

Alumnae Achievement Award 2014
Remarks by Ellen Moore Suthers, Class of 1973

Well, Ann Close and I had the same major, but they must have discontinued the classes in stand-up comedy by the early 1970s when I was here!

My heartfelt thanks go to Kathie Matthews Hoffmann, Karen Patterson, and other classmates for their recommendation; to Heather Garnett and the selection committee, and, finally, President Bateman for the decision to present me with an Alumnae Achievement Award. Congratulations to fellow recipients, and thanks to all for including my family and me tonight.

Stunned by the call from President Bateman, I rather ungraciously suggested he must have the wrong person. No, he said. Then why me, when so many alums are more deserving? How about giving it some thought, he proposed. Later, my husband Paul confessed he had hacked into my computer for a resume to send Kathie and Karen. My first thought: Why would they, knowing my insecurities, conspire to push me onto this podium?

Then a flashback to adolescence: my name over the loudspeaker, mother insisting I claim the door prize, mortification to be chased to the stage by a spotlight, to be given a pot of chrysanthemums in which I had no vested interest. I have learned that to keep moving through one's fear can be fortifying, although moving, in any sense, is never my first reaction at an African roadblock! Fear itself is not fatal. How one reacts to fear determines the outcome.

Calmer thinking called up four core values of our college-- graciousness, hard work, humility, and duty to serve others. I accepted to step into the spotlight tonight as an opportunity, indeed a responsibility, to do three things:

First:

Express graciously my thanks for the many years of encouragement and support from professors and classmates, friends, and family- especially my husband Paul and daughters Ashley and Katherine.

Second:

Do the hard work of speaking here tonight, giving you first some background to show how the liberal arts education, built by many hands at my alma mater, became the foundation for a professional life that has allowed me to serve others.

Third:

Accept this recognition, not for myself, but on behalf of many people in Sierra Leone, giving you a picture of the people and their efforts that made possible the sustainability of their community-driven project highlighted in the recommendation letter.

So, first:

I hope the substance of my remarks tonight will convey my deep appreciation to everyone who has helped shape my very abundant life.

Secondly, some background:

I said "hard work" because, even after years of practice speaking before many audiences of students, parents, educators, bureaucrats, diplomats, government ministers, and now add alumnae, alumni, and college administrators, it is still not easy. I should have pushed through the fear to speak up more in class, as Dr. Strickland urged, while having a mentor and sympathetic audience. So, echoing my professor, I

urge students here to take advantage of this nurturing environment to hone your speaking (and writing) skills. They will enhance everything you do from now on.

People ask how (really wondering why on earth) I chose anthropology and Africa. The “why” answer is simple: confidence this would hold my interest indefinitely. So far, so good! The “how” answer I will give you, in abbreviated form, because I believe it exemplifies the value of a liberal arts education. To attend college was a given. Three generations of women before me had paved the way. My grandmother, Frances Hopkins Tredway, class of 1916 and a close friend of Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, passed away before knowing I chose to attend this college out of sentiment and tradition. Over the four years, with inspiration and guidance from many sources, a sense of purpose and direction evolved.

Distribution requirements meant exploring new fields of study. The discovery of anthropology connected the present with bits of my past: pasting National Geographic photos into school reports, wearing a bracelet my uncle brought back after filming African animals for the television show Wild Kingdom, growing up in southern Virginia during the 1960s. Dr. Moreland tapped my interest in race and culture, engaged me in research, and co-authored a journal article. Dr. Strickland’s sociology classes provided the terminology and methods of analysis for social patterns I tended to observe. Her office was always open, the shelves filled with books on Africa. She advised the social impact component of the Blackwater Creek Park study for which I met with city planners and conducted interviews with residents all over Lynchburg while Kathie and Karen analyzed the flora and fauna for the biology component. Who knew then that perspectives gained from this interdisciplinary experience would inform the Sierra Leone project more than 30 years later? So did the lesson that to ensure sustainability, it is essential to involve all of the stakeholders. This lesson can be applied in workplaces and families too, I have found.

Blocks added to the foundation include: Graduate school at UVA, that forced a career choice between anthropology and sociology, (the former suiting my interests more), work at the National Museum of African Art; a Fulbright dissertation grant; field studies in Cote d’Ivoire (accompanied by Paul); a PhD; and university teaching. Now, fast forward through childrearing (rewards being our amazing daughters) and volunteer work as a parent educator, to the day I was hired as team anthropologist for the small non-governmental organization that received primary funding for the project in Sierra Leone from the Tiffany & Company Foundation.

Who would have imagined-- a second blue box? The past connects the present, again!

Now, thirdly, the Sierra Leone project:

In the region of Sierra Leone most devastated by the war depicted in the film Blood Diamonds, people still struggle to rebuild their houses and rehabilitate land left barren by deep, disease-ridden mining pits. The experimental community-driven project was an initiative to improve environmental conditions and restore land for greater food and livelihood security. It took two villages, a town, and a host of people in roles as government ministers, chiefs, civic leaders, elders, heads of landowning families, agricultural experts, men, women, and youths, and the project field representative: Daniel Gbondo, a remarkable young man from the town, with degrees in sociology and peace studies. These people, whose lives are far from abundant in most ways, invested their knowledge, labor, and limited resources for nearly four years to transform over 100 acres of pits into productive agricultural fields to feed their communities. It was a privilege to work with them as project manager.

Key components of the project included an effective partnership between the communities and my organization, broad-based community participation, commitments from all stakeholder groups, and agreements for sharing the benefits. Men and women worked side-by-side, filling holes and growing rice with simple hand-held tools. Their courage, cooperation, and perseverance helped create the conditions in which they gained the skills and built commitments to maintain and replicate the work over time.

Outcomes included the establishment of sound environmental practices, improved social and economic conditions, greater local governance capacities, and greater gender equality. That last one, you might imagine, was especially rewarding to me. The transformation was tangible. Women at the beginning were reticent, with demeanors that spoke loudly of war's brutality. At the end, when the communities assumed full responsibility for sustainability, these same women participated equally in discussions with men, with squared shoulders and confident voices. Although this outcome is not measurable against kilos of rice, I am confident of its lasting impact.

This is a very poignant moment in time to direct the spotlight to the people involved in the Sierra Leone project, to share their humanity with you as I accept this award on their behalf. The town and villages that participated in this project are located precisely at ground zero for the Ebola virus, although Liberia is getting much more media attention in the U.S. I worry about the well-being of everyone in the region. I have not yet figured out to move through the fear to offer some form of meaningful support. I hope to soon.

Quickly, to conclude with thoughts on the core values:

Graciousness can initiate and help us sustain connections that make life more abundant in ways we cannot always anticipate.

Working to move through personal roadblocks- fear, complacency, or whatever- lets us get on with the real work that brings lasting rewards.

Humility aims the spotlight on outcomes, which rarely, if ever, are produced by a sole individual, but rather by a constellation of forces both past and present.

Duty to serve others challenges us to be creative and persistent in our endeavors to widen the circle of human beings who share in life more abundant.

Thank you!