

For Immediate Release



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AUB mourns former Dean Thomas Sutherland

The American University of Beirut (AUB) mourns the passing away of former Dean, Dr. Thomas Sutherland, who passed away Friday night in Colorado, USA at age 85. Sutherland served as Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences at AUB from 1983 until 1985 when he was taken hostage during the Lebanese civil war and held captive for more than six years.

Sutherland was appointed Dean of agriculture at AUB in 1983. He had opted with his wife, Jean Ann Murray who started teaching English at the University, to join the faculty at a time when Lebanon was anything but stable. The civil war was in its ninth year; the Israeli occupation was in its second year. It was a time of chaos and shortage of facilities and food. But Sutherland was on a mission to make a difference, so he took a leave of absence from his 26 year career teaching animal science at Colorado State University (CSU), Fort Collins, and joined AUB.

As dean, Sutherland focused on keeping his faculty running despite the political instability. He arranged with President Malcolm Kerr to develop an agriculture program in the Eastern side of Beirut as part of the Off Campus Program (OCP) for students who did not dare to come across the Green Line to the main campus at AUB. With financial support through AUB's Vice President at the time Abdul Hamid Hallab, Sutherland prioritized the rebuilding of structures and the redoing of the Agriculture Building, building B, and the farm in Beqa'a, as shelling had caused much damage there.

“Dr. Sutherland’s outstanding leadership of the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences was instrumental in enhancing the Faculty’s excellence during very hard times, a matter which made him highly respected by FAFS faculty, students, and AUB community. He was visionary, fair, objective, and compassionate.” said Dean of FAFS, Dr. Nahla Hwalla, who credits her career to Dr. Sutherland for recruiting her as a faculty member at the Nutrition and Food Science Department.

He was the first to take agriculture students back to the Beqa'a after a long time during the difficult political situation where they could become familiar with the machinery, the cropping, and the harvesting routines.

Known for his commitment for his students, Dean Sutherland was often late for meetings at College Hall as he sat to have long discussions with them outside the FAFS building on Lower Campus. "The students loved it. They knew that they could get their gripes and their arguments listened to," he said in an interview with AUB's MainGate magazine in 2008.

In that interview, Dr. Sutherland recalled his impression of AUB's students. "The students at AUB were, frankly, better trained and brighter than the students we were accustomed to teaching," he said. "It was interesting to be involved in a private university where students were very highly selected and very, very bright. I was genuinely impressed with how talented and capable all those students were. And I say that most sincerely." Sutherland kept in touch with AUB students when they visited him in Colorado and indirectly through philanthropic efforts he funded with his wife.

Dr. Sutherland was often referred to as a "Fort Collins icon". Many described him as the survivor, hero, and the light of hope. He was also honored early on in his career with the Distinguished Teacher Award from the American Society of Animal Science in 1975 and the Harris T. Guard Distinguished Service Award for Teaching from Colorado State University in 1976. In 2014, he was honored with a CSU Founders Day Medal in recognition of his and his wife's service to the University, Fort Collins, and higher education worldwide.

"Dr. Sutherland has been a longtime supporter of FAFS and AUB, and he established the Dean Thomas Sutherland annual awards for graduate excellence and undergraduate excellence," said Dean Hwalla. "His optimism and courage greatly influenced and inspired others. His legacy of compassion will continue with us."

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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 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 130 programs leading to 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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