

**Josleen Al Barathie**

**Student's Commencement Address**

**October 8, 2021**

President Khoury, Dean Sibai, esteemed faculty, family, friends and fellow graduates

When I was nominated to draft this speech, my nerves got the best of me. After staring at a blank paper for more than 5 hours, I googled the term “graduation speeches” and after reading a plethora of inspirational stories and watching impressive videos by influencers, instead of drafting my speech, I wondered whether I should just add a reference list... just kidding.

Eventually my mind went into autopilot and I connected with one of my dearest professors who advised me to just speak from the heart.

Here I am standing in front of you today, extremely honoured to share with you, my story.

I grew up in a small village on the foothill of Mount Hermon, happy and grateful for the humble life I had. When I finished my ninth grade, I took full-time jobs during summer, cleaning supermarket shelves and sorting cans by expiry date to pay part of my high school tuition fees. My parents took charge of the rest from their modest income. My dad worked as a support staff in a small hospital in our village and my mom worked as a cleaning staff in a nearby office.

This phase of my life was certainly tough, not only on me, but also on my beloved parents. They have suffered as a result of illiteracy. They did not have access to education which they believe is key for improving people's life. They wanted the best for my younger brother and me, and they aspired to give us an education they were deprived of.

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One day, a group of strangers visited our high school. They introduced themselves as representatives of the USAID program, offering competitive scholarships to study at the American University of Beirut. Wow! Beirut, I've heard a lot about it, but I've never been there!

I took an application home with me and placed it on my bedside table. It was the last thing I looked at before I slept and the first thing I looked at when I woke up in the morning, wondering if I am fit for this journey.

Few days later, the high school principal called me to his office, he was upset that I did not fill the application and insisted that I qualify based on my high academic standing and my low economic status.

To cut a long story short, I managed to complete my application on time, and here I am today, standing in front of you after a journey of six years at AUB, holding a BS in Medical Laboratory Sciences and a Master of Public Health, concentrating in epidemiology and biostatistics.

Our dear professors, thank you, not only for being our educators, but also for believing in us, inspiring us, nourishing our research skills, helping us shape our interests and aspiration for a future career, and helping us serve our community. One of the professors once told us, you don't have to be famous to be a hero, we “researchers” are silent warriors who work behind the screen to help disprove lies, support truth, and build knowledge.

My fellow graduates, right before graduation, students normally focus on finding a decent job and building a career. On the contrary, we faced a storm of three major historically-rare stressors (the covid-19 pandemic, the port blast and the economic meltdown). Those were stressful and challenging times. But look at how fortunate we are, we mustered up our strengths and we kept going, WE DID IT!!!

I owe my achievement to my family and my partner: thank you for the selfless unconditional support and thank you for the countless sacrifice to help me get to where I am today. Thank you, mom, for staying awake by my side when I was studying all night. Thank you, dad, for the countless prayers. Thank you partner for the continuous encouragement and for believing in me. Thank you, brother, my biggest cheerleader, who was all-eyes-and-ears when I needed to have a bit of a grumble.

At this moment, I want us to applaud our family members and loved ones who are virtually attending this ceremony; your love and support gave us strength to persevere.

Also, let us always remember all the silent warriors in this world who are not always seen on the frontline or are on the news but are working day and night to make life better, safer, healthier and more meaningful.

We are seated here today because of our desire and curiosity to foster our knowledge and our need to continue to grow; I want you to dream big and make those who matter proud!!

Fellow graduates, consider your future as a recipe of your own creation, season it with passion, care, purpose, pride, and faith and make sure to decorate it with many achievements. Achievements that are not only personal but ultimately serve the community and humanity.

Thank you.