

Mary Abu Kalam: Employee at LAU

(Born in 1935, in Hasbayya; currently living in Beirut. Recorded at LAU. Language: Ms. Abu Kalam used occasional classical words in mainly colloquial Arabic speech, suggesting the seriousness with which she took the task of telling about her life at 'the College'.)



I am Mary Adib Abou Kalam from Hasbayya. Born in 1935. We had neighbors from the Dabaghi family, and Najla Dabaghi was in charge of everything in Beirut University College (BUC). She - my brother went to the college first. In the beginning we have to talk about Najla Dabaghi in order to be able to talk about myself. Najla Dabaghi was in charge of everything in the school - selling, buying, everything - she and Mr. Stoltzfus. My brother went to work at the college. I was very much attached to him. I stopped eating and drinking. My mother asked Najla

Dabaghi, "Will you take this girl? Haram, she can't stay without her brother." Najla said, "They won't accept her. She's too young." One day she came and told my mother, "Come on, get her ready." In those days there was -- let 's not say that there was poverty, there was financial need.

So my mother took me to my brother. He was sixteen and I was fourteen. I felt really happy, I no longer wanted to stay with my parents in the mountains. When I first came the College I was welcomed by a woman called Nelly Francis. She was like a mother, she took care of me and trained me. But my first mother was Najla Dabaghi. She took care of me. My mother had asked her not to let me go anywhere. Whatever I wanted, she let me buy. I rented a bicycle. She told me that everything I need - chocolates or whatever -- was in the college. But - I used to invent needs so as to go out - I was a child. I couldn't use the bicycle unless I took her permission.

Ghena: So you tried to fool them?

Mary: No I didn't. I asked her, "Please let me go out." I was a child. They opened a kindergarden in which the Americans could put their children, and I was like a baby-sitter. Later there were more children. Everyone wanted to bring his children. It was a small room. In BUC in those days, there was only a villa, Sage Hall, Nicol Hall, and a small room for the kindergarden. I used to play with the children. They couldn't ask me to do other work, I was too young. Later they started to give me work. We had thirty women students in the college, no, sixty students. We

got up early everyday to feed these students and we washed dishes in a sink (laughs). They had to put a stool for me to stand on because I was so short and young. After that I played in the nursery till noon time, the children and I. Then every couple came and took their children and I went up to work in the college. They taught me how to work because at the beginning I didn't know.

So Najla Dabaghi told me -- you have to write about Najla Dabaghi. Build her up! She is our neighbor, she may read this. She told me, "Mary, go and take this milk bottle to the president." Oh! I forgot to tell you, the moment I came to college I was received by Mrs Nelly and someone else called Mrs Johnson. She took me to the market, bought me shoes, a dress and hair bands. Everyday she came, she took care of me and gave me a lesson in English and Arabic - no, not Arabic - English - so I could speak to her. There were many Americans. Oh, I don't remember all their names. Every year new Americans came. They didn't bring Arabs very often. There was Mrs Bweiri and Mrs Najjar, but they were very old. There was Noura, in the evening she was everyone's mother. I worked in the nursery with the children. I was the first one to work in this nursery. I was a housekeeper for the children. Later the American children increased. So they sent us someone called Miss Saydah. I worked with Miss. Saydah for ten years. I started with a salary LL10 a month. Write that!

One day Najla Dabaghi told me, "Mary, go take this milk bottle to the president." I thought, "Oh! how can I meet the president without putting on some make-up?" So I went to the nursery and brought the 'red medicine'. I smeared it on my face, and brought what they call 'shash' (bandage). I braided my hair and tied it with the bandage. As I was going out I took the milk bottle. I looked like a 'Barbara' mask (laughs). I went out. The college in those days was filled with prickly pears. Write that! There weren't as many buildings as today. It was mainly prickly pears and pine trees. As I was going, there was a pathway inside the college that takes you to

the upper gate. As I was going along, the bottle fell and broke. I started crying. The president called them to ask about the milk. They told him they had sent the bottle with Mary. He came and found me. He said, "Mary, you're very young. How could they send you to do such work? Why are you crying?" I told him, "The woman in charge will shout at me." So he took me to her and told her, "Please don't scold Mary, because she's very young." He took a photo of me here on the road. He wanted the milk because the Americans were going up to 'Ainab. They used

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because I was so young"*

to rent a home there. They were all Americans there, no Arabs (laughs). The president treated me kindly like a daughter. He liked me a lot, but not in the way that people may think. He took care of me and taught me and asked others to teach me.

Then I started to work. They gave me rooms to look after. I used to make the beds in the teachers' rooms. That was my new work, and I went to the kindergarden at midday. We were responsible for the dorms as well. There were thirty girls. We used to go to the dining room to give the girls their meals. I should say what they gave the girls for breakfast, shouldn't I? In the dining room, there were twenty tables. We laid the tables in the morning, at noon time and in the evening. We gave the girls their food and we washed the dishes. Later when there were ninety students, they brought us eight workers from 'Ain Zibdeen, men and women. They helped us.

Before Najla Dabaghi left they brought Mr Hajjar to the college. They introduced him to us because he was going to be in charge. This Mr Hajjar was a very good man. He liked the workers and gave them a lot of attention. Write this! He preferred me to the other workers, and felt sorry for me because I was a young girl - not that he preferred me in that manner, I considered him like a father. Whatever happened to me I went and told him. My parents weren't close to me, so I went and told him. Najla Dabaghi left, and he replaced her. Whatever happened to me, whatever anyone said to me, I went and told him, and he listened.

Then my father came and worked here in the college. He worked here for about twenty years, and my brother for twenty eight years. My father, brother, and I worked here in the college. Ah, I forgot to tell you that before my father came, my brother said, "Let's go and see Beirut." Can I tell this?

Ghena: Of course. I want you to tell me all about yourself.

Mary: Yes, before that, the first month I came to the college, there was a woman, Mrs Beech. Write Mrs Beech! This Mrs Beech was in her room. I was a young girl, I didn't know that I had to knock on the door to go in to give her the blankets. So Mrs Beech locked me in the toilet till noon-time. This story should come after the one when I broke the milk bottle. I went on screaming till noon-time. They looked for me but couldn't find me. At noon-time she let me out. When they saw me they asked me where I had been. I told them I was locked in the toilet. Najla Dabaghi got really upset.

I went to the gate and told my brother that they lock people up in this school. I said we should leave. He went before me, he got on the tram, and I followed later. I was washing dishes, I couldn't leave before. I took a taxi. I didn't know that a taxi is different from a 'service'. A 'service' then cost fifteen piasters. "Where are you going?" I told him, "To Al-Nouriyeh market" (laughs). All the way people were calling 'taxi!' 'service!' and

he didn't stop to take any passengers. I felt afraid. I put my hand on the door. He asked me, "Where are you going, young girl?" I told him, "To the Burj." Before I got down he told me to pay him. So I opened my purse. I had 25 piasters. I gave them to him. He told me, "No, I want LL1." I told him, "I've only got twenty five piasters so you'd better take them." I met my brother there. Our aunt brought us back to the college. She did not allow us to return on our own. We would have got lost because we were new in Beirut. Our aunt told us, "Come on! Why did you get upset? They must be looking for you everywhere." My aunt was a wise woman. She brought us back to the college and we were scolded by Najla Dabaghi.

"The College in those days was all prickly pears and pine trees"

The following Sunday, my brother told me that we wanted to see Beirut. It was his idea. We had a break every Sunday. We went to the Manara, and started to throw stones at the sea. You know, we were just children. We walked and threw stones till we reached the port area. Then my brother said that we should start returning. We went from the port area and reached Sakiet al-Janzeer. In those days it was all prickly pears. There were no buildings. When we got there we started crying. An old man saw us and asked us, "Where are you going?" We told him, "To the university." He took us to the American University. My brother told him, "No, not this university." So he brought us to the College. We arrived at ten o'clock at night, after they had been looking for us everywhere.

The first incident was the milk bottle incident, the second was when I was locked in the toilet and ran away with my brother to our aunt's place, and the third incident was when we went to see Beirut and got lost. Beirut, ya Beirut!

After a while they closed the kindergarden, and I started to work in Irwin Hall. They wanted to build a building. I went back to work in the dorms. In those days many events were held in the college and we had a lot of work. There were no machines for cleaning the floor. Later, they expanded the kitchen. Najla Dabaghi left and they expanded the kitchen. This big building was constructed, Shannon Hall, Orme Grey building. We worked. What shall we write? It's all work.

Ghena: You haven't told me about your family or personal life. Mary: Well many men proposed to me. Yes, really, many men proposed to me. I turned some down, some my parents turned down because -- in the past parents liked to let their daughter work to help them out financially. They wanted to keep the girl to help them in their old age.

Ghena: What else?

Mary: Women came to the college from Kuwait, Iraq. After I'd been here for a long time, they called me and said, "You have to take care of the girls, take them to their rooms, guide them." They chose me because some of the girls came from Kuwait,

Mary Abu Kalam

Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Abu Dhabi. They said, "Mary, go with the girls, take good care of them." I was the one chosen to show them their rooms and tell them about everything. In the past, whenever someone telephoned one of the girls, we had to go upstairs to tell her. Whenever a girl wanted to take a bath -- Oh, how stupid I am, I should have mentioned these things at the beginning. In the past there wasn't hot water in the dorms. Every day one of us had to go and light the primus. She heated water for them. Every day three or four girls took a bath, they couldn't have a bath everyday, only once every three or four days. Everyday at four o'clock, tea was served. Everyday one of us had to serve tea to the American teachers. They wanted to drink tea at four o'clock. We took care of them. There was a rule for washing clothes downstairs. We went down and sorted the blankets. We sorted them according to names. Everyone wrote her name on her clothes. Students used to have their clothes washed at the college. They liked to have parties, 'carnivals', they brought fortune tellers. They had many parties, and at the end of each year they held a graduation ceremony. Up to today they hold this ceremony. The school gave a lot of attention to these things, and we participated in this too. When there were formal dinners they told me, "Mary, you should get properly dressed". They used to have us wear a 'formal costume,' [in English] pleated caps, and a black and white dress, with white sleeves and gloves, and white shoes

and socks. This is what the woman who served at table wore. They stopped this because Najla Dabaghi was the one who gave attention to these matters. She was a very elegant lady. She didn't want the workers to look untidy in the dining room. Write this please! Yes, let people know about this. Today the workers' clothes are not neat. They used to sew us navy blue dresses with white collars, and bordeaux dresses. They used to bring us a tailor to sew our dresses. Write this please, this is most important! Write this so that the college will know that much more attention was given to the workers' appearance in the past. I want to shame them, they're bringing us such cheap material. See how neat the clothing in the section at

Jbeil is! They brought them shorts and T-shirts on which they wrote 'LAU' and put two wheat ears as symbols. Very neat. And see what they wear in winter--tights and neat sweaters. You can't tell the workers from the students. Don't be upset! Here, we have several religions. You'd find one woman who wants to put on the veil, some want to wear very long dresses which get easily dirty. In Jbeil they are all one religion. In the past we had three or four religions on campus, but we all wore the same costume. In the past, when there was an evening occasion, we wore hats. Write this! Write how we wore black dresses with white collars. That was how we dressed on formal occasions. Now they give us one dress which we wear when we're cleaning



the toilet or receiving people. Write that they aren't neat. Let them read. What else can I tell you?

Ghena: You haven't told me much about your family.

Mary: I don't see them everyday. I see you more than I see them. I have a sister who lives in Hasbayya. She's married. I have two other married sisters. My sisters are all fine, thank God. My brother is in America. When my brother left the College, they gave him a silver tray

as a thank-you to my father. My father worked here in the College for twenty years. All the 'mobilia' of the Orme Grey Hall was made by my father. Since I came to Irwin Hall I have been in charge of it, before that I was in charge of Shannon Hall. I survived many events. People came and went. Eventually, I ended up in this College having heart surgery. Write that I ended up with heart surgery and a good reputation.

We have to write that I was called to witness the putting of every cornerstone in this college except for Nicol Hall and Sage



Hall. They made a party and thanked Mary Abu Kalam for her presence. When you write the introduction, write that whenever they established a building, Mary came, she was young, and she stood next to Mr Stoltzfus and Mrs Grey. They made a party each time, and Mary came and served the tea, food, and drinks. Not that I was the only one, all the workers came. Write that the faculty apartments building was a garbage heap (laughs). Also the Fine Arts was on a garbage heap. Write that the girls were not allowed to go out. A girl who was about to graduate had to be on campus by six o'clock and the one who had a BA had to be back by seven o'clock. They used to knock on our doors in the evening so that we'd open the door for them. Write this in

the introduction. One forgets to mention certain things. Girls were not allowed to smoke. Once girls came to smoke in my room. They said, "Mary, you are a worker, they won't punish you". They burnt the room. They burnt all of Nicol Hall. Oh no! I shouldn't say it, they might deduct this from my compensation money.

Ghena: This happened a long time ago. Presidents have changed since then.

Mary: Yes, they brought cigarettes to Mary's room. They bought cigarettes for ten piasters and everyone of them took a smoke (laughs). They said, "Mary, you can't be kicked out of the college. We want to smoke in your room." They sent me to the market to buy cigarettes for ten piasters and each one of them took a puff (laughs). One day Miss Haddad knocked on my door to say everyone should go to the dining room for lunch. I went to the dining room, and the girls threw the cigarettes in the waste paper basket. The waste paper basket was next to the curtains. The paper caught fire, the curtains caught fire, and the whole building caught fire. All of the girls' clothes got burnt. I didn't have clothes. I had one dress only. I had some jewelry which turned to ashes and my LL10 monthly salary. They [the students] told me later, "We will buy you clothes. Don't tell the college about us. Tell them, I smoked because I was upset, my cousin died (laughs). We'll take you and buy you clothes." They never bought me clothes. My parents bought me a dress later. I didn't tell the College about them. I took the blame and the College compensated them, and did not compensate me for the clothes I lost, or my salary. The College paid everyone of them LL1000, and they paid me nothing. Because I told them that I set fire to the room. In those days if a girl was found smoking she'd be suspended from the College.

Ghena: All the building was burnt?

Mary: Not all of it. Just the floor in which my room was. They brought the fire engine to put the fire out. Nicol Hall had two floors then. In those days three girls worked in every corridor. Today one woman works in the whole building. Write! (She laughs) In the past in every corridor three girls. Today I work alone in this building. In the past four or five girls worked with me. Today I am alone. The number of workers is too little compared to past days. Today the college is bigger. Now everyone has an office and two sitting rooms (laughs). My God, how much this college has changed!

Ghena: Was the College nicer in the past?

Mary: Yes, it was nicer in the past. It's true there wasn't much money but people were satisfied with what they earned.

Ghena: You earn more now?

Mary: I earn more now. After forty nine years. In the past I took LL10 and bought a lot. Now I earn LL1, 500,000 and I can't buy anything. Write this please.

Do you know what I told the president in my speech on Labor Day? I represent the workers here - because I'm old - I told him, "Dr Riad Nassar, Gentlemen, I would like to start my speech in the name of my co-workers. We congratulate you as president of the Lebanese American University. We thank God for your presence, you are a precious jewel." Then I told him that we hope he will continue the path which he has started, helping LAU to become one of the most successful educational institutions in Lebanon." May God extend your life and time in leading this institute." All the presidents were good with me.

Say that Mary loves the College. Her voice is always heard because she grew up in the College. Her voice is loud because she's very passionate about her work, that's why she keeps shouting. Explain to them. She likes the College more than her own house. And now she's really upset because she's about to retire. I'm not working for money. I like the College because I grew up in it.

Ghena: Tell me more about your parents?

Mary: My family is very good, it's very respected. My father had a rank of an engineer. My mother worked at home. She was a housewife. She had many children. She did everything with her own hands. She brought water from the spring, she went and washed in the river. She brought up a big family. Now you have written about four or five pages. Please write them in chronological manner.

Ghena: Do you feel that your life would have been different had you lived in a place other than Lebanon?

Mary: I haven't tried. Well, yes, I've traveled. Say that I've been to London, I stayed there for a month. I've been to Kuwait for a month and Paris for fifteen days. I went to Canada once for a month and another time for three months. I attended my nephew's wedding. And I'm going again next year. I lived in Canada, but I didn't like the life there. There no one speaks to others. Everyone lives on his own. God created the world so that people could talk to each other. When I was in Canada, I was locked inside my brother's house. We went and invited our neighbor to come and drink coffee. She wanted to call the police because we were disturbing her. God! how can one live on his own? The first time I went to Canada I didn't enjoy it. The second time my brother and his wife were retired. Every day they took me to a new place. I thought it was nice, but nice for a vacation, not nice for living. Here I visit you and you visit me.

Recorded and translated by Ghena Ismail

End Notes

1. Saint Barbara was an early Christian Saint on her feast day children wear masks like those of Halloween.

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