

Opening Ceremony of the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, American University in Cairo, March 6th, 2006

Remarks by Dr. Barbara Ibrahim, Gerhart Center Director

We are honored today to welcome to the American University in Cairo our distinguished keynote speaker, HH Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Missned of Qatar, members of the Qatari royal family, honorable members of the Egyptian cabinet, respected heads of international and regional organizations, presidents of sister universities, members of the Egyptian business and civil society community, students, faculty, staff, and friends of AUC.

Philanthropy is a large word with a long history in our region. In its Greek origin it means love of humanity. Modern use of philanthropy is narrower: giving from private wealth to serve a worthy public cause. Most people think of charity or relieving the suffering of the poor or needy. But in the Muslim tradition there is a strong element of social justice in giving. The Holy Quran says:

“In your good fortune is an entitled portion that is the right of the deprived.”

The roots of social justice philanthropy reach back even farther into our Hellenic and Christian traditions, and are tied to the goals of education. Aristotle wrote:

“We learn justice by the practice of just actions.....”

Whether by giving wealth, or time, or talents, people across the Arab region are today actively creating more public space to participate. They seek new ways to work collectively to reduce inequalities and reform their societies. That growing movement across the Arab region is captured in the phrase “civic engagement”.

In that spirit, today the American University in Cairo is launching the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement. Its mission is to mobilize the resources of an urban liberal arts university so that AUC becomes a source of innovation -- for deeper civic engagement and for enhanced philanthropy. We join a growing number of organizations in the

Arab region motivated by an understanding of social justice philanthropy that is:

- locally generated and globally aware
- addresses root causes as well as the visible signs of problems in society, and
- mobilizes people without exclusion to participate in building the communities they want and deserve.

At AUC we are beginning with programs to create partnerships between our students and faculty and local communities engaged in development work. As our students learn and serve, we believe that they will deepen their understanding of inequality, poverty and injustice and build skills to become effective agents of social change.

AUC is privileged to serve in the Arab world, a region with deep traditions of public giving, generosity, and compassion for those in need. Individual giving, rooted in religious tradition, is strong today. But the historically important forms of institutionalized philanthropy, such as *awqaf*, have not been reinvented in our time.

The Gerhart Center will support and extend the work of leaders around the region who are building endowments, foundations (*mu'asasat*) and similar philanthropic institutions for change. We are privileged to have some of those individuals with us for the opening ceremony today. You are using your human and financial resources to develop your communities, to expand education, fight intolerance among groups or sects, reduce inequalities for women, for youth, minorities and the poor -- and we salute you.

The world is at a troubling juncture, where East and West vilify the other, anger replaces reason, and stereotypes are hardening. It is a moment to highlight and strengthen the many progressive Arab organizations at work to build an open, just and caring society. AUC dedicates the Gerhart Center to those ideals, and to joining hands with all of you in this important endeavor.

Let me now introduce Dr. Gail Gerhart. The Gerhart Center is named for her husband, John D. Gerhart, a man who embodied a life of active civic engagement. Dr. Gerhart was the 9th president of AUC. During his tenure

from 1998 to 2002 he brought community service and service learning to the fore as a core value of the liberal arts education offered at AUC.

Dr. Gail Gerhart is his wife and lifelong partner, first when they were student volunteers in Africa and later in their professional lives in Botswana, Kenya, Egypt, New York and South Africa. Gail is a historian and leading published expert on the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa -- and a true friend and supporter of AUC. She currently heads the Institute for African Studies at Columbia University in New York. We are delighted that she could be with us for this occasion and to speak on behalf of the Gerhart family.