

Letters Home

Welcome to fall 2007 commencement ceremonies, and congratulations to all of the graduates! It is such an honor to have the opportunity to stand here to mark the end of our journey at St. Cloud State. It's an old cliché that life is a journey; and education is as well. I'd like to share with you the journey one student made to St. Cloud State-- or I should say the St. Cloud Normal School. Here is what one member of this school's first graduating class, whose name was Mrs. Freeman, had to say about her educational journey:

"September fifteenth, eighteen hundred and sixty nine found me seeking admittance to the St. Cloud Normal School. It was the birth of the school-- the very beginning hour. I was but sixteen years of age, yet had been teaching two years so great was the dearth of teachers in those pioneer days of the good old state of Minnesota. [...] It was the closing day of the summer term of my country school, when I went to my boarding place for lunch and found on my plate a circular announcing the opening of the Third State Normal School at St. Cloud the very next Wednesday. When I read the circular I said, 'there is my chance, I'll be there when that school opens,' and I was although I had but three days in which to get ready and make the journey."

Mrs. Freeman would probably be surprised to know that today, almost one hundred years after she wrote those words, students make the journey to St. Cloud State not just from 'the good old state of Minnesota', but from around the world. What brings us all to

St. Cloud State? [Pause] Perhaps, when thinking about your education, you think of following your dreams, challenging yourself to reach your potential, reaching up to new heights to achieve great things. However, my time as an undergraduate has led me to look at education in a different light. Much of my thought in this area can be credited to those whom I have met here over the last few years, so when I contemplated how to share my ideas with you, it seemed natural to ask other students to help. And, as education is a journey, I asked them to share their feelings regarding education in the form of a letter, written as if addressed to someone who encouraged them to make the journey to St. Cloud State. My education has been an education in people. My conclusion: that, when all is said and done, we make the same journey. So let's begin with Mary Delia Mokwe, member of the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ.

Dear Mother Superior,

It has been four years since I have left Nigeria and my convent for the United States; I hope that, within two more, I can return home. And what a journey it has been!

The quality of education here [in the United States] is very high. A lot of young people back home don't have the luxury to go to school, so I hope and I wish and I pray, that when I finish my studies here, I can help these people, because there was a time when I didn't have anything, and now I have something to give. When I go back to my country, I would like, if my community will allow me to do so, to... educate those people who have

no opportunity to know, so I can give them what I have learned from here. Knowledge is: you gain it, you give it out, and when you give it you make sure that the person you give it to can give it to someone else as well. And most importantly, we learn about people, and this is knowledge.

Love,

Mary Delia

If the journey to St. Cloud State can be a challenge, the journey home can be equally as difficult. Consider Bashir Aynab's story.

Dear Farah,

I made it back to the United States-- a lot of people asked why I would want to return to Somalia, even only for a month-long trip, they thought that I should stay here because it is too dangerous. But you know what, it's my country and I feel safe there.

When I graduate, I could stay here and say, "I'm not going back to the violence in Somalia, forget about there", but my people continue to nourish me, and I believe that I can help them. My goal is to help everybody, my family and my friends and my

community. I don't know a single person who has gone back home after coming to the United States. I will be that person.

Your brother,

Bashir

Both Mary Delia and Bashir, and so many of the graduates here today, have made incredible journeys to St. Cloud State to receive their education. So what is an education? I asked that question earlier. A real education is fostered by the other people with whom we have shared our journey. As unfamiliar and exotic as many students' journeys may be, we are all just people who came here to learn. And really, as big as this world is, it's full of just ordinary people, with dreams, and goals, and passions, and hopes for the future--we are all united in that.

I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to take a minute to share my own letter:

Dear Family,

I'm graduating today; that feels funny to say; for some reason, I don't feel how I thought I would when I was younger imagining myself graduating from college. It's such a gift that I've never had to be afraid of not having the resources to achieve my goals. I think that's how my education has changed me: it's shown me how much I have-- and how much I

have to give. Learning isn't about what my knowledge and skills can do for me, but about what they can do for all of us. Love, Alex

Thank you, to all of the MNSCU and SCSU administration, to the faculty and staff, to the St. Cloud community, to Mary Delia and Bashir for allowing me to share their stories, and to all of the parents, family and friends who are here supporting the graduates today. And most of all, thank you, in advance, to the graduates, for the contributions to our world that you will make. Standing up here I can't help but wonder, as I am sure you are right now, where you will be, what you will be, *who* you will be, many years from now. Who knows. For a few final words of guidance, let's return to Mrs. Freeman, whose words from 1913 seem as if written for today:

I have not seen my Alma Mater for more than twenty-five years, but it has a warm place in my heart [...] It is well we can see but one step at a time... I saw then only in part. The forward look saw only sunshine across the chosen field...the backward look sees too the sunshine, success and triumphs, but it also sees the fierce gales. Sunshine comes after the clouds, joy after sorrow, victory with the battle. For all of this ... our dear old Alma Mater helped to equip and make us fit... and our achievements, our victories, our honors are hers also."

Thank you.

Freeman, N. (1913, 18 March) Normal Graduates Held Meeting: Interesting Paper on
Early History [sic] of the School by Mrs. N. Freeman. *The St. Cloud Journal* Press,
p. 7