadership instilled in me.

However, stories of the past are easy to tell. We find comfort in trials, tribulations, and triumphs that are not our own. But the difficult story is the one we are about to write, shaped a central question: what is leadership?

I can't claim to have the answer, but like you, I've been able to interrogate it most across that little patch of land between Nicely and Jafet, on the stairs of MainGate, and outside Latte Art ma3el shabeb.

I fell in love with the buzzing life and the promise of change around West Hall. I learned that leadership is service by watching our friends, students, organize blood drives, orchestrate marches for migrant workers, organize politically, armed with petitions and posters. Those are the leaders I look up to.

I learned that leadership is dedication from the Med 3s and Med 4s at AUBMC, who spend night shifts at the COVID unit, and rolled hospital beds into the rubble of destroyed buildings, carrying the burden of life and death far too early, but carrying it nonetheless because they must. Those are the leaders I look up to.

I learned what mentorship could do because of the efforts of President Fadlo, Dr. Nizameddin, Martin Asser, and a village of people that did not only make my entry to AUB possible, but my flourishing probable.

Without these lessons, my journey wouldn't have been possible, from presenting to Princess Anne and the House of Lords in London, to drafting policy with world leaders, and making it to the Forbes List I used to rap about in the shower. Dreams come true. I ask you what I ask of my little brothers Mohammad, Hassan, and Ali: keep dreaming and keep hoping. Hope is not a substitute for action or leadership, but it is the basis for it.

Look to your left and look to your right. You are seeing future politicians, doctors, and bankers- who will do better than the zu'ama responsible for this mess. We will do better simply because like the volunteers around West Hall, like our friends at AUBMC, we must.

We will do better because we've seen the bags under the weary eyes of our working mothers and fathers who have lost their life savings and ambitions of comfort. We've seen babies cry for milk and the elderly cry for medication. We owe it to them, and to ourselves to dream of a new Lebanon.

We may not be able to solve the immediate problems of the country. Things will get worse before they get better. But it is exactly these truths that push us to demand the most out of ourselves. To support one another and guide every decision with the values we've held true here. We don't all need to be outspoken activists. But in doing the absolute most we can day in and day out, with relentless hunger and purpose, in whatever field we pursue, inside Lebanon or outside of it, we are writing the story of a new Lebanon.

So please, put in those extra hours for your master's applications and GMATs, even if you're worried the tuition bank transfer might be blocked. Keep sending out job applications, even when prospects are bleak, and your visa might be rejected. Keep proactively reaching out to people, learning from and mentoring others, even when you're angry and exhausted. Eventually your efforts will pay off, and when they do, it will make all the difference.

Yet in this journey, in this pursuit of fulfillment, through the highs and lows, don't forget to hug and kiss your parents and loved ones, because we all know too well how quickly we can lose the chance, at 6:07 PM, on a random August evening. That makes every second we spend here together all the more valuable.

What a beautiful night. Tonight, with your friends by your side, in this incredible campus, think of all that you've done and accomplished these past few years. Tonight, even if the electricity cuts, our cars are empty, our wallets light, if nothing else, tonight is all we need to remember to keep moving forward.

A country is its future leaders. A country is its people. And Class of 2021, the Lebanon I see in front of me right now is beautiful. Alf Mabrouk!