

Commencement Address

Mrs. Miriam Bensalah-Chaqroun

Congratulations to each of you on this special occasion. Your graduation is the product of long hours of hard work, study – and perhaps a bit of “Rest and Relaxation” sprinkled in for good measure.

Acting President Plotts, Your Excellency, Bishop Burns, Dr. Zellers, Trustees of the Board, Provost Sanford, Deans and University Faculty, UD Doctorate, Graduate and Undergraduate classes, Family members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning!

President Plotts, and Dean Landry, thank you for giving me this distinguished opportunity to speak to such an august gathering.

I would like to acknowledge Satish and Yasmin Gupta in their absence. The generosity they shared with this university for endowing the business school is enriching the lives of students from around the world.

We share a common milestone – it is here on this campus of UD that we both found our life partners! A husband and a degree: Not a bad deal.

They are true role models of an immigrant success story that the US embraces and welcomes!

It is with deep appreciation and humility that I accept the great honor, which you gave me today, the Doctor Honoris Causa of the University of Dallas.

Graduates,

When I came to Dallas the first day as a foreign student it was far beyond my imagination that I would return here one day to be honored by my alma mater with this distinguished recognition. It is far beyond what I dreamed possible for myself when I left here as a new graduate - just as each of you are today.

Of course, now I will need new business cards and an update to my resume!

It seems such a short time ago that I was sitting where you are, on a day much like today. Jamal, my husband and I, graduated with MBA's in International Management and Finance. My mind was spinning with thoughts of the future – thinking of the challenges and opportunities that lay before me.

Today, you join me in the ranks of alumni – I am confident that the education you have received has prepared you for success and taught you how to navigate in a fast- growing business world. Your education and determination are the tools for achievement. The most beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take that away from you. Your wealth today is yourselves!

I was fortunate to be born into a privileged family, but I learned quickly that with privilege comes responsibility. As from Luke 12:48 : “To whom much is given, much will be required.”

I am the eldest in a family of four brother and sisters. In my time, successful women were at best, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and a very few, entrepreneurs.

My father, a self-made businessman, was a visionary and always ahead of the curve.

He told me *“you have the DNA of an entrepreneur and a leader. Being a woman is not a fatality. It is an opportunity. So, go get the best education in business; the family business will need you.”*

His encouragement set the stage for an educational journey that first took me to Paris where I completed my undergraduate degrees, after which, I made my way here to Texas.

University of Dallas provided me the chance to see the world through a different lens. Armed with new academic and technical skills as in the capstone with Professor Bruce Evans (who I salute).

I was exposed to three new factors that changed my approach to life and business:

First, scale matters. Everything is bigger in Texas! It showed me how small our family business was! More importantly, it showed me how big it could become!

Second, I learned what it meant to be global, an emerging concept in the 1980s. It expanded my understanding of businesses and opportunities.

The sky is the limit to your potential. The only thing stopping you, is you!

Finally, values transcend race, religion and culture. Choosing to operate with clear core values gave me the confidence to succeed in a diverse business environment. “Authenticity” is more powerful than “stereotypes.”

Young people that I mentor always ask me my recipe for success. My answer is always, there is none. But, here is what life has taught me:

1. Surround yourself with role models and people who believe in you

One of my role models was my father. He taught me: never compromise my values or self-respect. He held himself and others to the expectation of honesty in business and in his everyday interactions with others. Truth-based interactions allowed him to be as transparent as the bottled water he produced.

Another role model is my mother; she taught me how to keep the faith, to be patient and strong. She instilled in me the importance of tradition and family. She gave me the legacy of women’s strength. (Mother’s Day)

My other role model, my life partner, Jamal, a successful businessman on his own, with his global holding company working in 27 countries and more than 7,000 employees worldwide, he is my unconditional supporter, my balance.

I am blessed to have a soulmate with whom I share unwavering trust and respect. His selfless support of our shared goals, values and dedication to family allowed me to become the woman I am today.

Merci Jamal.

The other things that life taught me ...

2. Work hard and think long term

The journey is long, and success comes from hard work. Know your starting point and where you want to go. There will be difficult times - we all face them - successful people conquer them! If you fall, get up and start over! As Nelson Mandela, Madiba to Africans, said : *"I Never Lose, I Either Win or Learn"*

3. Trust, ethics, and self-knowledge are essential:

Trust yourself, trust your team and trust your business partners. Trust is key in a global world. It's how business succeeds.

Be ethical because your integrity matters, your reputation is your best reference in business. Never compromise yourself or your beliefs.

Know yourself but always respect others. Build an environment of global understanding and a respect for the culture of others.

The future belongs to you and is for you to write.

You hold the power to make a difference.

You hold the power to realize your dreams because....

YOU ARE THE SHAPERS OF THE GLOBAL TOMORROW.

Congratulations on your graduation.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.