

The AUB—TFL Connection



Sometime in April or May, every soon-to-graduate AUB student starts hearing the same questions.

“So, what’re you going to do with that engineering degree, son?”

“Congratulations! Gonna start makin’ the big bucks with that business degree?”

“Habibti, are you planning on med school right away, or will you wait?”

Every now and then—actually, in more than 100 cases over the past four years—the grad’s response has been something like, “Well, I’m thinking about Teach For Lebanon.”

“Teach For Lebanon? What’s that? Some kind of summer internship or something?”

“Not exactly,” the grad responds, maybe a bit defensively, “It’s a two-year program where I’d get some training, then get paid to work in a poor school out in the boonies for two years, and...”

Of course, it doesn’t always work out. Not all of the more than 100 AUB grads who have applied to Teach For Lebanon since 2008 have followed through. Of those who did, only nine have been accepted, trained, and gone into the field.

That nine, though, is a pretty respectable figure, since each year more than 200 graduates from almost a dozen Lebanese universities apply, and, since 2008, only 32 have been sent to work in schools like Saida Generations—the educational arm of the Sidon Orphan Welfare Society—or public schools in Maaroub and Bakhoun, or semi-private ones in Jebrayal and Rashaya.

It’s no surprise that Teach For Lebanon—TFL to its fellows—is so attractive to AUB grads. After all, its founder and CEO, Ali Dimashkieh, is himself an AUB grad: mechanical engineering, class of ’97. There was something about Dimashkieh’s AUB experience, as there has been for almost everyone who has joined TFL, that made him consider sacrificing the big bucks and status for something else, something more meaningful.

However the specifics may differ from fellow to fellow, it always boils down to something like what motivated Dimashkieh in the first place: “I just wanted to do something to help my country. I wanted to make a difference.”

After graduation, Dimashkieh dabbled here and there before working as a cultural affairs specialist for the US Embassy, which introduced him to young people from all

around Lebanon. What these contacts taught him about the state of Lebanese education led him to contact Teach For All (TFAll), the recently established off-shoot of Teach For America, which has been sending recent graduates to teach in disadvantaged schools since 1990.

In 2008 TFL was born. Its mission was—and remains—pretty simple: to reduce educational inequality by sending passionate, well-trained recent graduates to teach in needy schools and work as “change agents,” creating innovative extracurricular programs for students and even community members.

Dimashkieh created a nine-person board of trustees (that includes AUB President Peter Dorman and two other AUB-connected members) and raised money from banks, charitable organizations, and individuals. Nuhad Dagher, then dean of the Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, was the first chairman of the TFL board. In 2008, the first cohort of 13 fresh graduates spent six weeks being trained at the Summer Institute, then dispersed to schools throughout the country.

Among the AUB grads in this cohort was Youssef Simaan. This biology major (BS ’08) headed to Halba, Akkar, where he spent two years teaching elementary school French, science, and art and working as an after-school tutor.

Was there anything about his AUB experience that set him up to apply to Teach For Lebanon?

Like many, Simaan learned some of his most valuable lessons at AUB outside the classroom, including an inspiring extracurricular opportunity the University provided: the Insight Club. The compassion and concern for others expressed by members of this club for Muslim students (which he joined although he had been raised a Christian) impressed him.

But he was also inspired by a course in the Civilization Sequence Program taught by Professor Syrine Hout.

“We talked about medieval philosophy and discussed controversial issues. I sat in the front row of every class. She made you think that teaching is so important. She was full of passion and excitement.

“My last semester, I read about TFL on Facebook. I was ready to do something for others. I’d experienced a model teacher. I applied.”

Having finished his two-year stint, Simaan is now studying for his MS in biology at the University of



AUB, **Ali Dimashkieh** says, showed him Lebanon. TFL gave him the opportunity to do something with what he had learned about his country.

“AUB has always been a small Lebanon from a political perspective. It has the whole spectrum.

“I lived in the dorms since I’m from Chtaura. This was the most intriguing part of my life. I met everybody—extreme Muslims, liberal westerners. I got a scholarship from the Hariri Foundation like many students, so we were a socio-economic mix.

“I attended the meetings of all the political parties—I decided I couldn’t work with any party, but I had to get along with all of them. I knew I didn’t want to join politics, but I wanted to do something that mattered.

“I came to AUB in ’92. We didn’t know what we wanted, but the civil war was over, and everything was fresh and hopeful.”

Years later, while working with youth from all around Lebanon as cultural affairs specialist for the American Embassy, he decided that improving education could be a way to implement some of the ideals he had picked up at AUB.

“Just after the 2006 war, I got the idea of Teach For Lebanon. I tried to find someone to launch the program, but couldn’t find anyone. So I did it myself.”

Balamand while teaching science part-time at a nearby school.

Another first-cohort member, Riham Miri, has come full circle. This environmental health major taught math and English at Saida Generations School and has returned to AUB to work on her MS in health promotion and community health.

Miri also was inspired by many aspects of AUB life. At the Latino Club she learned enough about dancing to integrate it into her teaching. A local needs assessment conducted for a health behavior and education course got her interested in kids and education.

Her TFL work now informs how she thinks about her studies.

“I’ve had three courses from the head of the department, Jihad Makhoul, and she has changed

my whole outlook. She’s helped me see that if you want to solve a health problem, you have to address the larger social issues.”

Miri wants to stay in Lebanon and help a school deal with its problems in a holistic fashion, assessing student and community needs, then developing programs that address such complex realities.

Then there’s Nadim Haidar. After a gap year, this 2011 political studies graduate recently headed off to Jebrayel, Akkar, where he’s teaching English (grades 3, 4, and 11), writing (grades 9-11), and music (grades 1-6).

A 2010 Penrose Award winner, Haidar is no stranger to idealism. At AUB he was involved in several activities including protests against tuition hikes and, off-campus, in efforts to protect domestic workers’ rights.

A number of AUB professors influenced Haidar, including political science Professor Bashir Saade, who, Haidar says, “challenged a lot of traditional theories. He changed how I see myself as a Lebanese. I realized that I had rejected myself, and had to come to terms with the tensions between different aspects of myself.”

Deciding that time in the United States would help him further clarify such issues, he worked as a janitor in a small café in Montana and participated in several “Occupy” actions. Somewhere along the way, he decided two things: 1) to come back to Lebanon; and 2) to narrow the focus of his efforts.

“I decided to do something where I could see progress, to accept that progress might be small, but it would be real.”

So there he is, just south of the Syrian border, trying to “make a difference.”

Just as 2010 public administration graduate Hassan Issa was inspired to do in the same school for two years after being



Riham Miri



Nadim Haidar

“At AUB,” **Farah Bayoumi** says, “we all had this urge to change something. We wanted to actually do something, to work to improve the society. AUB is a microcosm of Lebanon, and it welcomes the victims of corruption and oppression.

“I had seen, as a child in public school, how poverty and corruption could affect education.

“Then I studied corruption in the public sector in my classes. My professor [Hiba Khodor] compared what was in the books with reality, not just theory. She told us to do things in the real world, asking how we could actually change things.

“TFL came along and said, ‘We want to deal with corruption and the problems in the schools.’ So I decided to try it.”

confronted by AUB political science Professor Mara Kolessas. She criticized his wearing a Ché Guevara T-shirt without understanding, as Issa says, “that this shirt was probably made in China in factories just like the ones Ché was fighting.

“AUB,” he continues, “helped me think about ideas like equality and human rights. The TFL concept of helping others who can’t help themselves fit with that.”

So, just as AUB prepared many of its graduates to consider taking on the kind of work TFL offered TFL has influenced how these young people think about their next steps.


AUB’s influence on 2008 public administration graduate Farah Bayoumi was direct. Following public administration Professor Hiba Khodor’s admonition that her students work to reform the “real world,” rather than lingering in the world of theory, she joined TFL, worked at Saida Generations School, taught there for another year, and now works as head of the Human Resources Department for the school’s parent organization, the Sidon Orphan Welfare Society.

Rana Saleh, a 2008 nutrition and dietetics graduate, is working on her MBA at AUB after spending two years teaching science and math in Maaroub.

“TFL provided me with lots of experience,” she says. “I had never expected to like teaching. I enjoyed teaching and am surprised that while I was searching for jobs before starting my graduate studies, I kept on looking for careers that combined teaching and nutrition.”

Bayoumi is still working in her TFL school, doing her best to implement the ideals she picked up at AUB; Haidar has moved from battling in in the streets of Ras

Since 2011, the AUB-Teach For Lebanon Graduate Scholarships have provided full tuition support to graduate students recommended by TFL who meet AUB admission requirements. Graduate students must have served two years in TFL.

Beirut and Oakland to the classrooms of Jebrayel; Miri and Issa and all the others are doing their best to integrate that desire to “make a difference” into their adult lives, and the lives of those with whom they work. 

—Nicholas Boke

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Minerva Faddoul, who began her master’s in clinical psychology at AUB after finishing her two years with TFL, grew up in Jos, Nigeria. Moving to her family’s northern village after graduating from high school, she earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Balamand.

“After graduating, I applied to AUB’s Clinical Psychology Program. Then I heard about TFL, and thought, why not go into something where I could get some experience, and also get to know my country better, get involved, make a difference?”

“I got into TFL, went to teach in Bakhoun, and realized this was the thing to do.

“Now I’ve picked up where I left off, except that I don’t want to be a clinical psychologist; I want to be a school psychologist. The conditions I saw in Bakhoun can be generalized all across Lebanon—many academic problems have psychological roots.

“I’m enrolled in Research 301 now, as preparation for my thesis. I’m looking into children and the problems of rural education. I’m hoping to do some research in the school where I taught.

“The AUB program is helping me see the flaws in what I did as a teacher, in the way I assessed, the things I didn’t understand. I always used to remind myself of the needs of the kids, but now I’m seeing more of what I might have done to meet those needs.”