

## 2022 Student Commencement Address

**Julia Samer Zaydan**

**June 10, 2022**

Dear faculty, students, parents, and friends,

I want to begin by thanking you all for being here and making this place one we can call home. Thank you esteemed faculty for continuing to provide us with high quality education and AUB for making these last three years truly an unforgettable experience. Most importantly, mom, dad, thank you for making me the woman I am today, and for giving me the opportunity to grow every day. I hope I made you proud.

Class of 2022, your time has come. You are here today, sitting in your caps and gowns. I want you to look around you. Look at the people who have reached this milestone with you, in this chapter of your life you are about to close.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we were studying in Jafet at 3 am, gathering our friends for a coffee break at Abu Naji's who was the only one open till late that night. We were reminiscing all what we've been through, all the good times and the bad. Sun bathing in the Green Oval, fighting off the cats who were trying to eat our food, rushing to the Big Games on this very field to support our friends, meeting people through the different clubs and societies we were members of—these are all things we will surely miss.

Now, I don't know about you, but I feel like it's been a long, tough road to get here today. I'm sure every one of you struggled one way or another, but I believe we shared some struggles together. From the sleepless nights during student council elections season, to midterms and finals spent in Jafet, to losing our breath on the Chemistry stairs running from lower to upper campus... These struggles have turned into beautiful, bittersweet memories—memories which we will cherish forever.

Sitting in your caps and gowns, I want you to think about all you have been through. Think about the October 17 protest and what it is has become (or not become), the pandemic that has taken up to 15 million lives, the crippling economic crisis that threatened our livelihood and education, the August 4<sup>th</sup> blast that has made us go down in history for all the wrong reasons, the queues at the gas stations, bakeries, supermarkets, hospitals, and pharmacies. Think about all of these, and then take a deep breath for a moment.

Now reframe that narrative. Think about October 17, a time that woke up a country, and the role we had in that awakening. Think about the pandemic that has knocked us into a new life and the role we had in regaining some of our old life, like our presence on campus today. Think about the current economic crisis that has thrown our world into a tailspin and the way we have persevered despite it all. Think about the different initiatives we took when we cleaned our streets and helped out strangers who had their lives turned upside down in the blink of an eye.

When I look back on all of this, I feel *powerful*. We tend to think that what we do as individuals does not matter, and there is yet a verdict to come out on whether or not that is true. Yet, both AUB and my program have taught me that we lead by example. So, each time I picked up a shovel, someone else followed. Each time I demanded my rights in the streets, someone else did the same. Each time I put on a mask, someone else followed suit. The same way I influenced a sort of change in someone's behavior, someone influenced a change in mine.

Contrary to today's popular opinion, there is always room for change. Ever since I was a little girl, my parents have told me stories about their university years, and how, in the midst of the civil war in Lebanon and the occupations that haunt us to this day, they found the confidence to do

something—to change something. Whether it was someone's opinion or a university policy, there was always room for lighting a fire in the darkness as long as you had the confidence to do so. I want you to do one more thing so that we can feel confident in our power to be changemakers. Think back to the times you joined the protests, or when you volunteered with AUB's vaccination campaign, or ran for university elections, or even voted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May in the parliamentary elections, or any other part you took in something bigger than yourselves. In every instance, you helped make an impact, you helped instigate change. As you leave this beautiful place, remember that you, my friends, have the power to transform the world, and I look forward to transforming it with you.

Class of 2022, congratulations!