



Address of Rev. Fr. Georges Hobeika

Launching of the Special-Needs Friendly City (SNFC) Project

December 2, 2016

Your Excellency, Mrs. Ambassador, Dear Deans, Professors and Colleagues, my dearest students,

Today, we are launching the Special-Needs Friendly City (SNFC) project, an initiative that can make its authors and coordinators really proud (that can make us all proud) and that mirrors our endeavors (USEK and the US embassy) to uphold human value and human dignity.

Diversity is a main component of our 21st Century world, quite paradoxically, the more a society is diverse, the more it realizes that differences shouldn't matter and that every one of us holds a great one-of-a-kind value that would add to the world human capital and human wealth. In the end, our "humanness" through our diversified values supersedes anything else we can be.

Yet, even if differences should not be a pretext to categorize people and change our behaviors accordingly, they should always be acknowledged. As educators, students, members of staff, and ultimately citizens, we should always be aware that not all of us have the same facilities when it comes to what we consider as natural. This is why such an awareness would make us more conscious of an omnipresent otherness and would make us value what we have and what we don't have. It is for this very same reason that I consider disability to be a richness of and to our societies. It offers us new perspectives on what we have always been doing since we were born. It forces us to think of simple movements of our daily life: Opening a door, crossing the road, watching a video, listening to music... Going to class. These are just examples of small actions of our everyday routine that we have always taken for granted. However, when we interact with people with special needs, whether our colleagues, students, neighbors or families, we must enter a new realm of thinking. We must breakdown our mechanisms and reflexes to apprehend their inherent, but concealed, complexities. Then, it is our duty to adapt our surrounding infrastructures to alleviate these complexities, in concertation of course with the concerned people, as nobody knows the expectations of people with disabilities better than themselves. Thanks to projects like this SNFC, we reflect, we act, we

induce change and we acknowledge that society can really reach its full potential by integrating all humans regardless of their differences....

The initiation of this project by USEK Students and the Lebanese Youth in Community Action Group, gives it yet more depth. Who but young people can foster the best environments possible for all of us to live harmoniously, today, tomorrow and for the many years to come?

Our event today sheds light not only on the value but also on the quality of our life. Ensuring a special needs friendly environment is not a privilege or a treat, ensuring a special needs friendly environment is a right and a pillar of the human dignity.

I am positive that when the plan for such an environment saw the light, the reason behind it was to make our cities worthy of their people with special needs. With that in mind, I would like to thank all the people involved in this brilliant and much needed initiative: The Embassy of the United States in Lebanon, for its invaluable trust and the countless opportunities offered to USEK, the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities headed by its Dean Fr. Jean Reaidy and particularly the Department of Social Sciences, chaired by Dr. Mirna Mzawak for her unique ideas and indefectible commitment, and, of course, all of you, students and young adults who take time from your busy schedules to work on creating a better world.