

For Immediate Release



AUB confers honorary doctorates to Choucair, Darwazah, and Hannun, during the Commencement exercises for graduate students

Beirut, Lebanon- 30/05/2014 The American University of Beirut awarded on May 30, 2014, honorary doctoral degrees to three individuals who made enduring contributions to the arts, entrepreneurship and philanthropy, and biomedical research.

The award ceremony, took place at 8pm on the AUB Green Field, during the 145th commencement exercises for 546 graduate students, among whom were 12 PhD candidates and 87 MDs.

The three recipients were: Lebanese sculptor and painter Saloua Raouda Choucair, a pioneer of abstract art in the Arab world; entrepreneur Samih Darwazah, who founded Hikma Pharmaceuticals and grew it into a billion-dollar global enterprise; and Yusuf Hannun, an award-winning molecular biologist and director of Stony Brook University Cancer Center, who was also the keynote speaker for the ceremony.

These three notable individuals were selected by AUB in recognition of the enduring impact of their work, their contributions to the advancement of knowledge through research, and their efforts to enrich quality of life in the region and around the world.

The ceremony started with the traditional procession of faculty members in their academic regalia, led by Chief Marshall Huda Zurayk, who opened and closed the ceremony. AUB has been conferring honorary doctoral degrees since 1969, but the tradition was suspended for several years due to the 1975-1990 war and was re-established in 2003.

Attending the ceremony were a host of dignitaries including Deputy Ali Bazzi, representing Speaker Nabih Berri, members of the AUB Board of Trustees, and others.

“Our University is a community of extraordinary individuals and groups, all of whom are passionately devoted to the vigor and the long-lasting success of one of the great experiments in education ever undertaken in the Middle East—chartered over 150 years ago,” said AUB President Peter Dorman, in his opening remarks. “The aspirations and values that bind us together are common to all.”

President Dorman acknowledged that the pursuit of values, such as freedom of expression, tolerance for diverse opinions and seeking dignity for every human being, is easier in a protected space such as a university campus, but “harder to practice in the world beyond our walls, and especially at a time when our region is beset by continuing violence.”

He added, “As you make the transition from university life into the first years of your adult careers, you will discover that you are ambassadors—not only for AUB—but for the fundamental values that we hold dear.”

Dorman then introduced the student speaker, Jinane Abi Ramia, vice president of the University Student-Faculty Committee, graduating with a master’s in public health.

For Abi Ramia, AUB offered an unforgettable learning experience, with many memories to treasure.

“We have learnt to push for perfection when faced with tense standoffs ... We have learnt that diversity is an asset we should celebrate, and dearly cherish. AUB has also taught us not to fear change or failure, and it is for these reasons that we proudly graduate today as nothing less than future pioneers in our fields,” she said.

Abi Ramia saluted her fellow classmates for speaking up, protesting, and staying as a unified student body, while fighting for what they believed was right. “Class of 2014, you have many battles that await you,” she concluded, “which is why I tell you now: leave, grow, fly, and fight!”

Christina Bergqvist, a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Medicine from the Faculty of Medicine, then took the stage, recounting some of the memories created during her four years as a medical student.

“We’ve had a unique journey of firsts...Although this is not our first graduation, it certainly is the most important one,” she said. The challenges of these past four years have given us a wider scope into this intricate life... Despite all these skills however, our most powerful tools remain a kind word or gesture to patients, the extra effort to show a patient that we genuinely care about their problem. I trust that none of us will ever lose sight of this.”

Dorman then introduced each honorand, conferring upon them, successively, an honorary doctoral degree of humane letters. Each recipient delivered a brief acceptance speech.

Dorman described honorand Saloua Raouda Choucair as a pioneer of abstract art in the Arab world, a prolific artist who has produced sculptures inspired by science and mathematics, as well as Islamic art and poetry, and who was truly appreciated only after the Tate Modern in London held an exhibit of her works in 2013. Born in 1916, Choucair is also an accomplished painter, tapestry maker, and jeweler. Due to her failing health, her daughter, Hala, accepted the degree on her behalf.

“Although she cannot be with us today, Mother is elated with this most rewarding honor,” said Hala Choucair.

Choucair then recounted how AUB has always been part of her mother’s life, right from the house in which she was born--in what is now the lower campus-- to her work as a librarian on campus.

Recalling that one of her mother’s sculptures had managed to inspire both renowned poet Onsi al-Hajj, who saw in it a drunken man, and the-then AUB dean of engineering, who considered it an incarnation of Static Dynamism, Choucair said, “If Mother’s art fascinated an engineer and a poet alike, I think it has the potential to inspire all of us. Though she took her own path, it has run concurrent to AUB and also revealed the value of bringing the different branches of learning together, in contest and dialogue. She always believed that, in addition to its aesthetic value, art should be functional and practical.”

President Dorman then introduced entrepreneur, philanthropist, and AUB alumnus Samih Darwazah, the founder of Hikma Pharmaceuticals and a school for girls in rural Jordan, as “a shining example of the values we hold dear at AUB, those of openness, tolerance, innovation, critical thinking, and civic responsibility.” He added: “As a successful entrepreneur, committed civic leader, and responsible corporate citizen, Darwazah shows how much can be accomplished while holding firm to these noble principles.”

Darwazah, who has been a generous supporter of AUB, shared with the graduating class of 2014 the secrets of his success as an entrepreneur. His main advice to students was to follow their passion; study and follow market needs; invest in talented people; build a values-based culture; innovate to survive; think positive; be transparent in business dealings and with banks; be proud of their achievements yet remain humble; and never to forget their families, communities, and countries.

Finally, President Dorman invited Dr. Yusuf Hannun, an award-winning molecular biologist, clinician, and professor of medicine, to the stage.

“The fight against cancer is happening at the molecular level, and Dr. Yusuf Hannun’s groundbreaking discoveries are helping to build the arsenal that will eventually conquer such dreadful diseases,” said Dorman. “As a distinguished alumnus who has achieved international recognition and prominence in his field, Hannun’s significant contributions to the advancement of science and medical practice bring great honor to this university and our historic medical center.”

In his keynote speech, Hannun recalled the wonderful memories he had made as a student at AUB, skipping class for a dip in the Mediterranean, or discussing Gilgamesh on the Green Field. “If now I have any regrets about CS (Civilization Sequence), it is that we did not spend more time on it. When else in your life can you spend time to dwell on some of the major contributions to human thought and development while someone else (most likely your parents) are paying for it?” he quipped.

Hannun reminded the graduates that education is a privilege they should rejoice in having received.

“Education liberates,” he said. “Of course education liberates financially. It is now well-established that students who go to college, over the long run, do financially better. But education more importantly liberates the mind. You start to take possession of your own thoughts. You start to understand the present world around you and the world that preceded you. No wonder this is called liberal education.”

And beyond education, Hannun noted, there is higher education, which does not only help one learn, but it allows one to start contributing to knowledge. “Not only are many answers not known, you begin to realize that there are so many questions that have not yet been asked. With higher education you acquire the ability to influence what others know. Now you start to understand not only the world as it is but also the world that is yet to come.”

He added: “Higher education is not only a higher privilege, but with higher education comes implicit responsibilities. Responsibilities to contribute to the improvement of mankind; no matter how small the contribution initially appears to be, it will multiply over the years.”

Hannun harked back to the days of Harun Rashid in the eighth century, when Europe was plunged in the Dark Ages, and the Arab world was contributing to science and learning.

“It has been estimated that the money spent by the Abbasid caliphate on just the Translation Movement ... had cost the equivalent of about twice the current annual research budget of the United Kingdom’s Medical Research Council,” Hannun said, incredulously. “The best scholars, of various religions, such as the innovative physician Muhammad Ar-Raazi and Hunayn ibn Ishaq, the great translator and also an innovative physician, had salaries that are estimated to be the equivalent of what professional athletes make today. Our society back then rejoiced in discovery and scholarship and afforded them a huge premium. So society can also make choices as to what it wants to achieve and promote.”

In conclusion, he reminded the Class of 2014: “You have big choices to make; make them well and I wish you all the luck in the world and a very bright future.”

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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 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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