

2022 Student Commencement Address

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I wonder how many times you've heard the expression "follow your heart." Have you ever given it a minute of thought? I can't pretend to know all the answers to what makes the human heart so special, but I can definitely give you proof of its power that goes beyond just pumping blood or being the vault of our innermost sentiments and warmest emotions. The heart is far more powerful, healing, and transformational than previously thought, but only if we trust it enough to follow. I stand here before you not giving up, despite the financial fiasco that the world hit me with, but following my heart and shooting for the stars.

Thank you, President Khuri, for the generous introduction, but I want to share with you who I really am. Eleven years into their marriage, a janitor and his housekeeper wife who had lost hope of having children welcomed their first newborn son. This baby, me, brought them joy and ignited their sense of purpose, at least, that's what they told me *[laugh]*. From dawn to dusk, my mother carried me along with her broom and mop cleaning houses in the neighborhood while my father worked as a janitor at an esteemed school where I was lucky to pursue my education for free. Then life happens so fast, who wouldn't agree with that? Yet I did stop and listen to the environment around me, I was aware of my ambitions in life and of the fact that I was that poor boy whose parents could only provide him with an abundance of love and comfort. Reflecting upon my next steps, I found myself in turmoil unable to afford a world-class higher education whilst my family struggled daily to gather necessities. I enrolled at AUB with an unclear payment plan. Into it, I received decent financial aid and scholarships from AUB, took a student loan, won the \$30,000 A-List Competition, and worked as a part-time student tutor. Class of 2022, you may not understand how things will work out. Things may look dark and bleak now but trust your heart and have faith that your dawn is coming. I tell you my story tonight to insist on the truth that if I did not become aware of my reality, did not believe that all these dots will eventually connect down the road, did not have the confidence to follow my heart, and did give up on my own dreams, my life would not have undergone this magnificent change.

Indeed, a tremendous change. AUB has transformed all our lives. From delving into curricula and books and engaging in club activities, especially those offering free pizzas at the end *[laugh]*, to cheering at AUB Outdoors and the Big Games, transforming our ideas into startups through accelerator programs and the President's Innovation Challenge, and even rebuilding Beirut up from the ashes, AUB allows us to not only participate in class, but also to volunteer our time, abilities, and talents for a greater cause. This enhanced the typical college experience with practical application generating change in our community and enriching us with a sense of accomplishment long before embarking on our future careers. AUB has taught us that in this world, our world, the impossible is possible and that education is the catalyst for change so that one day we can live in the world we dream of.

As with the matters of the heart, the only way to do splendid work is to put your heart into it and embrace what you do. Following this lesson has led us, the American University of Beirut, to shape history, write history, and set the bar quite high. Hear me out, class of 2022! We ranked 1st in the QS graduate employability rankings in the MENA region, we made it Forbes Middle East 50 most influential businesswomen through 5 of our alumnae, we established AUBMCares offering free health consultations from medical students to the disadvantaged, we partook in "The Researcher" show sharing knowledge across the nation, we completed our final year projects with breakthrough accomplishments, and last

but not least, we made it to Cyprus! This is only a glimpse of our year in review and a glance at the work of our hearts sailing in harmony. For Aristotle, “We are what we repeatedly do.” Hence, excellence is not just a mere act. Excellence is our nature.

Class of 2022, it feels bittersweet to be heading out into the world beyond these ocean waves crashing against the shore. Our hearts will remain deeply rooted in this vibrant community we call home and to which we owe our success – from the President and trustees to deans and faculty. As our hearts beat as one, let’s promise one another that we will be always side by side no matter where these waves lead us. Don’t forget – trust your heart, follow its lead, and sail in harmony. Class of 2022, to you and your loving families, congratulations!