

STAYING YOUNG AT HEART, A SAN JOSE HISTORY

Homecoming princess for a major university at the age of 55 - what a scrumptious idea on the menu of education! Staying young at heart and vital in the community has always been a priority in my life. When served lemons and a sour set of issues, I decide to make lemonade from the resources and situations on hand. I seek the village from one of my suitable support systems to make the circumstances a palatable, healthy lemonade. These continue to be major elements in my value system, in my recipe to feel and thrive as I stay young at heart.

My name is Patricia (Patty) Watkins, and I was a 2002-3 homecoming princess for San Jose State University (SJSU) – a student body of 30,000 in the Silicon Valley of Northern California. I was a full-time, disABLED student majoring in creative arts with a minor in art history.

Golden Key International Honour Society (a world wide scholastic organization) and the DisABLED Students Association (DSA) of SJSU nominated me to represent them in October 2002. The Golden Key Society offers membership to the top fifteen percentile of all university populations. My outstanding grade point average of nearly

four point zero, allowed me to become a member of the society for life.

Each fall semester every student organization on the SJSU campus has the opportunity to nominate a representative for their club, sorority, fraternity, or other organization to become a member of the Homecoming Court.

Me, a senior citizen and twice divorced mother of four children whom I had the privilege of birthing and raising as a single parent (their ages were at the time 18, 19, 27, and 30). Both challenges have kept me young in spirit and vital in my community. The nomination gave me a platform to mentor to all sorts of students, faculty, and staff in addition to my neighborhood and friends, community in general, and citizens of Santa Clara County. I used this podium to exemplify how important volunteering, studying throughout life, celebrating dignified diversity is in living a full and productive, caring existence. Today, in 2008, I continue to learn weekly, if not daily, from my children, my choral directors, fellow musicians, creative writing teacher, and fellow writers. I advocate our life time being a continuation of our education; the two equal one another. The village of friends, family, mentors, and survivors that

we choose to have surround us, should be our most supportive and nurturing folks we, by the grace of God, have in our reality. We need to honor each as a treasure and true gift to our being. Sharing that idea is part of sparkling their existence – our words and actions must exude this to each soul.

After my nomination by the two campus organizations to become a part of the homecoming court, I submitted an essay discussing my campus and general outside of SJSU community services. Because of my age, I had an advantage over the younger generations involved in university life; their so far short life could not necessarily have experienced teenage parenting at the “grad nite” of their high school graduate, four times over. I truly gave lots of energy, skill, and time to writing essays for my college scholarships, selling those bake sale items for the geology club... and networking with numerous leaders on the paths of education. My first career had been a vocational (on the job training) school thirty some years ago in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The next homecoming court requirement was an opportunity to voice to the selection committee the reasons why I should represent my diversified student body and

how I was a contributing citizen who deserved such an honor. My school spirit, patience, energy, and vigor were vital factors in the selection team's decision.

After being selected to continue the journey onto the court, two progressive (pass one to get to the next dialogue) intense personal one on one interviews followed. The committee was most interested in ways to celebrate homecoming week and include more attendees of the alumni and current students in fun and adventurous homecoming activities. I was delighted to represent my fellow students, to refresh and inspire the committee members with my ideas. I suggested better public relations extensions and networking to name just two suggestions.

Two days later I was introduced to the student body outside the student union building. What a thrill to speak to such a crowd, representing two of the many campus organizations that I belonged to. I realized how much the school's spirit and traditions meant to me...me a gal of the sixties who was now again a college student after a stunning medical career and four children. I had tears of joy as my name was announced while dear friends, family, and acquaintances, faculty, and campus clubs applauded. To represent Golden Key and the DSA students of SJSU

was a great mark of distinction that does not occur each year. Too often, it is the fraternities and sororities that consume the merriment of homecomings at universities throughout the United States. This year was different.

All the experiences at the podium and introductions throughout the week leading up to the Homecoming football game added to my excitement for life and staying young at heart. I was the age of so many of my professors and old enough, yet not necessarily mature enough, to be the mother of seven eighths of my fellow university students.

To participate in the celebration and homecoming halftime events was exhilarating! The morning of the homecoming football game, I showered, then dressed in my sequined lavender, full length velvet gown. A rhinestone tiara given to me as a court memento for the occasion crowned my curled tresses. Oh how it sparkled in the California sun as I raced to the early Homecoming Day designated meeting place, near Spartan Stadium on Seventh Street in San Jose. The school newspaper reporter and photographer arrived to interview and photograph each of the six finalists. Eek! Where was my “court sash”? The white ribbon was to be displayed across my chest

announcing verbally who I was, a member of the Homecoming Court. I had dashed from Pinewood so quickly, I had left it on my queen bed at home.

Could I get in touch with my daughters before they had to leave for their individual jobs? Thank God I had the privilege of a cell phone in my tiny sequined bag. A call to home brought my two youngest gals speeding to the stadium-glorious! Sarah, the youngest, had just earned her driver's license, and followed my directions through the downtown turnoffs. As I approached the car, I gave a smile and a sigh of relief.

“Congratulations, dear, great job in getting here. May I have my sash?”

Both Sarah and her sister, Krista, looked at me in despair. “Gad Mom,” shouted Krista, “We rushed for the car and directions so fast, we forgot to get the thing.”

Off they raced home to beat the clock and procure the neglected sash. We met at the same spot and finally the sash found its place around my bosom. To pass the time, I had greeted and thanked hundreds of guests entering the football event with their blue and yellow garb showing their spirit and joy to be “coming home.”

Now, completely dressed in my royal attire, I found my way to the next timed meeting of the court. Three groomed convertible mustangs carrying six candidates – three princesses and three princes - filed behind the band into the giant arena to join the festivities . Here I was sitting beside a young fellow (a prince representing Alpha Phi Omega), atop the back of the blue convertible. My Theo and I waved to the crowd, just like in the movies! Our parade lined up beside others who would perform and entertain. My prince and I chatted with one another and those involved in the joyous party pacing along side our motored caravan.

“How’d you get to be in the parade?” seeked one of my contemporaries, a woman close to senior hood.

“Lots of volunteering for my colleges now and years ago plus all those things we do on behalf of our children and our survival,” I sang back to satisfy her inquiry.

Prince Theo and I sat on the back of the lead Mustang. It is not as comfortable as you may think. I wished that I had thought of a pillow for our tushes;

Theo agreed. There are some sacrifices with royalty.

The cheers and enthusiasm of the throng fueled my ecstasy – waving and smiling at the audience and the 20-year-old beside me as we paraded around the outside field of the Spartan Stadium. “Crazy George”, another close to senior hood alumnus led exhilarated cheers to the drums cadence. My lips never got tired of grinning and laughing.

I was not crowned queen, and yet I certainly felt like one. SJSU lost the football game to Idaho State University but that did not change the euphoric honor of being in the Homecoming Court with all its excitement.

I am a returning matured adult student after a 35 year lapse between college life and my medical career. Of 30 years, a single parent, a senior citizen, and the granddaughter of an immigrant. In addition to being a member of Golden Key, I also serve as president of the DisABLED Students Association (DSA).

I am a member of Who’s Who Among Universities and College Students (2003) and the recipient of numerous awards and scholarships, including Golden Key/Ford Undergraduate Scholarship. Most of all, I represent and promote diversity in a global environment on my campus.

The dynamics of the average university college student have changed, and I am part of that change. Due to

injuries, hidden injuries, I had the opportunity for a career change. Despite my disABLITITIES, and through numerous and outstanding accommodations, exquisite, caring mentors, I find the energy and courage to advocate for those I represent and to resolve many campus issues. Each month I found numerous battery operated doors on campus whose power had been depleted; no one had reported the unopening doors to facility or the equipment had not been tended to in a timely manner. I assisted facilities and maintenance to be accountable to all those who depended on such doorways to operate. I find that unless a person needs a modification for learning, testing, or physical disABILITIES, the aid, the adaptation does not appear to be that important. I grew up with an uncle who was paralyzed from the waist down. My brother and I helped with Uncle Kenny's wheel chair, doorways, picking up and moving things out of the way for him each summer when we visited his home; for three weeks we observed how others behave and treat people with challenges that may be different than what they are used to. I dare say because I lived with him and his family, my awareness for accommodations, changes in everyday life was quite high compared to friends and community who may not have had

the opportunity to adjust and change their lives and mannerisms on behalf of someone else. On campus every week, I have the opportunity to introduce a fellow student to at least an idea that may assist him or her in their college and career pursuits. Every chance to enhance the student body regarding disABLED students' issues, I took. The persistent, caring, and dedicated staff of the Disability Resource Center (DRC) work for the nurturing, betterment, and stability of resources. The DRC enables each student to do their best with their studies as they journey through the educational system. The DRC staff is known nationally as one of the most caring and supportive group of professionals to assist and meet the students needs and challenges.

Our DSA club meetings provided monthly meetings to address and educate our community about opportunities and challenges, improvements, innovative thinking – new and positive ways to look at and take on the educational and vocational careers afforded us as a group and as individuals. We as a group of men and women dared to be different and braved the facts of our mental, physical, learning, and emotional trials; speakers, demonstrations, movies, and mentors all contributed to our education and

our fun. One of the mantras I established as a cheer for us was “Laugh to capacity each and every day; we only have this moment to be kind and receive the kindness of other souls.” I also established a scholarship in honor of Donna Ellis, a DRC counselor who worked on campus for decades. It was Donna’s persistence in never giving up on me and encouraging me to seek more educational opportunities at SJSU that helped me through the system. Her mentoring led me to pursue the accommodations I needed with my learning disABILITIES. I had worked for thirty years wondering about some challenges and she assisted me in facing those head on, daring myself to do better than my best. In her honor and others who instilled self esteem into us, I am thankful. I am most grateful to the cheerleaders (the professors, the note takers, the endless line of tutors, the counselors, especially Mary Moore) who surrounded me and lifted me up to get me through those years of struggling to meet the deadlines of tests, term papers, interviews, and performances. Seeing and promoting critical thinking was most rewarding – who knew at the painful time? I am honored and challenged with many newspaper and television interviews by students in those classes and majors who truly wanted to go beyond

their assignments and do a stellar job in awareness of our DSA challenges on campus and in lifestyles as disABLED students. And yes it is I who put the ABLED emphasis on those words you have been so patiently reading.

Every one of us is ONLY a breath away from a disability. Treat, minister to, care for others the way you would want, expect to be looked after. You too are only a breath away from a disability. Certainly all of us deal with challenges and minute accommodations daily; intensity and extensiveness may change in an exasperated moment.

My sincerity, integrity, and perseverance have been an inspiration to others-with or without disabling situations. I am honored to be a role model for my children, fellow students, and community – to assist in the building of a better, more caring world that is educated and diverse in its endeavors.

The human rights of disABLED people were always on my mind as I walked the many pathways of campus. I attended a 2003 fundraiser at the Fairmont Hotel in San Jose to fund the gorgeous bronze and tiled sculptures honoring our SJSU 1968 Olympic athletes, Tommy Smith and John Carlos that now grace our city campus. As I placed both my hands in Tommy Smith's palms and

introduced myself as the former Homecoming Princess of SJSU at the age of 55, Tommy chuckled. “Double nickels- now there’s another lucky number for you. He and his lovely wife thanked me for taking the positive actions to make that happen and representing our generation in another manner of expressing and harnessing our human rights, our rights as humans.

Next fall, my daughters will join me when all three of us attend college. If I continue my formal education after my bachelor’s degree in creative arts, it is conceivable that I could be a sorority sister to my daughters as they pursue their various degrees. Scrumptious, simply scrumptious.

I still have lots of “I wanna dos” – I hope to live and pursue more of those and yet I am truly grateful for all I have done, all I have, and of course all I do not have, nor ever will have. Less is more to me these days – I love to edit my home- give away that which is cluttering the halls that also literally clutter the mind. More song, more dance steps on the floor, on the bed, more friends to prance around the world with, lots more published poems, short stories, and more opportunities to “laugh to capacity daily”- that’s the pursuit of staying young. I long for my face

muscles to ache from the joy and kindness I have spread throughout my day. The homecoming princess is not about beauty without; it is about the within. The volunteering all these decades for the kids will fill more hours. The published works in art and literature will certainly proceed and multiply. I pray my smile will never blend into a frown; seniors should watch their frowns. The muscles freeze that way and then we could really be six feet down. That does not sound young to me.

What's been after graduation- for me it has been a kind of retirement. I use my skills from college daily in the way and care I manage my life. I continue to study music- jazz solo and creative writing and art projects. The pace is slower, however, and extremely rewarding as I play throughout the day. I entertain ideas- this past year I hosted four garden parties and encouraged, mentored the musicians, writers, artists, and dancers in my life. Old friends of mine became new friends with one another. Long lost friendships were renewed and embraced; the gal who knew the gal who knew the guy that she knew...Fun stories, sad stories spread throughout the house. A new ministry opened in December to fulfill my vocalist

endeavors and minister to the assisted living facilities more often than what my membership in two community chorals.

I pray this may become a road show that brings in some cash as I turn 65, a few years from now.

I took greeted the “jam ministry” with scrumptious cheers- new visitors at Westgate Church receive some plum or cherry delights when I ring their bells or chimes.

Next for me; only history will tell- the challenges of this Baby Boomer to not getting Alzheimer’s, a broken hip and dying from pneumonia are just a few issues I will face. I do want to pursue the art, certainly with my toes holding the media, yes that is what I said, Brother. Now on with it and the attitude of staying young, acting young, delivering young (as in the jokes I try to tell, if I can remember the sequencing of the darn thing.)

“Fix it, accept it, or get over it.” After all – as Lincoln said, “Attitude is everything.”