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Graduation 1992

by Lesley Dawson

We had finally got there. Graduation was in sight. Final exams had been taken and last dissertations had been handed in. Heads down. Marking, or grading as the Americans have it, was underway. Parties irrupted all over campus. Good weather was assured. Students tried on gowns and mortarboards, admiring themselves in every mirror they passed.

This was our first graduation. Twenty graduates of the bachelor's programme and another 20 who had survived the upgrading programme. No mean feat for either group as study had been interrupted by what history now calls, the First Gulf War. We nearly didn't make it. It had been so close.

The upgraders were all senior members of the profession. Already holding a diploma. It had been a hard slog for them. They had struggled with the need to do further study. After all, they were heads of departments and directors of clinics. All colleagues at that level were offered places. Some stood on their dignity and refused. Others swallowed their pride and learnt new theories and skills.

One day a week they became students, walking through campus and brushing shoulders with kids who were the same age as their sons and daughters. They suffered the indignity of having their ideas, practices and writings shredded by crazy foreigners, but at the end achieved a degree. And survived, even if it was a close thing, for some of them.

I had decided that I was not going to wear the BU academic uniform this time. After all these were the first degree-level physios in Palestine. Surely that warranted something special. Home in the UK for Christmas, I had been informed that the most prestigious shop at which to buy academic dress was Eade and Ravenscroft on High Holborn. I duly walked in and asked about a gown for a master's degree from Bradford University.

The assistant who came to my aid was not too impressed with such a red brick higher education establishment, being just up the road from King's College and was even less impressed when, after being shown the appropriate gown I asked, "Do you have a light-weight version, please?"

He pulled his stomach in tighter and sniffed snootily, "Madam, all our gowns are light weight enough for an English summer."

"I am sure you are correct but are they light weight enough for a Palestinian summer?" and explained to him the kind of temperatures to be endured there, even at six o'clock in the evening.

The final straw came when I asked for a mortarboard. I thought he was going to have a heart attack.

"Madam, only the platform party wears head gear at graduation ceremonies."

I hammered the final nail in my coffin when I replied, "this is an American university, and all graduates and faculty members wear either mortarboards or other head gear on official occasions."

He shivered theatrically as he charged me an astronomically high fee, seeming to regret that he had been a party to such a sub-standard transaction. Breathing a sigh of relief, he opened the door. I left swiftly and gladly.

I smiled to myself as I exited the shop with my lightweight gown, hood and mortar board and set off to show myself off in my finery to the rest of the family. This smile became smaller as I realized I would not have room or weight available to take these glorious garments in my luggage. The smile almost completely disappeared when in Jerusalem I had to pay clothing tax on the items, despite arguing with Israeli customs that they were academic dress and not clothes.

My new gown and hood were much admired but were not among the most colourful outfits on show. The prize went to a nursing colleague who had done her PhD at a university in Texas whose gown and mortarboard were scarlet with a gold-coloured hood.

All this paled into insignificance as our students began to strut onto the stage of the auditorium and exult in their success. The upgraders began to dance as they waited their turn to shake the hand of the Vice-Chancellor and receive their degree certificate. Was there ever a June as glorious as that one?