Leading with kindness

By Naseem Ferdowsi

By living a life of compassion, Mona Bawarshi, president and CEO of Gezairi Transport, has grown her sea freight company into a regional player.

“The world and business are moving towards aggression and power, but I sing another tune,” says Mona Bawarshi, president and CEO of Gezairi Transport, a family-owned sea freight company based in Beirut.

Bawarshi is referring to her philosophy in life and business, which is simple: be kind to others. She has used this approach for more than 45 years as she navigated her company’s journey from a small customs clearing office to a regional shipping player, distinguished for its expertise in freight forwarding, warehousing and distribution.

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— Mona Bawarshi, president and CEO of Gezairi Transport

“I startle people with my ‘hellos’ and ‘good mornings;’” she says. “People are absolutely surprised by a friendly greeting these days.” Bawarshi conducts her daily life with kindness, whether she’s managing operations at Gezairi’s headquarters in downtown Beirut or trying to make her next flight to one of her company’s 22 offices located in six countries.

Her father established Gezairi Transport in 1945. More than 70 years later, little has changed, according to Bawarshi. “The port is still a source and way of life for so many. Of course, technology and competition have affected our industry, but water is still the way we move goods,” she affirms.

With waterways remaining an important way to transport goods, Bawarshi believes the need for education in the field is crucial. “At a young age, we – as Lebanese – learn from geography books that we live on the sea and are a transit country with an important port. All of which is true, but for some reason our learning stops there. We need to educate students so they can take advantage of this important resource,” she says.

To be sure, learning on the job is an important way to gain the necessary skills and knowledge for a career in shipping, similar to the manner in which Bawarshi entered the industry. Recalling the first few years of her time at Gezairi Transport she says, “We all came and learned on the job, but it wasn’t easy. Back then and even today, you rarely find a person at the port who has a degree specifically related to the industry,” she points out, insisting that “this needs to change.”

Bawarshi is a proponent of education in general and made a generous building donation to LAU in 2012, which allowed the Beirut campus to grow considerably. The donated Gezairi building, located in the heart of Hamra near campus, now houses the university’s fashion design program and will be refurbished to accommodate more programs and classes.

Beside education, Bawarshi firmly believes in karma and kindness, and credits her success both in life and business to these values. In fact, when asked what principles LAU should instill in its students, she says compassion is all you need. “If we are kind to our planet and its resources, and kind to others, so many of the world’s problems can be eliminated,” she says. “It’s very basic and it starts at LAU, and has the potential to spread. Kindness is all we need.”