

Saint Leo University Commencement – Spring 2017

Speech written and delivered by Ammar Mohrat

Wow, we made it guys!!

I humbly stand in front of you as the commencement speaker of the graduating class of 2017 from Saint Leo University

God's peace and blessing be upon you all

I want to first of all thank (Saint Leo faculty, professors, students, friends and family) for giving me the honor of speaking to you today. I know commencements can be long and I promise to be brief and not make you suffer too much. I also want to acknowledge my parents (Mohammed Amin, and Maisson) and my siblings (AbdulBaset, Daiana, Tarek, and Adnan) who couldn't be here today, but who will be watching this video online in Turkey where they live and who have always been totally supportive of me and my dreams. They taught me all of the most important things about life and I couldn't ask for better parents and siblings. Thanks mom and dad.

Before I get into my speech, I want to acknowledge that I've spent the last 4 years with all of my friends and classmates teasing me about my accent. So how it was that you guys all decided to make me the commencement speaker, I have no idea. In any case, I'll do my best to speak clearly.

Fellow graduates, we did it! We all began our studies at Saint Leo with a dream in mind. In some cases, our dreams (and our majors) changed a couple times, but the thing that all our dreams have in common is that Saint Leo was key to helping us shape and achieve them. Today I'd like to tell you a little about my particular American Dream and about how Saint Leo made it possible.

As I'm sure you've guessed from my accent, I'm not from America. I was born in Syria, in the city of Homs. Ever since I was 14 years old, I've always wanted to come to America. As a kid, we always watched American TV shows and movies like *NCIS*, *Lost* and *Prison break*, and we always knew that America was a place of freedom and of opportunity for anyone who worked hard. You see, in Syria corruption rules and how talented you are and how hard you work is less important than your family, your religion, and how powerful your friends and relatives are.

When I was six years old, my father bought our first computer and I was immediately fascinated. It started with video games, but within a few years, I was taking our computer apart and learning how it

worked with my older brothers. A few years later, we got Internet for the first time and my exposure to America and my love of technology only grew.

I grew up happily and when I graduated high school, I got into the university in my city and at that point, I knew I wanted to be a computer engineer. I always wanted to be a network engineer or a “computer cop” as one of my classmates once said. But when I was in my second year of university, things began to change.

You probably know the story. In Tunisia people decided that they had enough of dictatorship and corruption. So the citizens rose up and they went out to the street to protest. And an amazing thing happened. They won and their dictator fled. They had free elections and they could speak their mind freely for the first time in decades. Those of us in other Arab countries watched this all on TV and online and we thought that if the Tunisians could do it, we could too. So we went out to the street and we began to protest.

But unlike the Tunisians, we were met by the regime’s security forces with live bullets and with arrests of the protest leaders and anyone speaking out against the Assad regime. Imagine seeing your friends getting killed in front of you. Within the first three months, I had quite a few friends and classmates who were killed. The other, less fortunate ones were arrested. Being arrested in Syria isn’t like being arrested in America. They don’t read you your rights and ask you if you want a lawyer. Instead they torture you and cram you in a cell with so many other people where there isn’t room to lay down. If you’re lucky, your family can pay a large bribe and get you out while you’re still a human being. And all just because we marched for freedom and democracy – the same thing we have in this great country.

But we didn’t give up. We kept protesting, in spite of the bullets and the arrests and the torture. Gradually over time, members of the Army started to join the revolutionaries and the peaceful protesters and activists started to pick up weapons along with them and fight the regime. By December of 2011, it was a full blown civil war—a couple months after this, the regime air force started dropping bombs on my city and they haven’t stopped since—and I was scared to remain in Syria. I knew the regime might be looking for me and I was afraid they would either arrest me and torture me, or force me to serve in the Army and kill my friends. So I packed a few things and I fled in the middle of the night outside my neighborhood that was under siege.

I kept traveling around the Middle East for a few months before settling down in Jordan. There I was safe and I could survive, but I couldn’t work, I couldn’t study and I basically had no future and no hope. So I got online and I started looking for scholarships for Syrian students and that’s how I found Saint Leo.

God spoke to humanity through his holy book in my faith, the Quran,

“And when your lord made it known: if you are grateful, I will certainly give you more”

Saint Leo was my ticket out of a meaningless and purposeless life in the Middle East. This Catholic liberal arts college gave me an incredible opportunity. This is a place where anyone can come from anywhere in the world and we're all treated equally, no matter where we're from or what we believe. And for this I will always be grateful.

Now, at the risk of sounding arrogant, I'm going to give my fellow graduates three pieces of advice. The first is to always maintain a wide network both within your field and outside it, so that you never miss a job opportunity and so that you're exposed to lots of varied ideas and perspectives. My fellow graduates, once you make a good reputation around you and build the right contacts then you will never need to go hunting for a job because opportunities will come to you. So when you meet someone interesting, connect with them and stay in touch. You never know when that relationship will come in handy.

The second is to find at least one thing you're passionate about and just go do it. No one is going to come knock on your door and invite you to do it. Instead, just make them stop you. That could be a job or career move, or it could be a civic or philanthropic activity.

Lastly and most importantly, we who are graduating from St. Leo today have worked hard and we should be proud of our hard work. But we've also been fortunate. Most people in most of the world—including quite a few people in this country—haven't had the same opportunities we've had to flourish. As Jesus taught us in his parable of the faithful servant, "To whomever much is given, of him much will be required." So as we move forward with our lives and careers, we should always keep in mind how fortunate we are and we should do something to make our little corner of the world a better place, whether in our careers, or in charitable or civic activities.

Before I end my speech, I would like to thank the Syrian community in the United States, and especially Doctor Ayman who is sitting between the audiences, Thank you so much.

Before I let you go, I want you to give me a big smile!

Let's go!