



KAUST 5-Year Memories

Press Release written for KAUST University
5-year Anniversary

Five years. Looking back in life, it can seem like it goes by with a snap of the fingers. Looking forward - one thousand, eight hundred and twenty five days makes it sound like an eternity. Lives can change significantly in five years. Hair becomes gray. Stomachs become bigger. Babies are born, and then learn to walk and talk. For some, they might meet the love of their life.



KAUST began as a vision, perceived across a great expanse of dry, unremarkable desert sand. Five years – and some key ingredients later – it has grown into a global force of academics, and is a proud pillar of light to its native nation. Of those key ingredients, none were more vital than the people who helped KAUST rise from the sands. They added water, and they added stone. They brought ideas, and they brought energy. They came to work, but they ended up bringing life. Life was all that the vision needed.

As KAUST celebrates its 5-year anniversary, we asked those who have been here from the very beginning to reflect on the early days, to share some of their stories, and to tell us what has changed about KAUST and about their lives. Thank you to those who took the time to contribute. We've selected some of our favorite quotes to share.



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“No one will know or feel the significant change more than the people who joined KAUST from the beginning. Just to notice the transformation of the desert into a civilized place is, in itself, the greatest possible shift to be witnessed.”

-Hadeel H. Al Sulaimany, Financial Specialist, Finance

“From my office, I would watch 40,000 construction workers streaming out of Level 0 - going and coming to lunch every day. It was similar to watching an army.

I have a much better understanding of the Arab community. The diversity here makes it easier to interact and understand the motivations and desires of this unique community.”

-John Larson, Chief Information Officer, IT

“KAUST was an eye opener to me in my early career years. It helped me explore and utilize my talents better and faster, given the fast pace we were functioning at. KAUST changed my life dramatically. It helped me learn a lot about start-ups, amazing project management skills, teamwork and dedication. I have also learned a lot in my 5 years, when in HR. I have met amazing leaders who seek the truth, and who go the extra miles to ensure all is done in a perfectly professional, fair manner.”

-Balqees Al Ramahi, Operations Assistant, OCRF



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“KAUST was a positive change for the country, and I wanted to be a part of it. It has improved my standard of living, and the benefits have helped me and my family a lot. The respect I get, when I meet new people who learn I work at KAUST, has made me feel like an elite of society. I can never thank KAUST enough.

-Majid Kaisrani, Library Services Assistant, Administrative Services

“I was one of the people who stayed at the Marriott. The first time the bus drove me to KAUST, there was a sign along the way stating that this way is the Hijra (the Prophet Mohammad’s immigration from Mecca to Al Madina). This gave me joy, and made me even more optimistic about my journey with KAUST. I was invited once to meet the Board of Governors for KAUST. It was a very exciting event to meet such people. It was a lifetime experience.”

-Rima Al Kurdi, Arabic Language Teacher -Grades 4 & 5, The KAUST School

“I feel very lucky to have lived and worked at KAUST from the start up. I have gained an appreciation for different cultures, made great friends from around the globe, been exposed to new activities like mountain biking, photography and snorkeling - and work with great people, and new, up-to-date systems and technologies.

I enjoy working within such an international environment at KAUST and with such talented people. I have learned so much professionally and personally, and hope I continue to learn.”

-Susanne Cunningham, Executive Secretary, IT, Office of CIO



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“I remember the library being completely empty when I first saw it. I helped to establish the library system and workflow from scratch.

In the first month, we worked so hard, you could sleep while you were walking. I bumped into my colleague who was walking in the corridor, and found that he was also closing his eyes.”

-Yi Yu, Systems Librarian, University Library

“The lab was completely empty, and it was like a white sheet. The most exciting and challenging part was to install the instruments, stock the chemicals, and make all the instruments operational. We had to meet so many vendors, track the purchase orders, arrange for engineers to install the instruments, and so on. I am glad I got this opportunity to play my role in making our lab operational, provide the services to KAUST researchers, and help to build this great university. The community life has changed dramatically and become vibrant with more staff and students on the campus. It is also satisfying to see many birds have made KAUST as their home. It is such a treat to watch them.”

-Kumaran Mande, Research Scientist, Bioscience Core Laboratory

“‘Never give up!’ has been my motto since I got here. You’ve had to have the stomach to do what it takes to get through the first couple of years at KAUST. Many people gave up the journey early on. Not me, nor my family. By staying here despite the odds in the beginning, you are committing yourself to making this a better place for future KAUST members. Whether it was a 959 call to fix a pot-hole on the road, or suggesting efficient procedures to follow at work, it gave me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to play a significant role in making a difference in the lives of many people in the region.”

-Madhu Srinivasan, Scientific Lead, Core Lab – Visualization



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“On September 3, 2009, as part of the opening activities, I planted a tree at KAUST’s global green village. The environment has changed much since then. The campus has become greener, with plants and trees. It’s interesting to see the trees growing so tall within a few years. Sometimes, I now even see birds on the campus.

Working with people of many diverse nationalities than has changed the way I look at things. I am learning about the culture of Saudi Arabia. I have even been invited to weddings and homes of my Saudi friends. I am still discovering. I have learned to play golf, biking, photography and yoga.”

-Norah Nakato, Elementary Teacher, The KAUST School

“Teaching at KAUST allows me to live in an extraordinary place in an amazing part of the world. I am blessed to have students at my grade level from 22 or more different countries. It is such a privilege to be able to learn about so many different people, cultures, and customs. My position here provides me with benefits that enable me to help my family back in the U.S. in many different ways - for which I am very grateful. I love my life here. KAUST is home, and has been for the last five years.”

-Patricia McDougall, Student Support Teacher - Grade 5, The KAUST School

“Initially we were staying in Jeddah for almost one year. During that time, construction was in full swing. Around 40,000 men were working at a time on day/night shift basis. We could see the big commotion of heavy earthmovers, bulldozers, trucks, and so forth. Around 380 mobile/tower cranes were operating to support the construction work around the harbor horse-shoe.

KAUST made a great contribution to my personal and career life. I have gained great knowledge in my field, especially in IT infrastructure and communication technologies. I also achieved my master’s degree in IT. Thank you to KAUST.

When we compare early KAUST with present KAUST, it has changed a lot. I’m sometimes amazed to see students walking around the campus, children playing in the grounds, lots of traffic on the KAUST roads, and residents in the busy community. Once upon a time this was only a dream, but now it is being fulfilled. ”

-Philip Joseph, IT Specialist, F&CIM&U-TS



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“KAUST was more of a desert, where nothing was reachable but in Jeddah and most facilities were not yet operating. Now, there is hardly a need to go outside of KAUST.

I have participated in many activities and occasions that helped create life in KAUST. This is a unique environment, with a variety of nationalities and challenges, and it has become globally known.”

-Saleh Alnahdi, Invoice Verifier, F&C Planning & Administration

“The first day I visited KAUST it was a desert. It is totally different now. It's amazing, and we are proud to help King Abdullah's vision come true. KAUST has grown into a global university. It is amazing that Saudi Arabia has produced such a big university, nurturing students from about 100 different countries. This was not in our wildest dreams.

The KAUST opening on September 5th is the same day of my marriage anniversary. Every year, I celebrate two things – the anniversary of KAUST and the anniversary of my marriage.”

-Wael Omar Al Moazen, Storage & Shipment Officer, Coastal & Marine Laboratory

“Career wise, I faced challenges that honed me professionally. I can say, ‘I grew up at KAUST,’ like one would say as if they were raised as a child.

I remember my first construction site visit to Thuwal. It was busy, dirty and dusty, with trucks and workers everywhere. But, it was a beautiful site. You know that something wonderful is happening, and you get that sense of pride that I am part of this University - that there is some greatness in progress outside my office cubicle in Jeddah.”

-Shirley Cadiz, Pension and Savings Administrator, Human Resources



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“I remember than in the first three months that the food was free. Academically, KAUST has grown and has made a reputation in the scholarly world, and is now a recognized global leader in transformational electronics. That’s pretty big! In another five years, I hope my group becomes a phenomenon in the global scholarly world, and that KAUST graduates are considered the best in their respective fields.”

-Muhammad Mustafa Hussain, Associate Professor, Electrical Engineering -CEMSE

“KAUST gave me the courage to make very hard, but life-changing decisions, which I should have made a long time ago. This experience is really like raising one of your own to be brilliant and successful. Chances are rare in life to be part of something that is completely new. I am just grateful that I was a part of that, and seeing KAUST grow to be a successful university, with excellent graduates, is a reward in itself.”

-Niveen Khashab, Assistant Professor of Chemical Science

“By working side by side with most intelligent people around the world, and being a part of King Abdullah's dream of making Saudi Arabia one of the best countries in science and technology, KAUST changed my way of looking to the future. By living in one place, with hundreds of people from different nationalities, with different lifestyles - KAUST changed my way of thinking and acceptance of others. KAUST changed everything in my life and my family’s as well.”

-Somayah Al Gashgari, Financial Analyst, Finance