



Thank you for giving me the honour to speak at this special event.

Not so long ago, I was asked what it was like for me to take the Oath of Citizenship. This brought back a memory of a conversation I had with a dear friend of mine, who told me: “Ghassan, this country and my birth country are like the two women in my life: My mom and my wife. I love them both, but I also chose one and didn’t choose the other”. And this is exactly how I feel. I have a love for my country of birth, Iraq, and I show that by trying to represent my culture well. But I have chosen Canada, and I know for a fact I have chosen well, and so have you. Becoming a Canadian citizen a year ago on Canada Day was the most exciting moment in my life and marked the beginning of a very eventful chapter.

I left Iraq because of the war, and when I came to Canada as a student (9 years ago!!), I was very nervous. Everything was new to me. I was even taking pictures of the gas stations because they looked so cool and colourful. But the people here made my life very easy. I remember calling my mom and telling her: “People here are always smiling ... they’re so nice”. Everyone I met was very friendly and very supportive, and more importantly, they were very interested in learning about my culture. They used to ask me to say and write their names in Arabic and they would get so excited.

Over the years, Canada has taught me not to just follow my dreams, but to always dream bigger. Nine years ago, I was just a clueless first-year university student in a new country, and now I’m doing my medical degree and my doctorate at the same time, looking into why autoimmune diseases occur. And I have my own course to teach in immunology.

I am very proud of being a Canadian, and I am now looking at ways to give back. For instance, as co-founder of the Arab Students Association on campus, we decided to hold a fund-raising campaign during the Ramadan fasting month last June and we turned over the \$1,300 we raised to the Lighthouse homeless shelter in downtown Saskatoon. I hope that you will feel so welcome here that you will express your pride in being a Canadian by giving back in the future.