

Ubah Ali
Student's Commencement Address
September 3, 2021

Faculty, family, friends, graduates, and those who are watching on screens, welcome.

Perseverance, hope, and the magnanimous work of philanthropists shaped my life.

At the age of 10, I was told education was not for me. As a young girl, I was advised to learn how to do domestic chores. My close family members urged me to drop out of school because girls' education does not have any values in my country. I was raised in a small town located in the eastern part of Somaliland. A country that is unknown in many parts of the world. I am the eldest of eight and was raised by a single mother. My mother had me when she was fifteen years old, and she lost both of her parents before I was even born. As a young mother, she struggled to raise her children while not having a supportive husband. However, she managed to overcome all these many obstacles. Although my mother never finished primary school, she understood the importance of education. I remember the day I finished 8th grade and I did well in the national exam. I wanted to attend Abaarso School, one of the best boarding schools in Somaliland. My sister and I had to travel 300km to take the Abaarso entrance exam, and it was the first time I travelled outside of my hometown. Our mother was with us, and we took the exam while competing with the most talented students in Somaliland. Abaarso was taking only 50 students and fortunately we were among those who were admitted.

Many members of my family were against us going to a boarding school to receive marvelous education. Additionally, the school fee was expensive because my mother was asked to pay 100\$ every month for both of us. However, with the help of Abaarso admission we received a full scholarship. I had a sponsor from New York City who paid my whole tuition, and he is one of the reasons why I am here today and sharing this story with you. After years of hard work at Abaarso School, I got the ASSIST Scholarship to finish my last year of High School in the USA. After I finished my exchange year, I took a gap year. I came back to Somaliland to give back to my community. I started volunteering with Abaarso School to tutor orphanage students. At the end of my gap

year, I was awarded the prestigious Mastercard scholarship to attend the American University of Beirut.

During my university years, AUB taught me a lot. I have learned the importance of standing by what I believe and raising my voice even when I think it would not reach anywhere. I started volunteering with AUB civic engagement center, to learn more about the Migrant Domestic Workers and refugees. And while working with marginalized people in Lebanon, I have learned that sometimes labelling individuals certain categories takes away to see their other attributes. Not only that, AUB taught me the importance of humanity, and the ways that all of us are interconnected. And that's why with the help of my AUB/MCF friends, I co-founded an organization called Solace for Somaliland Girls, whose aim is to eradicate all forms of Female Genital Mutilation in Somaliland. FGM is the partial or total removal of external female genitalia and 98% of the Somali women are survivors of this practice. As a young Somali woman, my hope is to end this practice, so every girl child could enjoy her childhood and basic rights. And I am sure, each one of you graduates has something in mind. Maybe you have brilliant ideas on how to solve internal/external conflicts, global warming, refugee crisis, hunger, state failure, and more. Hence, it is important to highlight that all of our solutions have a common denominator, which is to make the world a better and more accepting place. A place where Migrant domestic workers in the Middle East and other marginalized groups in the world feel welcomed. And as we embark on our journeys, preserving humanity should be the cornerstone of our mission.

Dear class of 2021, May you bring peace and prosperity to all your countries.

Congratulations!