Maine native and jack-of-all-trades Bill Porter and the first baseball enthusiasts in Blagoevgrad

It was trick more often than not…

AUBG students have always been conscientious community members

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For a small institution in one of Europe’s smaller economies, the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) has had an outsized impact in its first two decades. According to its original mission statement, AUBG was created to educate students “for leadership roles in the evolution of responsive and open societies so that Eastern Europe may experience a true renaissance in its democratic ideas and institutions.” It was a bold vision and an expensive undertaking that has succeeded remarkably well, albeit not always following a direct trajectory, as evidenced in the eye-witness reports that follow.

Much has been accomplished since AUBG’s founding:

- accreditation by both U.S. and Bulgarian higher education authorities;
- design and substantial construction of a state-of-the-art residential campus;
- establishment of an outstanding library with extensive English language holdings;
- creation of a $20 million endowment and growth of net assets to $50 million;
- balanced operating budgets;
- growth and internationalization of the student body;
- expansion of the curriculum;
- addition of new programs, including an executive MBA; and
- establishment of a conference and academic center in Sofia.
Most importantly, of course, AUBG has graduated over 3,100 exceptional young men and women who have gone on in many directions to distinguish themselves, to enhance the University’s reputation and, increasingly, to take on leadership roles in the region.

AUBG alumni are highly sought after by prestigious graduate schools and all types of employers, not just because of their technical preparation, but precisely because of their broad, liberal arts-based exposure to many different fields of knowledge and the ethically-minded, interactive, rigorous, problem-solving nature of AUBG’s approach to teaching and learning. This type of educational experience – which is unique in Southeastern Europe and still rare on the rest of the continent – is as valuable today and will be tomorrow as it has been for hundreds of years.

AUBG’s role has evolved as Bulgaria and the region are also evolving socially, economically and politically. As part of NATO and as a member of the European Union, Bulgaria, as well as AUBG, increasingly connect with the West. Not surprisingly, this has meant that students from the Balkan region and from Bulgaria’s eastern neighbors, the countries of the former Soviet Union, view it as a familiar passageway or connecting point to Western Europe and the United States. The University’s reach has expanded dramatically as it now enrolls students from over 40 countries all around the world. Thus, while we keep raising our profile and impact in Bulgaria, we have also enriched the campus experience of our students and the impact of the University beyond the immediate region.

AUBG is, however, a long way from being able to rest on its laurels. The road ahead is both challenging and exciting. As we aspire to reach new levels of academic excellence, financial stability and community impact, it is wonderful to be able to look back on the achievements of the past, celebrate our many successes, and thank all of you who have participated in sustaining AUBG over the years. We hope the stories that follow inspire you to stay engaged with us and to help us write AUBG’s next chapter!
2011, October 3 – AUBG marks its twentieth anniversary with a birthday gala in Sofia’s Ivan Vazov Theater

2011, March – AUBG graduate Georgi Iliev wins the 2010 Book of the Year award in Bulgaria for his novel Holy Fool: Dogtown

2010, May 14 – Groundbreaking for America for Bulgaria Student Center

2010, May 15 – The New Academic Building becomes Balkanski Academic Center in honor of Professor Minko Balkanski

2010, January 20 – AUBG and Blagoevgrad officials cut the ribbon on the Skaptopara III Residence Hall

2010, May 16 –
2009, April – AUBG grants the first Tchaparichkov scholarships for graduate study at top 20 U.S. universities

AUBG library named after Dimi and Yvonne Panitza at official ceremony

2009, April 4 – The Griffins American football club host the first national tournament in American flag football

2009, April – AUBG goes green – first Eco Week organized by students

2008, April 10 – First musical production in AUBG history, Chicago, premieres

2008, October 4 – Ground turned on the Skaptopara III Residence Hall

2008, October 3 – New library building opens doors

2008, September 27 – Elvin Guri ’96 receives the first Distinguished Alum Award

2008, October 3 – New library building opens doors

2007, May 12 – New academic and administrative building opens officially

2006, October – The American University in Bulgaria celebrates its 15th anniversary

2006, April 1 – First student-organized AUBG Olympics bring together more than 500 community members

2006, July 20 – The Bulgarian National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency bestows the highest accreditation evaluation to AUBG

2005 Winter 2012

AUBG Milestones in Facts and Photos
2005, May 27 – First Alumni Mega Reunion brings together all 11 classes of AUBG students

1999, November – First visit by U.S. President: Bill Clinton receives an honorary doctorate from AUBG

2004, May 11 – First Executive MBA class graduates

2003, March 19 – Elieff Center for Education and Culture in Sofia officially opens

2002, October 5 – Skaptopara II Residence Hall opens its doors to students

2001, June 14 – AUBG is accredited by the Bulgarian National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency

2001, March 28 – AUBG receives accreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)
1998, September 11 – Skaptopara I Residence Hall officially opens

1998, April 23 – First More-Honors Academy show – the most popular show on campus of all times

1999, September – FlashNews – the first online student publication – is launched

1998, November – First meeting of the AUBG Board of Directors

1997, November 27 – First ground broken on the Skaptopara campus

1995, October 1 – AUBG choir receives first laureate title (second prize) at the “Bedřich Smetana” international choir competition, Czech Republic

1995, May 7 – First AUBG class graduates

1995, April – First ever Arts Festival held at AUBG

1994, December – First theater production staged at AUBG – Thorton Wilder’s Our Town, directed by Al Cyrus

1992, October 17 – Signal issue of what would become the student publication Aspecter comes out

1992, April – First ever Arts Festival held at AUBG

1992, November – First meeting of the AUBG Board of Directors

1991, November 1 – AUBG inaugurated at an official outdoor ceremony in Blagoevgrad

1991, June 24 – First Opening Ceremony: AUBG opens doors with 16 full-time faculty members and 208 students

1991, fall – Students use the existing intercom music system ("radiotochka") in the Hilltop dormitory to begin the first dormitory-wide “broadcasts,” which would later turn into Radio AURA
“Why Don’t We Make Blagoevgrad a Little Oxford?”
A History of the Founding of the American University in Bulgaria

By Robert Phillips Jr., Associate Professor of Politics at the American University in Bulgaria


Looking at the founding of the American University in Bulgaria, it is difficult to find a hero. This is a story, but it doesn’t have a hero. Instead, it is a story of hundreds if not thousands of people who simply heard an idea that was “compelling and strong,” liked it, and wanted to do something to help it along.

“A few people can make big differences,” Dimi Panitza used to say. Yes, people matter. And lots of people can make a really big difference. Add a little luck to that and there you have it—a university. But to get these people to matter in the first place is the difficult part. Yet, in the American University in Bulgaria these many people found something that moved them. Maybe they did not see the entire vision; maybe they saw only their own slight sliver of the vision. But it didn’t matter; because they saw it and they acted on it.

From the conclusion of “The American University… Where?”

“I was in the army and my mother sent me an article from the newspaper. She literally cut it out of the newspaper put it in the envelope and sent it to me. That was back in 1990.” Dimitar Nachkov, a native of Assenovgrad, was one of AUBG’s first students. Like many of the male students in the first class, after graduation from high school in 1989 he was marched into the army for mandatory military service. “We didn’t have e-mail then; we used snail mail, so she used to write me letters twice a week…And I spoke about it with Manol [Manol Peykov, who would also become an AUBG student] because we were in the army together. And he said, ‘You know my mother also wrote a letter ….’ When we got discharged from the Army, which was in March of 1990, there was much more on TV and in the newspapers about this concept. So I said, ‘Well why don’t I try it?’”

As Nachkov notes, interest in the new university, fed by press and word-of-mouth reports, grew over the spring and early summer. By July 1991, the new university had become a hot press topic.

“We didn’t know what the requirements would be, so we called,” Nachkov remembers.

“They told us that all applicants are welcome and that the two exams that would be taken for consideration are the SAT and TOEFL. They told us when the SAT and TOEFL were going to take place in Blagoevgrad. So Manol and I … started preparing ourselves because for a year and a half in the army we didn’t have the chance to practice our English that much, so we felt that we needed some preparation.”

Each year in the U.S., high school students planning to enter college take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). It is a routine part of the college application process—in the U.S., that is. In 1991 Bulgaria, on the other hand, the SAT was unknown except to the few Bulgarians who were able to latch upon a copy of one of the preparation books sent by a friend studying in the U.S. But if the SAT was a challenge to students taking it, it was even a larger challenge to the team giving it.

Simply obtaining the tests had meant negotiating with a reluctant Educational Testing Service, the test’s creators, to agree to their being administered in Bulgaria. ETS eventually released a batch of institutional tests, which were lugger over on the plane as excess baggage.

“We didn’t know what the requirements would be, so we called”, Nachkov remembers
Honestly administered entrance tests and fair student selection procedures went largely unquestioned in the US, but in the aftermath of the previous system, suspicions of favoritism and connections were everywhere. For Milena Stoicheva, who had recently been hired to oversee student affairs, this meant that “everything had to be transparent in an environment that had nothing like this before.” To help demonstrate that procedures would be carried out with integrity, she remembers locking the tests in the university safe and even sleeping with the key under her pillow.

This was not the end to the SAT saga. Without modern scanners to grade them, the tests had to be hand graded and application essays individually read. Limited human resources meant that the newly assembled Blagoevgrad team had to wear many hats during that summer; two of these hats became test grader and essay reader.

“It was a challenge to students taking it, it was even a larger challenge to the team giving it.”

“Then we got results and it blew us away,” exclaims Laverty. “We didn’t think it was real at first. This was a second language. They had never taken a test like this before.” The test scores were indeed impressive and, at the time, meant that AUBG students rivaled the entering classes of some of the more prestigious universities in the U.S.

It is hard to imagine the level of the uncertainty that surrounded AUBG in 1991: it had no past, an under-construction present, and an uncertain future. All who became part of it were taking a chance that the institution would be up and running by the end of September and that it would remain in operation after that. But for those first students, “they were risking, not us,” comments Zdravka Bojinova, who joined the university staff in August 1991. Iordanka Melnikliyska agrees that the first class of students were taking a risk: “these people must have been very brave to believe us.”

When asked whether he was taking a risk by attending the new university, Nachkov matter-of-factly responds, “Actually, I looked at it as something exciting. I never questioned the possibility of this university not being able to succeed in the future.”
AUBG’s story began just a few short months earlier and its success was far from assured for a long time.

Eliana Maseva first heard about the idea of an American-style university for Bulgaria sometime in the fall of 1990 at a meeting of members of the democratic opposition. At the time, she was the leader of the temporary executive committee of Blagoevgrad, a southwestern city of about 70,000, some 60 miles from Sofia.

“The idea was still very much up in the air for a university whose goal would be an example and leader for change and reform in the educational system,” remembers Maseva. Just how this idea got up in the air in the first place is not exactly clear. No one involved in these early stages actually seems to remember who first came up with the idea of a university. If pressed, most will say it was John Menzies, the Press and Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Sofia. Others think it could have been George Prohasky, Director of the Open Society Foundation-Sofia. One of the earliest documented mentions of the idea dates from November 1990 within the Bulgarian Grand National Assembly. In a proposal for an American University of South-Eastern Europe to be situated in Sofia, Bodgan Atanassov, hoped that such an institution would allow the peoples of Southeast Europe to come together to learn. Atanassov, who would later teach English at the university, would see his idea partially realized in AUBG’s second year when Open Society Foundation scholarships brought the first Albanian and Romanian students to the university.

As Maseva’s group worked to finalize an offer to host the university in Blagoevgrad, the Open Society Foundation in Sofia, in consultation with Menzies, initiated a small feasibility study. Through this study, it was realized that the U.S. connection for such an undertaking would either have to take place through a consortium of institutions or a single, larger institution. With this understanding, Menzies contacted officials at the University of Maine, which had been one of the first U.S. institutions to host Bulgarian exchange students, to inquire about supporting the project.

Meanwhile, the Blagoevgrad group realized they would need wider support in the Bulgarian community. Zhelyu Zhelev, Bulgaria’s first democratically elected president, gave his blessing from the very start. “We all understood that Bulgarians needed a different type of politician, another kind of thinking, a much freer type of thinking… Our policy at that time was to open Bulgaria to the rest of the world. The fact that education [at the new university] would be in English was seen as particularly important given its importance in world politics and commerce,” Zhelev remembers.

“Maseva first met with John Menzies at the U.S. embassy to discuss the idea formally and begin planning. Menzies, an energetic U.S. career diplomat, was widely known and respected among democratic opposition circles of the time. “Menzies of course was a driving force in creating AUBG,” remarks Dimi Panitza, who would later become involved in the AUBG project on its Board of Directors.

“I felt that the location of Blagoevgrad was very good for such an institution that would help the stability of the Balkans in the long run,” Maseva says. “I also thought that this investment of the American University would be good for Southwest University and would introduce new educational examples to be followed. And last but not least, it would create liveliness in the town with two universities and a lot of young people. It would help the economy and commerce. We were saying to ourselves ‘Why don’t we make Blagoevgrad a little Oxford?’ Perhaps our dreams at the time were a little far-fetched, but I think that our thread of thinking was correct.”

Dimi Panitza received an honorary doctorate from AUBG in 2001. He was one of the university’s earliest and most ardent supporters.
“We all understood that Bulgarians needed a different type of politician, another kind of thinking, a much freer type of thinking…”
George Soros provided much needed financial backing early on. Another early supporter was Sol Polansky, who would later become the chair of the American AUBG board and the first unified AUBG board. Polansky was in the eyes of many uniquely suited for this position. As U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria from 1987-1990, Polansky enjoyed a strong reputation as a good and sincere friend of Bulgaria. His stature within Bulgaria was such that his early commitment to the project assured many Bulgarians, including Maseva, that the still tentative project would be eventually realized.

Dimi Panitza, a Bulgarian émigré who made a name for himself in the world of journalism, jumped wholeheartedly into helping out with the project and would remain a passionate supporter of AUBG throughout his life.

“There was this real sense of opportunity and possibility”
University of Maine officials were also warming to the idea. During mid-fall 1990, Dale Lick, the university’s president, traveled to Bulgaria where he met Menzies and university supporters. With the idea moving along in Bulgaria, a University of Maine team was sent at the end of March 1991 to evaluate the possibility of participating in the AUBG project. The team included Ed Laverty who, just some months later, would become AUBG’s first president. The team’s visit included meetings with the newly formed Bulgarian Initiative Committee (tasked with helping set up the new university), government and parliamentary officials, and US embassy officials, along with a trip to Blagoevgrad to see the possible facilities.

Impressed with what they heard and saw in Bulgaria, the University of Maine team returned home as advocates of the idea and began convincing President Lick, who was interested in internationalizing the University of Maine campus. Bob Woodbury, Chancellor of the University of Maine System, shared this view—a fact that would bring a wise and valued ally to the AUBG cause at University of Maine.

By May 29, the Maine team had drafted an implementation plan, which would serve as a blueprint for the endeavor. With the plan settled and summer beginning, time came for assembling the American part of the team that would actually construct the university. Since the University of Maine held responsibility for this part of the plan, the administrative team was made up of individuals drawn from the University of Maine community.

In 1991, Bulgaria, with its small émigré community, was simply way off the map for most Americans. Yet, with only a few exceptions, the people who set up, became faculty, or became active supporters of AUBG had no family or diaspora connections with Bulgaria.

“I had no, zero, personal connection with Bulgaria prior to this,” remarks David Flanagan, a Maine businessman who would later sit on the AUBG Board of Trustees. Instead, other motivations brought them to the idea and, for some, to Bulgaria.

“There was this real sense of opportunity and possibility,” Laverty says. Laverty would relocate along with his wife, Roberta, and their children. Roberta Laverty would become both a problem solver and extra pair of hands for the team and eventually a faculty member. For Steve Kenney, a Maine native working in University of Maine’s financial offices at the time, AUBG offered a professional challenge, but that was not the sole motivation. Kenney, who became AUBG’s head financial officer, admits that “We fell in love with the whole concept.” Paula Dalzell-Kenney agrees: “The opportunity to start something from the ground up—just the whole idea of the wall coming down and the Soviet Union breaking up and Eastern Europe opening up, it was just really exciting to be on the cutting edge of what was happening there. For us...for two Maine kids to have that kind of opportunity was just really quite amazing.”

With the administrative team almost in place, Laverty remembers a conversation in which a colleague told him, “You’re going to need a Radar O’Riley,” referring to a character on the popular television program, M*A*S*H. “You’re going to need someone who can do anything.” Several days later Laverty ran into Bill Porter, who oversaw ROTC on the Orono campus. Porter, a retired lieutenant colonel with command experience, was invaluable at logistics and getting things to work. In addition to being remembered for his no-nonsense approach to problems Porter would be remembered for making the initial “American University in Bulgaria” sign that adorned the Main Building by personally cutting the letters out of Styrofoam and for introducing Bulgarian staff to their first doughnuts – years before the products would become commercially available. Pauline Porter, who “would help with everything” during that first year, and their two kids would also join the team.

With the core group assembled and members arriving in late-June and July, the next step was simple – build a university in about 60 days.

For the full account of AUBG’s history and first steps, go to www.aubg.bg
There is a first time and a first person for everything. The individuals featured in the following pages became “AUBG firsts” because they dared to go where no one else around had gone before. They had no history or prior experience to fall back on. They didn’t always succeed, and sometimes even failed. But they plowed on. This is how AUBG’s first institutions, such as Radio AURA, Aspecter newspaper, student government, and AUBG library, as well as the school itself, were founded.

Because of individuals who had a spark and an appetite for challenge. Today, these trailblazers talk about their AUBG experience and how it has made a difference in their lives.

Todor Todorov
First Commencement speaker; father of first second-generation AUBG-er

These were the years! Adventurous and unforgettable. Before that we thought we were leaving behind the time of our lives in high school where we could be carefree adolescents before all the career planning and the other chores of “real life” would start to hit. Back in the early 90s Bulgarian universities seemed like a continuation of the carefree living but you could easily grow isolated and lost.

AUBG was nothing like that. We had little idea what we wanted to be but there was an incredible sense of togetherness. The people, the spirit – it felt like a renaissance of our lives. I remember the disarray of add-drop week, the wild parties at Vodenitsata, the belot world series, the soccer games. The matrix printers and the first essays that some of us (and I’ve been sworn – no names!) would try to write in MS-DOS – how insane is that?!

“Father and son during Lyudmil’s first days as an AUBG student

My son was born while I was in my sophomore year. He got the virus, I guess, and I am happy that he is an AUBG-er now. I am proud of him and hope he finds some of the school’s magic like we did.

I graduated with a degree in Business Administration, did my MBA in the U.S., worked for a major investment bank in New York and co-founded a small hedge fund. I have been back for seven years now and I am currently leading the Bulgarian financial advisory practice of a Big 4 firm.

I wish many generations of proud AUBG parents and an AUBG story that never ends.
Anguel Anguelov-Mostuna
More-Honors founder

The annual must-see show, organized by the More-Honors Academy, entertains more than 500 spectators each year.

AUBG’s impact on my life is “unintentionally profound”... I applied for a transfer to AUBG in August 1995 and I was accepted shortly afterward. It was the only American-style institution in Bulgaria, to which I could transfer from my first college in the U.S. That was the beginning of an interesting journey.

My greatest inspiration at AUBG were the many unique and interesting individuals among the students at that time. The More-Honors show was inspired by colorful personalities, by the will to keep creativity, rich social lives, and partying alive at AUBG, and to promote non-academic values, which are very typical for people coming from the Balkans, and especially AUBG-ers. Credit and thanks are due to Antoni Ivanov, class of 2001, and Anatoli Antov, Nikolay Penchev, and Emil Petkov, all from the class of 2000, who were with me in the chaotic creation of the very first More-Honors show.

What’s the typical AUBG-er like? We are awkwardly-spoken, demanding, and confused schmucks, yet (maybe) interesting and experimenting with different aspects of our life choices.

Being an Alumni Association president (between 2004 and 2007) is not one of my greatest accomplishments, but it was definitely one of the most challenging. It was a huge eye-opener and a deep well of experience, especially because of my work with AUBG trustees.

The reasons I keep coming back to AUBG are many: the positivity of the town, the parties of the night, and most importantly – many friends and events that I want to be there for, and be helpful to.

When I looked up “future of AUBG” in Google, I found an interesting result from AUBG’s own website in place 3. It says “Alumni Are the Future.” Who am I to argue with Google? ;)

Mostuna received a Distinguished Alum Award in 2011 for his service to the University.
It was such an exciting experience to come to teach at the first university of this type in the whole region. From the start it was different from all Bulgarian universities. As a representative of both cultures I really appreciated it from the very beginning. The first students did too; they were eager to study at AUBG, which gives such a broad education and worldview. We have always been lucky to have exceptional students. I have loved and I do love all my students.

When I came here in 1991 I had just completed my AD degree at Indiana University in Bloomington, USA. The first shock was that people around me, in the streets, in the stores spoke Bulgarian. Not because I don’t speak the language, but I got used to listening to and speak only English for a long time. It sounded strange to me to hear another language, seemed to me that I was dreaming…

The first concert:
In Bloomington I got used to having solo recitals with a different program every two months. Following the same pattern I did my first recital here in late October, two months after I came. I will never forget this experience. The concert took place in the Blagoevgrad Opera House. By some reason, backstage instead of two doors there were two open spaces facing the street. You can imagine how cold the stage was when I appeared there in my dress…

The first applied music class and concert:
The U.S. Military donated to AUBG four pianos and they were lying around the University. Looking at them not being used I got the crazy idea to start teaching piano. Everybody thought that it was impossible to teach people to play a musical instrument when they can’t even read music. The kids themselves were scared, but we made it! I taught them music notation first and made them put their hands on the piano. As a professional musician I must say it is much more satisfying to teach people who have no music background than to teach professional music students, which I have also done for a long time. The very first semester we started the applied piano lessons we had our first student recital.

I am happy to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of this wonderful and unique university, to be part of its history, its present and I will continue giving everything from myself for its future.
I arrived in Bulgaria on the 15 or 16 of September 1991 and classes started two weeks later. We were a group of 12-14 faculty members. I already knew a little bit about Bulgaria because I had already been here in the summer of 1990 for a week, visiting friends. I wanted to understand a little bit about what was going on with the student strikes that ended at that time. I knew about the place. I was excited when I came here in September, we were all excited. We knew that it was a great opportunity. You are coming to people that have been raised in a very different system and we had been told stories about this system. To be able to come and interact with the students was really exciting and nerve-racking as well. We were nervous, we did not know what to expect in the classroom and we didn't have much to work with because there was no library. Everybody had just what was in their heads. Everybody brought basically two or three suitcases with some clothes and some materials. Basically, we were largely on our own.

My early impressions – I remember being at the dormitory at Hilltop, I lived in the dormitory during the first year. All the students had been brought together in the Auditorium and I just remember being very very afraid and nervous, but excited at the same time. Nobody knew what was going to happen. I remember being up there, looking out and seeing this sea of dark hair, everything except for Vesi and Maria – just a sea of dark hair. I was like wow – this is a different place. I am coming from South Carolina, U.S. and it just seemed unusual. Everybody was excited, students were excited. The second night two students came to talk to me and that was the first interaction I had with the students.

We didn't have much infrastructure at all back then. The situation in Bulgaria has changed so much – it has a wider infrastructure now. Now the university can rely on the people and the community. It was much more difficult at that point in time. There were only a few places you could go. The community has certainly changed. The university has more resources and a larger infrastructure and more personnel, specialized to do certain things. The student body has changed. It is not only more geographically diverse, culturally diverse, but over time there have been changes in students as well.
I had about a hundred days to bask in the glory of my 4.0 GPA at AUBG. By September of 1999 I had joined the new class of graduate students at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School, where my colleagues’ credentials were impressive well beyond GPAs. As we sat in our first microeconomics class, we were treated to a marathon of formulas describing the supply/demand equilibrium. An hour later, the professor finally stopped to ask: Can anybody tell me how to solve these equations? I expected everybody would rush to raise their hands, but as I looked up, nobody seemed to know the answer. A silent minute later, I finally decided to weigh in. It was a simple system of linear equations. I’ve seen it in my sophomore year at AUBG. “We should just use Cramer’s rule,” I suggested.

That one answer bought me a lot more respect than the 4.0 GPA ever did. Even back in the day at AUBG, having all A’s was the subject of gentle banter. I was accused of always being the first to enter the library and the last one to leave. That was partially true; what my friends failed to notice was that I would spend quite a few hours taking naps on the floor in the back of the bookshelves. Or maybe they did know, since one day I woke up to find a note by my side saying, “If I’m still sleeping at noon, please wake me up for lunch.”

Not that the lunch was any good back then (I’m told it’s much better now). But the education I got was outstanding, and it helped me finish at the top of my class at Princeton, then get a job at McKinsey. It was the consulting work I did there that made me interested in investing. Today I am a senior investment analyst for a $3.5bn hedge fund in New York, managing money for a variety of pension funds, university endowments, and family offices around the world.

And I am by no means the only AUBG-er in New York. My old roommate, Horia Tipi, is a high-level executive at FICO; his wife, Stela, who was the Commencement speaker, is now a litigator at Jones Day, one of the largest law firms in the world. Bori Deak, the Salutatorian of our class, works for the CFO of JP Morgan. My sister, Roxana, who joined AUBG in 1999, went on to graduate school at Columbia University and is now working for the Earth Institute, a non-profit associated with the school.

We may be doing different things, but we all started our journey in the same place; a two-hour bus ride from Sofia to Blagoevgrad. My wife, Romy, who is a very successful Sales Director at The Wall Street Journal, went to Yale, and I often tell her I got a much better education than she did for a tenth of the price. When she first heard that she thought I was joking, but I think by now she knows I’m right. And AUBG is only 20 years old; Yale is 310 years old. I am guessing by that ratio that AUBG can only get even better.
Dilian Pavlov

First chair of the student publications organization

It was hard getting into AUBG. Literally. The first time I had to come to Blagoevgrad to apply was an ordeal of heroic proportions.

First, I took the train from my hometown, Rousse, to Sofia. It was an express train, and Bulgaria (for all I knew) was a short-distance country, but the trip took 11 hours. Go figure.

I used a power combo of bus and tram to get from Central to Ovcha Kupel bus station. It was scorching hot, the tram was packed, the sweat was dripping. But what did I know – that turned out to be the best part of the journey.

In Ovcha Kupel, I jumped on a state-run Chavdar bus (made circa 1960). It was 1991, and private enterprise in transportation was yet to flourish. On the way out of Sofia, the front windshield exploded. After a short deliberation, the driver decided to keep on, unfazed. The passengers cheered. Then silence fell, as the wind started to blow through the wide-open front window at 60 km/h. It felt like riding a motorcycle, only we were very lightly dressed. The passengers donated to the driver every bit of windproof clothes we had on us, so he could fend off hypothermia and stay on course. Dressed on, he was the most hilarious sight - a sturdy bloke wearing one woman's vintage 70's sunglasses, another woman's sun hat fastened with a pink scarf around his neck, another passenger's oversized jacket, T-shirts wrapped around his naked hands... But I wasn’t laughing. I was freezing. That trip took four hours. All I wanted was to be back in the warm sweaty tram in Sofia...

I was supposed to tell you about the first AUBG student newspaper, Aspecter, how it came about, the boys and girls that made it happen, how much fun and how much trouble we had along the way. I just felt the trip story was a good preface, for you to get a feel of the zeitgeist.

For everyone on the startup team of Aspecter had trips like that in 1991... To get to AUBG, to jumpstart Aspecter, or the million other initiatives we ran parallel with classes. Monika Filkova headed a team of fantastic student-journalists. Joro Zahariev and Lyubo Yovchev stayed up countless nights to design the thing. Alex Alexandrov managed the production and finances. There were over 30 people who worked on the project, and everyone was fantastic. We had zero experience, but loads of enthusiasm. We had the best of times. Happy birthday, AUBG!
Radio AURA was originally conceived by a bunch of hyperactive freshmen living in the Hilltop dorm just a couple of months after the first class had moved into the former Communist party training campus, what was then the Hilltop residence hall. It was probably October 1991 when the first dorm-keeper – Geoff Dean – suspiciously gave me permission to use the outdated “cable radio” room on the second floor. Radio AURA’s predecessor was thus launched around November 1991 as a dorm-only station, narrowcasting via the building’s single-channel cable radio called the “radiotochka”. The station was first launched under the name “rAUBGadio”, a butchered pun in hindsight, but try telling that to the original “radio bunch”: Manol, Dimiter, Dora, Kate, Bistra, Peter & Petar, and a few others. rAUBGadio broadcast every evening a “quality mix” of rock, pop and ballads, mingled with public service announcements of the “computer lab will stay open all night tonight” type. As it could only be heard via the single-channel wall-mounted radios across the dorm rooms, its slogan was logically – and wittily – “Don’t even try to change the channel… it’s technically impossible.”

Just a few months after the micro-launch in Hilltop, the radio bunch – which had gradually expanded to include Emil, Stratsi, Maria, Ivan, and many others – decided they had earned their right to go on the airwaves, and started making preparations for a city-wide radio station to compete against the old-fashioned national and local public stations. For that we needed just three things: studio premises, equipment, and an FM frequency. Oh yes, and a real name, and that was brainstormed to be Radio AURA – as in “American University Radio.”

The first thing was easy. The university – namely the late Administrative Director Bill Porter – allocated an unused office right next to the original faculty room. In just one overnight shift, the radio bunch sound-proofed the “studio” walls with violet-colored, pressed-cardboard apple crates (yep, apples were sold in crates back then – can’t tell you how many apples we had to buy and eat to end up with enough crates to cover all four walls). The next morning the shocked building engineer Georgi Pregyov (until recently deputy Minister of Infrastructure) told us to immediately “tear down this wall,” as it violated all conceivable fire regulations. So off went the crates, up came a layer of fire-proof carpet (which was indeed tested in action during a studio fire much later – it didn’t burn, but the white dust from the fire-extinguisher stayed in the carpet forever, causing quite a few bronchial issues).

The second item – equipment – was not a problem either. I arranged for a friend from the Netherlands – a former radio pirate – to ship to us the disused equipment from a former pirate radio ship (the prototype for “The Boat that Rocked,” for that matter). I remember I paid $350 for the whole studio. (A year or so later we were able to get a grant from the non-profit International Media Fund, which allowed us to buy the most state-of-the-art equipment available – which included professional turntables and CD players.)

The third component – a frequency – was where we ran out of luck. It took months and months of applying, begging, lobbying, and threatening the Telecoms Agency in Sofia to even be considered for a frequency permit. What with us being just an unincorporated bunch of students, far away from Sofia, with nothing to offer for an expedited solution. I remember it took literally hours of repeated dialing from the rotary telephone in the President’s office (indeed, we didn’t have our own phone yet) before we could even get
through to the Telecoms agency. Ultimately, we were told we would get the frequency of 98.9 FM, but needed to wait a few more weeks for final clearance.

Needless to say, the combination of ambition and peer pressure meant we went on air immediately, tuning our (appropriately pirate-vintage) transmitter to 98.9 FM. Thus we became the first semi-legal radio station in Bulgaria, broadcasting on FM. We left the luckiest among us to mix music on the air, and the rest of us somehow squeezed into Manol’s old Trabant and started driving around the city to see how far the signal could be heard. Sure enough, it could be heard – on 98.9 FM – well beyond the edge of the city. We drove nearly all the way to Dupnitza, and we could still be heard. At one point someone decided to compare our signal to the other station’s sound – only to find out there were NO other stations – we broadcast on 98.9, but also on nearly every other frequency on the FM band.

We drove back to the studio frantically, conscious that we were conducting nothing short of radio terrorism. Within half an hour the problem was fixed, the transmitter fine-tuned, and we were comfortable we could only be heard on the designated frequency of 98.9 FM. Over the next few days AURA became a “real” station, with its own promos, sung jingles (courtesy of members of the AUBG choir), and its original slogan “Digital Dynamite. Dare to be Different.” Even with T-shirts with our logo and frequency.

A couple weeks later we got a letter from the Telecoms Agency. It was brief: “You will be issued a different frequency: 98.8 FM. This change is due to the discovery of a pre-existing signal – evidently from abroad – that is already broadcasting on 98.9 FM.”

Needless to say, Radio AURA immediately re-tuned its transmitter to 98.8 FM – but never told the listeners about the change. We just couldn’t bear the thought of changing all the on-air imaging – let alone the printed materials, business cards, T-shirts and all. Plus, at that time – early 90’s – most receivers had a “needle” analog dial, so no one would figure out the difference anyway. So for many years to follow, Radio AURA remained probably the only station in the world to insist it broadcasts on a different frequency than it actually did.

And the group of people who were responsible for this white lie grew larger and larger by the month, as the original radio bunch was joined by Irina (now Program Director of BG Radio), Kostadin (later a Radio AURA General Manager), Fai (now CEO of Communicorp Bulgaria), Victoria, Maria, Dessi, Boriana, Svetoslav a.k.a. DJ Zorro, and dozens – and now hundreds of other AUBG students.

P.S. I wonder which of the subsequent General Managers took the responsible, adult decision to inform the listeners of Radio Aura’s actual broadcasting frequency…

“Oh yes, and a real name, and that was brainstormed to be Radio AURA – as in “American University Radio.”
Dimitar Nachkov
One of the first AUBG alums to complete the University’s EMBA program

AUBG Class: 1995 (BA), 2004 (EMBA)
Country: Bulgaria
Current occupation: Executive Director, Rodopski Kilim, a family-run textile business
Current location: Asenovgrad, Bulgaria

Old AUBG friends reunite in Stara Zagora in 2000

Diliana Angelova
First Chair of the Student Government

AUBG Class: 1995
Country: Bulgaria
Current occupation: Art History Professor, University of California at Berkeley
Current location: Berkeley, CA, United States

Diliana with her classmate and friend Elitsa Nikolova

Daniel Tomov
First AAA president to be elected to the Board of Trustees

AUBG Class: 1997
Country: Bulgaria
Current occupation: Partner, Bulventures Capital
Current location: Sofia, Bulgaria

Dani Tomov at a Student Government meeting
My AUBG story is a story of learning. Learning which went out of the confines of the classrooms. I took classes and learned how to read and write critically, how to analyze and argue, how to defend my point and how to understand the viewpoints of other people. I lived at the dorm, and I learned how to live with people. I met new people and learned how to make friends. I learned that there is always a different point of view, and that the decisions we have to make are not always right and wrong, but should always be made.

The amount of academic pressure was astounding (with all the readings, projects, deadlines, mid-terms, tests and finals), yet its weight was easy to bear because of the surrounding environment. An environment where all participants – students, professors, administration, guests and visitors – were motivated by the enthusiasm to build a new institution which had never existed in this part of the world. There was a feeling of togetherness shared by all participants who felt challenged to create something new with their minds wide open.

One can argue that learning is the purpose of all universities. At AUBG, however, the process of learning was everywhere. Twenty years later, I still feel like I am a happy part of this process.

I do believe that this feeling is still an integral part of most AUBG students nowadays, 20 years after it all started. And I wish this feeling keeps living for centuries to come.

In May 1995, in his speech to the first graduating class, our beloved economics professor addressed the two hundred plus seniors as “Pioneers.” The speech lauded our adventurous spirit and our accomplishments in the past four years. Many firsts were mentioned. Our college years came back to life, swelling us with emotion and pride. We thought that we were doing what all students at American universities do, but the realization that we, the pioneers, did a lot more struck me at that moment. We mapped the road, and in so doing left our mark in a unique way. It was a moment of perfect clarity as we all sat together for the last time, drinking in our achievement as one.

Student government was one of these achievements, being established in the opening year of AUBG. I am very proud to have been the first Chair of the Student Senate, a democratically elected student governing body. The senators ran as individuals, and then the 12 elected senators chose their Chair. Alas, I was the only woman. The first election “posters” were sheets of paper with little more than our names. Politics Professor Bobby Phillips patiently taught us the intricacies of fair and civilized discourse. We debated electoral procedure at length, and learned to make motions, second, and adjourn.

On this twentieth anniversary of AUBG, I would like to recognize and thank all the professors who opened my eyes to the wonderful world of the humanities, history and archaeology above all. I liked what I learned so much that I wanted more. This led to a master’s degree in art history from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX (1998), and a doctoral degree in art history from Harvard (2005). My AUBG professors encouraged me to think analytically; they fostered my creativity; and they taught me through dialogue. As much as I can, I endeavor to apply these lessons in my own classes at the University of California at Berkeley, where I currently teach early Christian and Byzantine art. The picture shows me with the remains of a gigantic statue of the emperor Constantine, one of my favorite subjects. My husband is a historian, and I have two children, a son (8) and a daughter (5).

AUBG was a great personal adventure that gave the start of an incredible journey, made me friends for life. It’s where I met my future wife, got to know so many smart and colorful people, full of dreams and passion, enjoyed great basketball games, and learned to give back to society.

One of my most vivid memories, while still incredible to many outsiders, was our honest and friendly talks with friends from Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, and Serbia about the past, present, and our common future, while others were waging war a few hundred kilometers away. Then I got this personal epiphany that became a strong conviction later on in life: Friendship, shared values, and education could make our lives and the lives of our kids much much better and safer!

Asking the right questions, applying critical thinking, getting organized, having a standpoint, while respecting the opinions of others, keeping your promises, pouring all your heart and passion into all your endeavors, staying curious and hungry for knowledge... these are some of the incredible lessons that I got from AUBG and which assist me, almost every day, in my entrepreneurial ventures.

I sincerely hope and wish that after another 20 years AUBG will still be that incredible personal adventure for my daughter and her peers from the next generation!
That Start-Up Spark Called AUBG

It is rare that when as a prospective student you send out an inquiry letter to a university, in return you get back a feasibility study and a five-year academic and business plan for the school that you are about to enroll in. Yet this is what I got in my snail mail back in the distant 1990 – not an enrollment information brochure, but a 50-page prospectus, as if I were an investor, who had to read the business plan for a start-up. I must confess this was by far one of the most interesting documents that I had read up to that moment. I was totally fascinated that an American-style liberal arts university was about to be founded in Bulgaria – just as I was about to graduate from high school – and that the future President of that university was writing to me personally to ask if I had some ideas and comments on the feasibility study.

So I decided to “invest” in this university “start-up” – even though I had the chance to go and study in an established school in the USA. What worried some of my high school classmates who preferred to go to well-established universities was what inspired me. What are the chances for a person to be involved in the founding class of a university that offers liberal arts education in a country where 45 years of communism had just come to an end?

I don’t regret for a second my decision to come to AUBG. In reality, I not only received regular education, but also gained tremendous experience by participating in the founding of a university from scratch. From going over the first 20 books that arrived at the university library (how many times can a student say that they have read all the books in the library?) to participating in the first student assembly to write the student government constitution, and then voting for the first student government to witnessing the creation and flourishing of student organizations that have become hallmarks of AUBG – newspapers, newsletters, Radio AURA, theater, the musical – the experience was amazing. All this was inspired by the creativity, hard work, and entrepreneurial attitude of everyone involved in the project from the get-go and made possible by the vision and unwavering support of AUBG’s founders.

Beyond any doubt, AUBG has been instrumental in shaping my subsequent professional development – from the decision to remain in Bulgaria to the entrepreneurial career that I have chosen to have. After you have participated in the founding of a university from scratch, no business start-up seems too daunting. Like quite a few of my classmates, 11 years ago, I co-founded my first business – a software company, which has now developed into two other start-up businesses that I am actively developing at the moment.

Fast-forward to 20 years into the present and my AUBG retrospective may sound all too quaint to the point of being redundant and way beyond the maximum 144 symbols that could fit into a riveting Twitter post, let alone a “like”-able Facebook post. In the age of the digital informational deluge, which constantly threatens to engulf us, it is worth stopping for a moment and celebrating the spark of a vision that AUBG was 20 years ago and the success story that it has become today. Happy 20th Birthday, AUBG!
Deyan Vassilev

Professional Bio

Deyan Vassilev is President of the FinZoom Financial Guide Network, www.finzoom.com, which since 2005 operates leading financial comparison portals in Bulgaria (www.moitepari.bg), Romania (www.finzoom.ro) and Turkey (www.finzoom.com.tr), and empowers millions of consumers to make informed decisions about their personal finances.

Deyan is also a founder and Member of the Board of Creditland – the leading Bulgarian Mortgage Broker, www.creditland.bg, founded in 2005, with offices throughout Bulgaria. Creditland and FinZoom are part of Eastisoft Inc., www.eastisoft.com – a software solutions group co-founded by him in 2000. Prior to that Mr. Vassilev had several years of experience as business assurance advisor with Pricewaterhouse-Coopers Bulgaria where he carried out business assurance, due-diligence and consultancy work for a number of banks, financial institutions and multinational companies in Bulgaria.

Mr. Vassilev is a Certified Accountant with the British Institute of Certified Accountants, ACCA, Founding member of the Board of Directors of the Bulgarian Association of Software Companies (BASSCOM), www.basscom.org in 2002 and the Bulgarian Association of Credit Consultants in 2008. In 2008, Mr. Vassilev was Marshal Memorial Fellow with the German Marshal Fund, and is currently on the selection committee of the Marshal Memorial Fellow Programme for Bulgaria. In the period 2000-2002, he was also on the Board of Trustees of the American University in Bulgaria, www.aubg.bg. He has a B.A. in Applied Economics from the first class of the American University in Bulgaria, www.aubg.bg in 1995. While at AUBG, Mr. Vassilev served 3-consecutive years as the first Student Government President.

Deyan Vassilev is married with two sons, Simeon – 11 and Nikolay – 4, who continue to raise him up as much as he tries to raise them.

Erion Cano

First international presidential medalist

It’s been 15 years since my AUBG graduation in 1996. Incredible how time flies. It seems like yesterday that we were exploring international relations with Professor Derleth and political philosophy with Professor Phillips, learning how to write essays with Professor Feinstein, and puzzling over western concepts of Money and Banking with Professor Grim. The experience was amazing for us kids who grew up under communism, and then found ourselves in a western-style liberal arts institution with little transition in between. It was like a breath of fresh air after a long day in a hot, stifling room. AUBG was unique because of the kind of education it offered and the quality and diversity of the people it attracted.

It wasn’t all work, either. One of my most vivid memories was the hiking club trip that took us to the top of the mountain at the Bansko ski resort. Thankfully for a non-skier like me, it happened off season; no snow in sight.

AUBG opened the door to great new opportunities for me. After graduation, I received an MBA from the University of Maryland and worked for General Motors Treasury in New York. I now work in risk management for a large financial guarantee company in the U.S.

I am proud of my alma mater, what it stood for at the time, and what it continues to stand for today. Congratulations on your 20th anniversary! Your best days are ahead of you.
Truth be told, my decision to go to AUBG back in 1991 was very “unlike me” - rash, even whimsical, and pretty scary at the time, as the university had been barely set up and still awaiting approval from Bulgarian authorities. Looking back, it was one of the best decisions I ever made, and it has given impetus to my entire adult life so far.

I hold two AUBG degrees, and after completing my M.A. studies in the U.S., I spent seven years working in AUBG’s Development & University Relations Offices in Washington D.C. and Sofia. My best friends are fellow alumni. I have hired AUBG graduates in my teams in every job I have held. But most of all, AUBG gave me an attitude and a way of thinking that helps me make the big and small decisions in my life every day. So that I do my best to lead a life of purpose, both personally and professionally.

For me, the university was about passion, questioning, and taking a stand. It was about acknowledging differences of opinions, characters, cultures, and circumstances, and learning to work across or despite these differences. Ultimately, it was about learning that the most universal truth is not some intellectual guru or theory, but learning to learn and embracing a lifetime of learning... if one wants to move forward.

Today I manage Marketing Communications for two of the biggest commercial brands on the Bulgarian market. The industry I work in - telecommunications - is arguably the fastest developing field worldwide, characterized by lightning-speed change and daily innovation. My professional area – marketing – is undergoing a major transformation as well. Largely driven by web and communications technology developments, people today are increasingly in control of what, when, why, and how they get information, and marketing professionals have decreasing ability to edit or manage information flow and content, and influence consumer choices the old ways.

Today, more than ever, people of my profession are forced to rethink long-held assumptions, become open to new realities and opportunities, and be innovative in approach. For many, these fast developments and changes are breeding uneasiness and uncertainty. Me – I am not scared, nor intimidated. I thrive in such dynamics. I learned how to keep on learning a long time ago.
Proto-AUBG memories. The determination to “make this happen,” and the excitement that went with it, written on everyone’s face. The strong sense of commitment among the founding faculty and staff, and the strong sense of community in the Hilltop residence hall. The inconveniences of the first year – lack of equipment, power outages, salads without lettuce, and running into wild animals at Hilltop (snakes, bats and scorpions, to name a few) – all relatively insignificant in the larger adventure of jump-starting a university, of transplanting an educational system to a part of the world largely unknown to the American contingent involved in the process.

What have I done over the last 20 years? Learned “do nyakude” the local language, got in touch with my “inner Bulgarian,” founded music festivals and ensembles, performed hundreds of concerts around Europe, the U.S., and Japan as a cello soloist and chamber musician, puzzled over my dual cultural identity, and watched my Bulgarian-born son grow and puzzle over his. Realized that music isn’t just about listening or creative (self-) expression…

Like AUBG, music is also about bringing people together and transcending all sorts of barriers, real or imagined, that can potentially divide us. Both music and AUBG are important symbols of something that unites us all – the need for meaningful and morally uplifting collective experiences that energize us and allow us to grow as thinking, feeling human beings. To be able to reaffirm this every time I enter the classroom has to be one of the greatest gifts possible. AUBG-ers past, present, and future, stay energized and united through the next 20 years! OK, make it 200 years!
I was admitted to AUBG in the spring of 1997 when, after three months of anti-Milosevic rallies and hope, everything was back to how it had been before, the energy gone and optimism shattered. The stale air of ancient régime weighed down heavier than ever. At that moment the phone call from AUBG came like a dizzying doze of oxygen – not so much a promise of some materialistic better future but a promise of freedom.

I got no shortage of critical thinking and intellectual stimulation at AUBG but what really made it different than any other place were the smartest, craziest people. Driven, inspired and inspiring – people with a spark. I have met some pretty impressive people in my post-AUBG life, too, but never such an amazing group. AUBG magic?

After graduation I made a career in nonprofit communications and advocacy, currently working at the World Health Organization where I am creating digital content and piloting social media campaigns. As a writer in English, I know I would never have been able to compete against the native speakers if it hadn’t been for my AUBG education. But there is something much more important than my majors that I took away from the university and that is a keen sense that the bar needs to be high all the time. AUBG, for me, has always been the antithesis of complacency.

You rocked in your teens, now it’s time for the roaring twenties. Happy 20th birthday, AUBG!

*FlashNews is the first electronic publication at AUBG and the longest-lived student-run news outlet.*
Julia M. Watkins

First 10-Year President

It was a dream, an aspiration; its achievement was complicated and tested daily by uncertainty and the vagaries of politics on both sides of the Atlantic. But positive regard for higher education in Bulgaria and enthusiasm for change, including educational reform, the development of market economies and the recreation of the structures of civil society prevailed in the test of twenty years of educational excellence. To prevail, however, required, as one accreditor said in 1994, a little bit of luck and a lot of hard work. As luck would have it, the students were terrific and the staff was totally dedicated to ensuring the success of the new enterprise, the American University in Bulgaria. Foreign faculty members were inspired by the mission of the institution and enjoyed the challenges of living, teaching, and learning in the “exotic” environment of a Bulgaria in transition from a communist state to a modern, democratic, European state. Bulgarian faculty were guides and mentors to all. The same accreditor, on one of several visits to AUBG, left me a small “magic wand” that I used figuratively, when despair and fatigue from the unending politics seemed sure to sabotage our dream. No amount of hard work or luck would be enough. Yet, here is AUBG at 20 years – solid, excellent, and sure to survive the entirety of the twenty-first century – a tribute to all involved in creating a forward vehicle for change and enlightenment.
In the summer of 1991, I had finished a year of volunteering at the Bahá’í holy places in Israel and joined a group of friends who had come to Blagoevgrad to support the activities of the local Bahá’í community. The visit was ostensibly a parenthesis before enrolling at McGill University; “...just a 3-week stint in Bulgaria,” I thought. I truly enjoyed my time in Blagoevgrad and was told about an American university which was about to open; I looked into it, interviewed with the university’s President and applied! My 3 weeks suddenly mutated into 5+ years, the last year of which I ran the Career Center!

Later one, whilst doing my MBA at Oxford University and as I faced the demands of my course, I became acutely aware of the value of the writing and analytical skills I’d acquired at AUBG. After Oxford, I moved to Barcelona where I’ve been running my own firm for the past several years whilst enjoying the pranks that my little Olinga, now 7 years old, plays on me. Looking back two decades, I realize that AUBG was not just a one-time educational investment, but rather a life-experience package that still tags along everywhere I go.
When we arrived at AUBG in the late summer of 1991, we were introduced to the faculty, who consisted of eight people. There were six classes to choose from, and we had to enroll in five of them. During my first history class the professor asked us if we knew what a submarine was. Some faculty members had brought from the U.S. loads of toilet paper in their suitcases for fear that this product could not be found in Bulgarian shops. For us Bulgarian students (there was only one non-Bulgarian student in the first class) the silliness of all that was rather surreal.

Yet there was something uplifting about AUBG that charged us emotionally and intellectually in a way we’d not experienced before. No other school of higher education in the country could give you that sense of freedom, that sense of opportunity. The curriculum was created almost on an ad-hoc basis, and we students played an instrumental part in shaping it. The same was true of every aspect of our life at AUBG. A university was being built and we laid the concrete in its foundations.

For my part, I rarely opened a textbook in those four years (I rarely missed a lecture and recorded everything in my speedy longhand, and I relied almost entirely on that, taking advantage of the fact that I was the only male Southeast European Studies major in a class where four out of five students majored in Business). Yet, I was on every university committee, from the curriculum committee to the president’s council to the Board of Trustees, where I served as a student representative during my last year at AUBG. I was a student senator for four years and chaired the senate for two of these. (Once I presided over a heated seven-hour meeting – it started at 6:30 pm and finished well past midnight – during which we distributed our handsome budget of $20,000 amongst various student clubs and organizations.)

When I graduated in 1995 I did not consider myself well-schooled, and I was not a specialist in anything. The only real skill I’d acquired was to put my thoughts into words. This, and the sense of freedom, and of opportunity – which is still, to my mind, the biggest asset AUBG offers its students, even though the feeling of ad-hocness is long gone – are, as I’ve come to realize over the years, the biggest capital I’ve acquired in my adult life.

If only to illustrate the limitless nature of the sense of freedom and opportunity that AUBG gave me, I returned to it as a master’s student some 12 years later. I, who was perhaps the most un-businesslike person in my entire undergraduate class and refused to touch a business course with a ten-foot pole, had returned to AUBG to study business. Much to my own surprise, my relationship with textbooks had changed drastically, too: I finished my EMBA with honors as a straight-A student (in fact I couldn’t help it and I got one B, if only to retain a sense of continuity with my previous student self), and I was selected by my cohort to be the EMBA student speaker at the 2008 AUBG commencement ceremony.

What didn’t change about me was my sense of opportunity, my sense of freedom, and the inevitable disposition to speak out. I’ve invested these assets (with varied success, but with equal enthusiasm) in every meaningful thing I’ve done as an entrepreneur, a publisher, and a human being.

Einstein once said that “education is what remains after you forget everything they taught you at school.” If this is true, then, in hindsight, I could hardly imagine getting a better education than the one I received at AUBG.
As an 85-year-old who doesn’t maintain an up-to-date filing system and whose memory is now less than perfect, it’s a bit difficult to pinpoint precisely when I first heard that an American university would open in Bulgaria. In early 1991, after retiring from the U.S. Foreign Service following three years as the U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria, I accepted USAID’s invitation to serve on the Board of the new university in Blagoevgrad. As a private institution, the Board’s role and responsibility was to manage the university’s academic, faculty, financial, and personnel resources.

At the Board’s first meeting, in November 1991, I was elected Chair, and Dr. Georgi Fotev, Deputy Chair. Members included Blagoevgrad Mayor Ellie Masseva, Bulgarians and Americans members, all of whom – despite the lack of a common language – worked together resolving serious financial, personnel and academic problems, making AUBG a stronger and more attractive institution of higher learning. The first graduating class in 1995 had some 200 graduates; enrollment now is over 1,100 students from 40 countries.

After three terms on the Board, I joined the university’s University Council, which enables members to be active in supporting AUBG but have no voting privileges on issues before the Board. The Council has established a financial award for two annual written essay competitions on current policies before the international community. In addition to the Council, I have been, for a number of years, a Trustee of the American College of Sofia, and am the president of the Bulgarian American Society. This Society is financed by a private not-for-profit foundation in the U.S. that supports a number of educational programs for youth, handicapped children organizations, and orphanages.

I congratulate the University for hard work well done, the excellence of AUBG students who make a success of themselves and reflect on a once small university in a little Bulgarian city – you’ve done wonders and I wish you more to come.
I remember the call.

Late one day in May, 1991, while I was in my office at the University of Maine System headquarters in Bangor, I received an unexpected call from my former boss at the University of Maine, Dr. Chick Rauch. “Steve,” he said, “I have a job offer that you can’t refuse.” My thoughts immediately went to the seven months of work that I had done for Chick during the latter half of 1990 as an Interim Director of Business Services at the University of Maine campus in Orono. Although I had applied for the permanent opening, the search committee selected an outsider. Before I could ask him if the person that had been hired was not working out, he added: “The job is in Bulgaria.”

The rest is history. I never stopped thanking Chick Rauch for introducing me to the founding president of the American University in Bulgaria, Dr. Ed Laverty, and for the life-changing experience as a member of the original implementation team. We have so many fond memories of the generous hospitality bestowed upon us during our five years in Bulgaria – too many to record in this short space. Our future will forever be tied to Bulgaria for two very important reasons – our son Darren and daughter Monica, who were born in Bulgaria while we were working at AUBG.

After leaving AUBG in July, 1996, I worked with the Open Society Institute and USAID contractors on various projects throughout Central Europe, Russia, Central Asia and the Middle East. I assumed my current post as Vice President of Finance at the American University of Beirut in 2007. Paula, Darren (now 17) and Monica (now 15) have been my fellow globetrotters over the past fifteen years.

We want to wish President Huwiler and all of our friends at AUBG a Happy 20th Birthday (Chestit Rozhden Den!). AUBG is the best, better said “Nai houbovo!”

Steve Kenney

First CFO

I remember the call.

Late one day in May, 1991, while I was in my office at the University of Maine System headquarters in Bangor, I received an unexpected call from my former boss at the University of Maine, Dr. Chick Rauch. “Steve,” he said, “I have a job offer that you can’t refuse.” My thoughts immediately went to the seven months of work that I had done for Chick during the latter half of 1990 as an Interim Director of Business Services at the University of Maine campus in Orono. Although I had applied for the permanent opening, the search committee selected an outsider. Before I could ask him if the person that had been hired was not working out, he added: “The job is in Bulgaria.”

The rest is history. I never stopped thanking Chick Rauch for introducing me to the founding president of the American University in Bulgaria, Dr. Ed Laverty, and for the life-changing experience as a member of the original implementation team. We have so many fond memories of the generous hospitality bestowed upon us during our five years in Bulgaria – too many to record in this short space. Our future will forever be tied to Bulgaria for two very important reasons – our son Darren and daughter Monica, who were born in Bulgaria while we were working at AUBG.

After leaving AUBG in July, 1996, I worked with the Open Society Institute and USAID contractors on various projects throughout Central Europe, Russia, Central Asia and the Middle East. I assumed my current post as Vice President of Finance at the American University of Beirut in 2007. Paula, Darren (now 17) and Monica (now 15) have been my fellow globetrotters over the past fifteen years.

We want to wish President Huwiler and all of our friends at AUBG a Happy 20th Birthday (Chestit Rozhden Den!). AUBG is the best, better said “Nai houbovo!”

Steve Kenney

First CFO
Blagovesta Momchedjikova  
First female commencement speaker

Tracing AUBG In New York City

As I was getting into costume for the role of Abigail – the naughty girl who accused her enemies of witchcraft – I struck up a conversation with the girl who I shared both the role and the costume with. Our theater professor, Vivian Mason, had decided to double-cast the main characters of Arthur Miller’s “The Crucible”: dark-haired and blond haired casts performed on alternate nights. Tanche was the dark-haired Abigail, and that is how I met my future roommate and best friend: in the ladies room on the second floor of the Main Building – our impromptu dressing space – in between rehearsals for AUBG’s main stage production. When our third friend, Ljubche, saw both of us perform, she admitted that Tanche’s Abigail spooked her out, while mine made her laugh. While the three of us discussed the many ways in which the play transformed based on our respective performances, we started calling each other, lovingly, “witches” (“veshterki”). This was eighteen years ago.

Since then, the three of us “witches” have engaged in the sweetest witchcraft of all – that of friendship – sharing some of the best talks, walks, laughs of our lives. We owe our friendship to AUBG, where we learned that theater has the power to transform ordinary occurrences into extraordinary events.

Between the role of Abigail in 1993 and the role of Commencement Speaker in 1996, I explored various other characters, most notably Meg (B. Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*), Harper (T. Kushner’s *Angels in America*), Seraphina (T. Williams’ *The Rose Tattoo*). I was happy to also perform in a special play that now famous writer and AUBG alum Georgi Iliev – Starcheto wrote for me back in his AU-GG-BG days.

It is the energy of theater that fueled me on my trip to the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. When I left for New York City, I carried several important documents from my AUBG-era: in my front pocket – the round trip ticket that the late Dimi Panitza (one of the founding fathers of AUBG) had gifted me with and two vital hand-drawn maps: one of Manhattan, drawn by Doug Birgfeld as he explained the geography of the island; and one of a bagel place at Grand Central, drawn by Prof. David Durst, who stressed the importance of getting a bagel with cream cheese once on American soil. In my back pocket, I carried my “emotions,” as famous theater director and friend Stavri Karamfilov had advised me to do lest I become too homesick, and the manuscript of Ned Bobkoff’s one-woman play about Clara Schumann (the wife of the composer), *The Man at the Piano is Not Here*, which Ned, my fantastic theater professor and friend, had entrusted me with.

Once in New York City and settled in the Performance Studies department (where I would study with professors Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Peggy Phelan, and May Joseph), I began developing both theater and film characters, among which Clara from Bobkoff’s play and Gurda, from Niels Dachler’s short *Gurdamilia*. Soon after, I started teaching in the renowned Writing Program at New York University, directed by Prof. Pat C. Hoy II, and found a home among other writers there. But, perhaps most importantly, during my early days in New York, I acquired a pair of secondhand rollerblades on my friend Susu Durst’s recommendation. I owe my love of the City to these eight wheels (later lost in the New York City subway, but found within two weeks – and if that’s not a miracle!) – not only did I discover a whole new city through them but I also encountered the subject of my academic interest: the *Panorama of the City of New York* – a mesmerizing scale model of the metropolis.

As in theater, the model stages the convergence of two worlds: its own and its visitor’s. It also teaches us that memory is simultaneously strong and fickle, accurate and fabricated, liberating and imprisoning. And though this New York City model is formally complete as a visual representation (the buildings of all five boroughs are on it), it is never complete for me without what I brought from AUBG to it: Doug’s Manhattan map, David’s bagel shop, Ned’s play, Dimi’s plane ticket; Tanche’s laughter on a long distance call from Bulgaria, and my “emotions” peeking out of my back pocket, against Stavri’s instructions, at this amazing new city, which I feel so strongly through the wheels of my blades...
Blagovesta Momchedjikova holds a Ph.D. in Performance Studies from New York University, where she teaches essay writing classes on art and the city in the Tisch School of the Arts. She chairs the area on Urban Culture for the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association and leads specialized tours of the Panorama of the City of New York – a fascinating scale model of the metropolis (and glorified subject of her doctoral dissertation) located in the Queens Museum of Art. Her urban-inspired work appears in the exhibition catalogue Robert Moses and the Modern City; in the yearly essay writing textbook for the Tisch School of the Arts (NYU); and in the journals Genre: Imagined Cities, The International Journal of Tourist Studies, The Journal of American and Comparative Cultures, X-Cp: Streetnotes, PIERS. Most recently, she guest-edited a special issue of X-Cp: Streetnotes: Urban Feel, where she featured the best work on urban issues that she had encountered as a chair, teacher, writer, and New York enthusiast. Blagovesta lectures and conducts writing workshops both nationally and internationally. Her work was featured in The New York Times, in Washington Square News, and on WKCR. She is the proud mom of two gorgeous boys, who she happily birthed at home in Brooklyn, under the loving care of her midwife Cara, doulas Kali and Kelly, and her own, amazing mom Toni. Homebirth has been the subject of one of her latest poems.
Bulgarian education Minister, Officials honor AUBG at 20th Anniversary Gala

More than 500 officials, friends, alumni, faculty, students, and staff of the American University in Bulgaria came together on Oct. 3, 2011 in Sofia’s Ivan Vazov National Theater to mark the institution’s twentieth anniversary. The evening began with a short program on the stage of the theater and continued with a grand party in front of it.

A keynote speaker at the 20th Anniversary Gala was Bulgaria’s Minister of Education, Sergey Ignatov, who called AUBG “a special place where the Bulgarian spirit and educational traditions intertwine with the educational trends of a globalizing world.” For AUBG’s contribution to higher education in Bulgaria, Minister Ignatov gifted the institution with a special ministry distinction.

Special greetings were also extended by U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria James B. Warlick, Marianne Keler, Chair of AUBG’s Board of Trustees, and AUBG President David Huwiler. The Gala’s guest list included distinguished Bulgarian and international public figures, such as HRH Princess Maria-Luisa and her brother, Simeon II of Bulgaria, Solomon Passy, Meglena Kuneva, Georgi Fotev, Dr. Minko Balkanski, and Yvonne Panitza. Provost Cyrus Reed was the ceremony’s host.

Guests and community members had a chance to listen to live performances by the U.S. Air Force Band and Bulgarian jazz singer Ruth Koleva and to the premiere of AUBG’s anthem, composed by University Council Chairman Gerard van der Sluys. The Gala’s program also included tributes to AUBG’s achievements by More-Honors Academy members and More-Honors founder Anguel Anguelov-Mostuna.

Attendees also helped raise funds for scholarships by bidding on high-value items, many of them unavailable on the open market. These included a cooking tutorial by Valentin Petrov, the Chef de Cuisine at the renowned Moulin de Fourges restaurant in Normandy, and the opportunity to see a film in the making at Nu Boyana Film Studio, Bulgaria’s biggest production studio. Another auction item was a champagne dinner for six at Vaux-le-Vicomte in France.

Some of the auctioned items, such as AUBG’s first commencement staff and business class return tickets to the United States, were donated by AUBG alumni. Many of the institution’s graduates occupy leading positions in government and business in the region and the world. Their success was recognized by the official university ranking system launched by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education in November 2010. According to the ranking, AUBG leads all Bulgarian universities in terms of the employability of its graduates and the incomes they earn.
More than 500 individuals attended the twentieth anniversary gala. Princess Maria-Luisa and Simeon II of Bulgaria were among the evening’s honored guests. Wings of Dixie, a U.S. Air Force Band, entertained the guests. Old friends reunited at the gala. Yvonne Panitza and Minko Balkanski.
20th Anniversary Celebrations Begin Royally: in Violet & with Fireworks

Story & photos by Sylvia Zareva

AUBG’s twentieth anniversary celebrations kicked off on August 29 with fireworks, a live band performance, and games as students, faculty, and staff came together to Porter Baseball Field for the traditional beginning-of-year picnic. This year, community members wore specially designed purple T-shirts in honor of the institution’s twentieth birthday.

Excitement permeated the air as old friends reunited after a long summer break and new friends worked on freshly formed bonds by sharing a picnic blanket or a game of Frisbee or soccer. In addition to 1,000 plus students, faculty, and administrators, more than 50 AUBG graduates attended the opening picnic in search of reminiscence and news about the festivities ahead.

On the eve of its 20th anniversary, the University community had many reasons to celebrate. In just two decades, AUBG has established itself as an academic leader in Southeast Europe. Even Bulgaria’s university ranking system recognized the quality of education at AUBG by giving excellent ratings to the institution in 2010.

In 1991, the institution enrolled its first class, consisting of 208 Bulgarians and 1 Norwegian. Today, AUBG is one of the most diverse universities of its size in the world. About 70% of students are international, and 45 countries on six continents are now represented on campus. Moreover, AUBG offers its students a campus experience that matches what students would find at the very best universities in the United States.

Happy birthday, AUBG!
practice of journalism, but underscored that good storytelling was still indispensable for success in the craft.

Polish Ambassador to Bulgaria Opens Katyn Exhibition at AUBG

October 12, 2011
In October 2011, AUBG hosted an exhibition, a talk, and a movie screening about the Katyn massacre of Polish nationals in Soviet Russia during World War II. Polish Ambassador to Bulgaria Leszek Hensel opened the exhibition of photos, documents and personal letters titled “I remember. Katyn” on October 12 and talked about Katyn’s significance in Polish history.

U.S. Diplomat Gives Eyewitness Account of Recent Balkan History

October 19, 2011
Former U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria James Pardew gave a lecture at AUBG titled “The Breakup of Yugoslavia” on Oct. 19, 2011. The ambassador talked about his personal conflict-resolution experience and his encounters with some of the most important figures in recent Balkan history. Over 40 students, faculty, and staff attended the talk.

International Week 2011 Is the Most Successful Diversity Program to Date

November 14-20, 2011
The diverse events, new program additions, and participants’ enthusiasm made International Week 2011 the best edition of the diversity celebrations to date. During a weeklong lineup of events on November 14-20, students debated the uses and abuses of stereotyping, presented quirky things about their countries, played Jeopardy!, and showed off their cooking and dancing abilities at the Taste Fest, International Week’s crowning event.

Oscar Winner Opens Inaugural Edition of AUBG Short Film Festival

November 24-26, 2011
AUBG hosted its first ever short film festival on November 24-26 last year, showing shorts by established and aspiring filmmakers from more than 13 countries. AUBG Short Film Fest showcased 28 productions ranging from Academy Award-winning documentaries and shorts to independent shorts and student films. Scott Hillier, cinematographer and director of photography of the Academy Award-winning short documentary Twin Towers, kicked off the three-day event in November 2011 with a lecture about the joys and frustrations of doing film.

U.S. Ambassador Discusses Multilateral Diplomacy at AUBG

November 28, 2011
U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria James Warlick gave a talk on the growing importance of multilateral diplomacy in the world, stressing that countries needed to work together in coming up with solutions to global issues such as terrorism, food shortages, war, and economic crises.

AUBG Students, Children from Local Institutions Put on Dazzling Christmas Show

December 5, 2011
More than 30 children from local institutions showed off complex dance routines and singing abilities at the “Christmas Lights” Concert on December 5, 2011. The event was organized by the student-run Better Community Club (BCC) at the American University in Bulgaria in cooperation with Blagoevgrad Municipality.
I am happy to have the opportunity to congratulate the American University in Bulgaria on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. The University can be proud of what it has achieved in the twenty years since its founding and of the values it stands for. It has offered to many hundreds of graduates – Bulgarian but also increasingly from a wide range of other countries – a liberal arts education in the finest tradition of American colleges. It has overcome many challenges to reach the point where it is today. It has had help along the way – from the U.S. government, from enlightened donors such as George Soros, from dedicated individuals such as the late Dimi Panitza and John Menzies. But as with any university, it has prospered because it has been able to attract dedicated, high quality students and faculty. Today, AUBG stands well equipped to face the future with confidence. I wish all those associated with it – students, faculty, administrators – all the best in the years to come.

Please accept my most sincere congratulations on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the American University in Bulgaria. In the past two decades, the private university in Blagoevgrad managed to establish high standards and a strong reputation, which transformed it into one of the most prestigious academic institutions not only in the Balkans but also internationally. Every year students from more than 40 different countries receive their degrees. This means that they have real access to local and global knowledge, a very important condition for the success and development of young people.

I congratulate the faculty for their efforts and care so that their students can have the opportunity to pursue successful careers not only in Bulgaria, but all over the world. Therefore, on this day, dear faculty, you have every reason to be proud of what you have accomplished. And you, dear students, can enjoy a worthy and world-class education. I assure you that you may count on the government’s full support. I am confident that with joint efforts, we will achieve even better results. This is also important for the economic progress of our country, which needs highly educated young people.

Once again, happy anniversary, I wish you all luck and many successes!

I still recall my lecture visit to AUBG and to find to my surprise and delight that during the subsequent vigorous discussion with the students, it was mostly the women who asked questions. I would like to think that AUBG is not only offering first-class education in Bulgaria but is even changing the Balkanese male culture. May you prosper in the next decades.

World-renowned chemist Carl Djerassi gave a lecture at AUBG in November 2007.
The creation of the American University in Bulgaria is the best investment the United States has made in Bulgaria since democracy was re-established in the nation. The University has developed steadily from its first days 20 years ago to become a first class liberal arts university for Bulgaria and the region.

The U.S. Embassy in Sofia had the foresight and determination to launch this ambitious program 20 years ago with the strong support of the U.S. Agency for International Development. Over time, the University became increasingly self-sufficient through the determination of the faculty and private supporters who were committed to the highest standard of education for young scholars. The dividends from that commitment will produce generations of future leaders in every element of society.

I commend those who have worked tirelessly to make AUBG a shining example of the best in higher education since 1991. I am proud to have been associated with the development of AUBG during my tenure as U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria.

Congratulations AUBG for 20 years of success. May you continue to represent the finest in liberal arts higher education far into the future.

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James Warlick
U.S. Ambassador to Bulgaria

I am very pleased to offer my congratulations to the American University of Bulgaria on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary of providing outstanding education to Bulgarian, American and other young people. Since I have visited the campus in Blagoevgrad several times, and been honored to attend the commencement ceremony last year, I have seen that AUBG produces graduates with both top-flight academic credentials and a clear moral purpose. The scholarly achievements are due not only to rigorous standards, but to the spirit of free inquiry and personal interactions with faculty. The commitment to social values stems from AUBG’s emphasis on volunteerism and making contributions to one’s community. Both of these characteristics embody the American style of education at its finest. I congratulate both AUBG’s visionary leaders and its devoted faculty for these achievements. And this is why I believe that AUBG will continue to serve as a model for higher education in Bulgaria for many years to come.

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Kim Campbell
Canada’s 19th Prime Minister

When my dear friend, the late Dimitry Panitza, asked me to visit AUBG as its commencement speaker in May 2011 even his enthusiasm for the university did not prepare me for the excellence I encountered in Blagoevgrad. AUBG is a beacon of light not only in Bulgaria, but in the region. It is a fitting memorial to Dimi Panitza – a founder and proud advocate of AUBG – because his life embodied the spirit of inquiry and commitment to contributing to a better world that is the mission of AUBG.
AUBG used to be, is, and will be on the top of my priority list because my daughter graduated from here. I will tell you a story from that time. Those of us, who belong to, so to speak, the more experienced generation, remember that the 90s was a period of hardship. My daughter started her studies at Maryland University. She finished the first semester and started the second one. One night she came home and said to me: “Mother, I should be either Americanized or go back to Europe.” Then she did something very strange – she became an international (foreign) student in her own country – here at the American University. My relatives kept calling me and saying “Kristalina, how could you let this happen – let your daughter study in Bulgaria – she will become part of the Guinness World Records Book as the only person who left the United States to study in Bulgaria.” Now there are many more such cases.

My attachment to the university obviously is a function of my daughter graduating here, but also a function of the fact that at that time (90’s) I came and I was very impressed by the quality of the students. I talked to an American professor of my daughter… He told me that he has never ever seen a group of students that is so motivated, so hardworking, so smart.

I am very proud that we have so many smart young people in Bulgaria. I am particularly proud that among you there are also students from neighboring countries and far-away countries.

It is my great honor and pleasure to congratulate you for the 20th anniversary of the American University in Bulgaria.

The American University in Bulgaria is a special place where the Bulgarian spirit and educational traditions intertwine with the educational trends of a globalizing world. It is not by chance that young people from more than 30 countries come to the university to learn together.

Year after year, AUBG affirms its place among the best higher education institutions in the country and the region. Its alumni occupy leading positions not only in Bulgaria, but also in prestigious international companies, in governments and state administrations, and in major non-profit organizations all over the world.

The faculty of the American University in Bulgaria have proven themselves capable of successfully preparing educated, knowledgeable, and capable professionals, ensuring that every student fulfills their potential on the dynamic labor market in the knowledge economy.

I wish the administration, faculty, staff, and students of the American University in Bulgaria to keep up the spirit that drives them to keep improving and creating opportunities for the personal, social, and professional fulfillment of young people.

The AUBG is a remarkable university doing remarkable work, offering real opportunity to bright and ambitious young people across South Eastern Europe and well beyond. For them accessing tertiary education of this standard usually means surmounting immense obstacles – the diversity, the outreach, the high standards and the warmth of AUBG represent a golden key in unlocking the significant potential of intellectual capital in this region which has remained stifled for too long.
Twenty years ago, the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union were struggling to reinvent themselves as free and democratic states. In 1991 a visiting academic delegation from the University of Maine suggested creating a selective, residential, higher education institution in Bulgaria that was based upon the classic American liberal arts model. Although the idea seemed an unlikely one at the time, a band of young Bulgarian enthusiasts – members of the newly elected parliament, intellectuals, the mayor of Blagoevgrad, and directors of the just created Open Society Institute in Sofia, came to see me in the Presidency to solicit my support for the establishment of a residential, American-style liberal arts university, a model entirely unknown in Eastern Europe but which I immediately sensed could become an institution that would provide the highest quality education to a new generation of leaders that would assist the newly independent Bulgaria to develop economically, politically, and socially. I endorsed the idea immediately. A committee was formed; I became its patron and appointed Stefan Tafrov, who later served as ambassador of Bulgaria to several countries and to the UN, as its secretary.

Within days, former communists, now-baptized socialists, reacted with anger, provoking vehement discussions in Parliament and the media, attacking the initiators for being lackeys of the Americans, spies on the payroll of the CIA, etc. They went further and proposed the establishment of a Slavonic University, closely tied to Moscow that no one seemed to see much value in...

All this was happening at the beginning of 1991, at a time when Bulgaria was going through its worst economic crisis, with shortages of money, food, and all basic essentials. Seed capital was needed if the American University in Bulgaria would ever see the light of day. At least one million dollars were necessary.

This is when a small miracle occurred. Young Stefan Tafrov had met George Soros in February 1991 in Sofia, who had appointed him as one of three directors of the Open Society Institute that had just been set up. Stefan figured that the only possible donor would be Mr. Soros. He had an enthusiastic supporter in the person of John Menzies, the Public Affairs Officer of the American Embassy in Bulgaria who was also instrumental in the creation of AUBG. Hearing that Mr. Soros was in Prague and about to fly to Russia, Stefan and John Menzies jumped in a diplomatic car and set out to drive non-stop to Prague, to catch Mr. Soros at breakfast. As they walked in the room, Stefan recalls Mr. Soros greeting them with, “All right, gentlemen, tell me, how much is this breakfast going to cost me?”

“Only one million dollars,” answered John and Stefan. “Fine, you’ve got them, now, will you tell me what for?” A detailed explanation of the idea of AUBG followed, the million-dollar grant was confirmed, and on June 24, 1991, after a debate in the National Assembly, AUBG became a reality.

On a cold and foggy November afternoon of that year, Mr. Soros and I, surrounded by Mrs. Aileen Chow, President George Bush’s special envoy for the occasion, Sol Polansky and members of the first board of AUBG, stood to attention as the army band played the national anthems of Bulgaria and the USA and the ceremonial ribbon indicating the official opening of the American University in Bulgaria was cut. Since then, with the generous help of the American government, Mr. Soros’s Open Society Institute, the America for Bulgaria Foundation, friends and supporters from around the world, AUBG has become a stunning success story. Its academic ranking is at its highest, professors are outstanding, and the institution has become a beacon of democracy, tolerance, and freedom of thought that is unique in our turbulent post-communist world.

Of great importance to me is also the fact that over the years the largest individual donors to AUBG have been Bulgarians: Mrs. Anna Tchaprachikoff, Minko Balkanski, Atanas Zamphiroyoff, Dimi Panitzia, Stephane Groueff, and others. Unfortunately many of them already passed away and I would like herewith to render homage with gratitude for what they did. I express also my sincere gratitude to Mr. Soros for being the father of AUBG. Let me congratulate Mr. Huwiler and the staff of this wonderful University that have tirelessly worked for its prosperity and perfect reputation.

Good luck and every success in your future endeavors! God bless you all!
Before and After

Student Government

AUBG has been a magnet for theater buffs for 20 years, and has even produced an award-winning writer and playwright, Georgi Iliev-Starcheto ’96.

For Student Government to work, the surroundings don’t matter as much as the people in it.

Technology

In 1991, the laptop would have sounded like something out of a science fiction movie. In 2011, DOS would more likely translate as “definitely old stuff.”

Theater

AUBG has been a magnet for theater buffs for 20 years, and has even produced an award-winning writer and playwright, Georgi Iliev-Starcheto ’96.
The smile has always been among the prettiest party accessories.

Heavy on comfort, light on character.

Heavy on character, light on comfort.

Before and After.

Residence Halls:
- Volga
- Skaptopara
- Waterworks
- Hilltop

Fashion:
- The smile has always been among the prettiest party accessories
Regardless of the surroundings, our students have always been thirsty for knowledge. Doing homework in 1991 was a slog; you had to dig through several hundred volumes to find what you need. Today, the right answers are just a click away: Panitza Library offers access to the world’s best online resources in addition to the more than 100,000 books and print publications.

At the first commencement ceremony in 1995, Blagoevgrad locals were taken aback by the congregation of “priests” that descended on Georgi Izmirliev Square. Today, Commencement is a much-anticipated occasion that fills the town’s main square with an admiring crowd.
The moves and the mood are the same, only the scope is different. The AUBG musical has become an AUBG institution, just like More-Honors, AURA, and FlashNews.

In 1995, students worried less about getting disheveled than they do now and danced the night away.

After 20 years of practice, our seating calculations finally came out right.
Imagining the Future

Alba Gjino, Albania
Student Representative to the Board of Trustees, 2011-12

AUBG has played an important role in my life and thus will shape every decision regarding my future. Even in 20 years from now I do not think I will be able to find the right words to describe this wonderful experience where education meets standards and diversity. I can imagine AUBG being one of the leading universities in Europe with a big campus and research institute. The university will have introduced new majors and maybe online courses for the first time in the region. Also, the new Caucasian research center will be one of the most famous institutions where eager professionals from all over the world will meet up and discuss the latest issues. Moreover, quality will remain the primary force pushing parents to send their children to AUBG. For one thing I am sure and that is AUBG will remain a safe investment even 20 years from now.

Alexander Nestorov, Bulgaria
More-Honors co-president, 2010-11

While relatively young in age, AUBG has given full indication that it is a university run with a long-term vision. An undisputed leader in the region in regards to quality of education and diversity of the student body, I am adamant that this position will be preserved and strengthened in the future. In the years to come I see AUBG continue to expand its number of students enrolled, continue to improve its campus base, implement technology and modern ways of education into its philosophy, and enrich its liberal arts status by popularizing new major programs in different fields. I see established student clubs grow in experience and stature to become well-recognized and respected entities beyond the boundaries of the university, as well as new clubs to emerge and provide innovative thinking, always serving as a creative supplement to academic life. But above all, I see a community kept together by an ever-growing history and a strong sense of belonging.

Elitsa Nacheva, Bulgaria
Student Government president, 2010-11

In 20 years AUBG will be a place that will make its founding father Dimi Panitza proud. Now we say “AUBG is the place to be.” In 20 years, we will be saying that “AUBG is the place where you have to be” in order to grow into a young and promising professional. In 20 years it will be the leading university in Bulgaria, not only in economics, but also in all of its departments, which will grow in number. In 20 years, its alumni will be making history in their fields and its professors will be the most renowned in the region. In 20 years, we will be looking back and thanking those entrepreneurs who believed and dared and made it possible to have the American University in Bulgaria, which shaped us into the people that we are today.
Dear First Year Students of the Class of 2035,

AUBG has always been a place of promise for a better future and since I graduated two decades ago, it has expanded and grown into one of the most prestigious international universities, attracting top professors from every discipline and world-class administrators. I am proud to say that while living and studying at the fully equipped campus facilities, you will have access to: state of the art sports center, global cuisine cafeteria, and the most modern digital classrooms. Attending AUBG will also give you the unique opportunity to study with students from every continent, representing over 100 countries, and speaking dozens of languages. Beyond the on-campus global immersion, you will have the chance to broaden your horizons further by spending a semester or two at one of AUBG’s satellite campuses across Bulgaria and abroad, made much easier now than in the past since issues of border control and visas no longer trouble us in our current globalized society.

There is so much I see happening to AUBG in the next twenty years, a lot relating to the university expanding. I see a huge increase in the number of students and with that, AUBG will have more campuses around Blagoevgrad. There will be more exchange students coming in, many from new countries not yet represented at AUBG, and more AUBG students would get to be exchange students themselves. The relations AUBG has with other universities and businesses will be improved and contracts with huge companies in the region would allow for greater scholarship and internship opportunities. Moreover, AUBG will enter the ranking list of the top 500 universities in the world. I also hope to see AUBG having more graduate students pursuing master’s degrees at the top 10 universities in the world, such as Cambridge, Harvard, and MIT.

I see AUBG in 20 years from now as a university that will be well known not only in the Balkan region, but also in the rest of the world. The number of students will significantly increase during that period as the popularity of the university will be spreading around the globe. The number of countries represented will rise respectively, which will promote the diversity on campus and help the institution prepare active citizens of the world. Professors at AUBG will use various creative ways of teaching using innovative technologies. I believe that in 20 years AUBG students will have a much bigger choice of major and minor programs, thus the students will be able to devote themselves to a field they are really passionate about. To conclude, I suppose in the near future the most successful companies in the world will compete with each other to attract our AUBG students.

In closing, my years at AUBG were the best and most formative of my life. Though the school has developed into a dynamic, technologically advanced institution, its strongest asset still remains its students. So reach out, make connections, and remember that the friendships you develop at AUBG will last a lifetime.