

For Immediate Release



UN special coordinator Michael Williams on AUB Founders Day: 'If AUB did not exist already, it would need to be invented'

Beirut, Lebanon- 6/12/2010 - The American University of Beirut's positive influence on its direct neighborhood and the world was highlighted during the University's Founders Day ceremony, held on December 6, 2010.

From its impact on the economic and cultural growth of its surroundings to its indirect contributions to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and regional politics, keynote speaker Michael Williams, currently the United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon lauded the University as a "sacred place" that promotes "dialogue and coexistence" not just in Lebanon but the region, as attested by the fact that at least 19 AUB alumni were involved in the drafting of the UN declaration and several Lebanese and regional senior politicians and officials had graduated from the University.

Following a formal procession of faculty members and senior administrators, AUB President Peter Dorman opened the ceremony, highlighting AUB's influence on its surroundings starting from the time of its founding in 1866.

"Beirut embraced the University not only for the opportunity it offered for higher education, but physically enfolded it as well, as Hamra, Ras Beirut, and Ain Mreisseh were first settled with villas and gardens, then shops, apartment buildings, and a tram line," said Dorman, in reference to how the neighborhood burgeoned following AUB's creation. "While we often reflect on the growth of AUB in terms of its academic programs, its students and alumni, its faculty and the research they produce, the hospital and its doctors, no university can exist independently of the neighborhood and the city that together help to mold its inimitable character."

It is in this vein, noted Dorman, that the theme chosen for this year's student essay competition—which became a part of Founders Day in 1999—was "the evolving relationship between AUB and its surrounding neighborhood."

Dorman then introduced the winner of the student essay competition: Daria EISamad, a senior majoring in economics, who will receive \$750 for her winning essay, "The Space We Occupy: AUB's relationship to its surrounding." EISamad's name will also be immortalized in a plaque that hangs outside Assembly Hall.

Ranked second and third, respectively, were, Tala Mukkaddam a political studies major who will receive \$500, and May Chaker, a business major, who gets \$250. In her essay, EISamad highlighted AUB's role in promoting Ras Beirut's cultural, economic, and intellectual growth through the diversity and freedom of expression it

embraces in addition to its strong humanitarian engagement within the country, even in the midst of the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990.

"It was a 'safe haven,' offering medical help and humanitarian aid in many forms such as soup kitchens," said ElSamad in her essay. "During and after the civil war, Ras Beirut ... became... the closest the Arab world ever reached to [being] a liberal and open community, where pluralistic groups could coexist in relative harmony and peace."

ElSamad added that today AUB students and faculty are still contributing to the neighborhood's economic growth through their consumer activities.

She invited students to widen their scope of impact, by targeting the neighborhood through academic outreach, field research, cultural involvement and social awareness projects. "I, for one, pledge to use the rest of my time in this University in this direction. I hope that many of my colleagues will do the same," she concluded.

Keynote speaker Michael Williams, currently the UN special coordinator and formerly a diplomat, senior adviser, writer and researcher focusing mainly on Mideast and Asian issues, praised AUB's positive role on promoting dialogue in the region and indirectly influencing world politics.

"AUB has long been and remains an important center not only of study and debate, but also of dialogue and co-existence not only for Lebanon but the entire Middle East," said Williams. "It provides an island -- an almost sacred space -- within Lebanon for interaction and engagement between students of different backgrounds and origins, of different confessions and nationalities. In this sense, AUB captures, I believe, and embodies the very spirit of the United Nations."

Williams then overviewed the relationship between Lebanon and the UN, including the nation's current two-year term on the UN Security Council, UN agencies' developmental and humanitarian work in the country, and progress made on the implementation of Lebanon-related UN resolutions. He also gave special attention to the late AUB alumnus and former professor Charles Malek, one of the main authors of the UN declaration.

No fewer than 19 AUB alumni were delegates at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945, added Williams, noting that three former AUB students were also among the first men and women to sign the UN Charter on behalf of their respective governments. "No other leading academic institution in the world can claim to have played such a central role in the creation of the United Nations," he said.

"Much as we often say about the United Nations, if AUB did not exist already, it would need to be invented," Williams said.

The UN special coordinator for Lebanon did not rule out the difficulties that Lebanon is facing, but noted, "Lebanon's pluralism and diversity are also its defining characteristic and strength."

In conclusion, he invited the AUB community to play "a critical role" in safeguarding the stability and unity of the country and contributing to its development. "You are the building blocks for the Lebanon of tomorrow. And we need more Lebanese in the vein of Charles Malek and the many other great Lebanese and non-Lebanese who have been educated in this wonderful institution," Williams said.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of more than 7,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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