

Graduation Message to the MENA Class of 2021 from Nora Sharba

Congratulations to all of my fellow graduates! Needless to say, we have endured a lot this year, but regardless, I hope you all are as excited as I am to begin the next chapter of our lives.

I came to the university inspired, with one goal in mind, one dream, one path. I figured I'd make some memories along the way but the end goal was to get my degree and continue on a path I thought was set from the day I wanted to be a doctor. Instead, over the last three years, I had no idea where I was going or what I was doing most of the time.

See, what I didn't expect to happen was self-discovery, or at least the start of it. I knew my Middle Eastern identity made me different from those around me, as it had been my whole life, and I didn't expect that to change in college. I knew I was a minority but it never crossed my mind that I would even have the opportunity to meet a community of people that were like me. And because of that, I neglected the impact of my identity on who I was, let alone who I would become. In my journey to get a degree, I feel like I circled the world finding myself along the way, and gaining inspiration from those around me.

I know that everyone may not have that same experience. Frankly, one thing I naively didn't expect when I became part of the Arab community was that there would be so many unique experiences.

The Middle East and North Africa is comprised of multiple languages and dialects, dozens of ethnicities, and a variety of religions. On top of that, we were all raised differently, whether it was the city you grew up in, the number of people you lived with, and the way we choose to express our culture.

Overall, there is no singular defined way to be from the MENA region. However, despite our differences, we are united by our similarities. Our hospitality, great taste in food, tendency to talk a little louder than most, big friend groups that are like family, and a few other things I'm missing for sure. We all have amazing stories to tell, influenced by our heritage and upbringing, but it never tells the whole story.

Sometimes we are guilty of making assumptions about others character, beliefs, and practices based on their country of origin, religion, or ethnic identity, in the same way that assumptions are made about all people of the MENA region.

While I may be the only Arab Syrian Ismaili woman from West Bloomfield at the university, that isn't how I would want to be defined as or judged by, and it does not nearly describe my character. If we uplift each other, empower the voices of our community, we can collectively work together to create opportunities for ourselves and the younger generations that will follow in our footsteps.

Those who came before us gave us the opportunity to celebrate our graduation together, to identify as MENA on university forms, to bring the MENA identity into spaces where it was suppressed before. They worked to make sure our voices were heard. That we were not invisible on this campus. That our needs are acknowledged, and we have the ability to advocate for ourselves.

Before I came to Michigan, I felt that my identity wasn't important, that it was something to hide, and not bring into the spaces I was a part of. I cowered away from cultural expression, fearing that I would never fit in anywhere if I was different.

My community made me proud, outspoken, and empowered, which is why I dedicated my college career to make sure that those who follow can gain the same self-discovery that I had. And every day I reflect on how differently my life might be if I didn't put off studying to go dancing in the diag with people I hardly knew, or spent a semester pledging an Arab sorority, or get roped into hosting the Arab Xpressions after-party, among other quick decisions my freshman year that changed the course of my college career.

Being part of such a diverse community taught me to fight for the world I want to see, to be myself, and most importantly, to surround myself with people that will do the same.

As we continue on our separate paths, we will all carry our MENA identity with us, proudly and strongly. Congratulations again to all of you, and forever, GO BLUE!