



THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

Azza Fahmy

Chairwoman and Creative Director
Azza Fahmy Jewellery

Honorary Degree Recipient and
Undergraduate Commencement Speaker
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Azza Fahmy is one of the most successful and innovative Egyptian designers of all time. She has been a distinguished ambassador of Egyptian culture and arts, as well as one of Egypt's most influential women.

Fahmy was born and raised in Sohag in Upper Egypt and later received her Bachelor of Arts in interior design from Cairo University. She then changed her path and became one of the first female apprentices to several of the best jewelers in Cairo's famous Khan El Khalili district. Fahmy's work was recognized in the mid-1970s when the British Council offered her a fellowship to study jewelry craft in the City of London Polytechnic. Soon after, she set up her first workshop with two employees and began her journey to become an international symbol of Egyptian art and design.

Fahmy's work has always drawn from the culture and heritage of Egypt and, eventually, the world. One of her first collections, Houses of the Nile, foreshadowed her constant efforts to put often-overlooked aspects of Egyptian life at the forefront of her art. She pioneered the concept of intellectual jewelry carrying Arabic poems and proverbs that celebrate the works of the greats from the Arab world, which eventually led to a timeless calligraphy trend in the region that has served as an inspiration to many others. Fahmy expanded her work through fashion, as well as cultural and educational partnerships, by collaborating with Julien Macdonald at London Fashion Week in 2006 and with Justin Thornton and Thea Bregazzi at New York Fashion Week in February 2010. In early 2012, she worked with the British Museum to create a custom collection for its exhibition titled *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*, which invoked historic reflections inspired by the hajj pilgrimage and sacraments.

Fahmy has used her skills and experience gained over the years not only to further her own brand, but also to foster the future of young and aspiring jewelers through the establishment of The Design Studio by Azza Fahmy, in partnership with the Alchimia Contemporary Jewellery School in Florence in early 2013. The studio, which serves as a jewelry vocational school, is the first establishment of its kind in Egypt and the Middle East, positioning Egypt to be an international hub for the region's jewelry design.

What makes Azza Fahmy's designs so captivating and popular is the pride she takes in Egyptian culture and heritage, in addition to the efforts she makes to represent them with depth to the international community. Her passion for her work shines through her choices in design and the ways in which she seeks to extend her experiences to the world around her.

Azza Fahmy

Thank you President Thomas for this warm introduction.

I am honored to be among you all on your big day.

It gives me great pleasure that my words can hopefully inspire your journey to come.

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Nothing compares to what's ahead.

You may not realize it, but you are all one step closer to your dream.

Let me tell you one thing: Nothing is impossible and that all your dreams can, in fact, come true.

You want to know the secret? Let me share, through my journey, eight very valuable life lessons with you.

Lesson number one: Find your passion and purpose in life.

In 1969, I started my journey to becoming one of the most recognized jewelry designers in the region and it all started with a book discovery that changed my life.

For eight years, I worked in a governmental position.

I was constantly searching for something I could be passionate about. I was hoping to find something to love without a doubt.

I tried different things until one day I came across a German book about Medieval Jewelry at the first international book fair in Cairo.

The book was written in German, but it came alive to me through its pictures.

It sparked something in me.

I had no doubt this is my destiny.

I bought the book with all of my savings and told myself that this is the book that is going to change my life.

I tell myself how lucky I am to have discovered what I love. Everything I did, I did with passion.

So, find yours!

Lesson number two: Believe in yourself

I never doubted where I would end. I remember always telling my Aunt Safeya, “One day you will see my name in the headlines.”

Jewelery design at the time was a very male-dominated field. But this did not hold me back.

I wanted to learn the craft first-hand. I went to Khan El Khalili and started introducing myself to the workshops there and I was accepted in one.

I put on my overalls, tied my hair back and started learning the basics of techniques on the hands of one of its masters El Hajj Sayed; a petite religious man. He was very forward-thinking to have taken a university graduate like me as an apprentice.

I was doing something so unheard of that it even took my family some time to fully understand it and support it. Today, Hajj Sayed hangs my pictures up on his wall as a proud master.

I desired this so badly, there was a cosmic support as people went out of their way to help a woman who normally would not receive this much opportunity.

Keep believing in yourself!

Lesson number three: You don't need a big capital to start your business.

I started with a very small capital of three Egyptian pounds to buy my material with.

The first pieces I sold for fifteen Egyptian pounds — big revenue for a woman in the late 60's.

I bought more material with my revenue and started creating more pieces and making more revenue.

You don't need money to achieve your dream.

All you need is dedication!

Lesson number four: Be patient and never stop learning.

There came a point when I would face technical difficulties and would ask my master in Khan El Khalili but he wouldn't be able to help me. My creativity has become much more advanced than his own practice.

I reached out to the British Council and was offered a six month grant to study at the London Polytechnic.

I went to London and finished in six months what students would finish in two years. I was like a sponge and was so eager to learn.

I realized how learning with a teacher differed from learning with a craftsman. The teacher taught me scientifically how to approach any design that could come to mind. He taught me that the sky is the limit and that was the kick-start to my creativity.

London opened my mind. I came back with wider horizons and even bigger dreams. I opened my first workshop during the early 1970s and my first shop in 1981.

I never thought in that moment that, 45 years later, the one craftsmen will turn into 200 and the one shop will turn into 19 outlets worldwide.

We all have to start somewhere.

So keep dreaming.

Lesson number five: Your dreams will get bigger but so will your challenges.
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The brand grew as my sense of purpose grew. I loved designing, but all of a sudden I was bound to split my time between designing, growing the business and also handling my duties as a mother. I had to adapt from a one woman show to a structured business in order for us to cope with the growth.

The transition from a workshop to an institution needed to be made. This was when my craft shifted into becoming an industry.

I soon recognized that I needed the right team with the right skills that I could trust to help me reach my ambitions. Soon enough, I had completed the circle with a strong base of consultants and a strong team of craftsmen to cater to our ever-growing demand. One thing led to the other to bring us where we are today.

Take every challenge as an opportunity.

Learn to trust and empower others.

This is the only way you can achieve more.

Lesson number six: Once you find your purpose, develop it and never lose it. As an intellectual woman myself, all this led me to developing my concept of “intellectual jewelery.”

With a profound sense of determination, I took on the role of translating universal heritage and cultures to the world, and especially those originating from my hometown Egypt. I wanted to make sure I preserved research and ancient craftsmanship within my work.

I wanted to make sure this know-how was never lost for hundreds of generations to come so I built an educational system within my workshop, developed the craft and married it with technology.

I took pride in my research travels across Egypt and other parts of the world and launched an academic book celebrating Egyptian jewelery and now I’m working on my Ottoman one.

By the mid 2000s, we won international recognition, but even then, our purpose stayed strong and continues to set us apart from everyone else.

I stayed true to the artist and academic in me ever since I set out in 1969.

Always stay true to yourself.

Innovate and don’t follow.

Find your edge in life and differentiate yourself from others.

Lesson number seven: Give back and make a change.

Giving back was another great passion of mine. Back then when I started, I did not have much opportunity. There are many cases like me today who wish to have the support I struggled to receive.

So I partnered up with Alchimia Contemporary Jewellery School in Florence to establish The Design Studio by Azza Fahmy with the aim of educating hopeful designers with the knowledge that would allow them to compete internationally and eventually position the Middle East on the map as a jewelery design hub.

One of my future dreams for my beloved Egypt is to develop the craft sector and provide vocational education for skilled craftspeople.

This brings me to my last but most valuable lesson in life.

Lesson number eight: Don't be afraid to fail.

There's a Chinese proverb which I love and it goes, "It's only but our one-thousandth time to fail.

Know that to succeed, you must fail and fail more.

Despite the many challenges I faced in my path, everything that I have done has led me to where I am now and I would not change a thing about it. I believe there are no coincidences; everything happens for a reason.

Don't be afraid.

Go against the current.

Follow your dreams.

Be passionate.

Keep learning.

Keep giving.

Thank you.
