CSB Distinguished Alumna Award 2009 Speech: Suzette E. Sutherland, MD

There are so many reasons why the College of St. Benedict was absolutely the wrong college choice for me.

First of all, even back in the 1980s, it was far too expensive. I am the product of a public education system all the way through high school, so suddenly finding the financial resources to fund a private college education was really going to be tough.

Second, no offense to you Mom and Dad, but St. Ben’s seemed to be just a little too close to home, which was the Twin Cities at that time. Not to mention that I’m really more of a city-girl at heart, so the idea of spending four years in the sleepy town of St. Joe had me just a little bit concerned.

And third, knowing that I was interested in pre-med, I realized that the majority of the science programs and facilities, back in the 1980s in any case, were located on the St. John’s campus. This would require me to be organized enough to take daily Bennie-Bus rides between the two campuses…and usually as early as 7:30 in the morning!

But despite all these obstacles, and by the grace of God, I found myself in the fall of 1980 standing in front of what was then Lourdes Hall, my freshman dorm, ready to begin my St. Ben’s journey … a journey that ultimately became four of the most formative years of my life.

I have never for one moment regretted my decision to attend St. Ben’s.

When I first learned that I was to receive this award and that I needed to prepare some remarks about my experiences at St. Ben’s, my head was absolutely spinning. There were so many important thoughts and memories that I just couldn’t seem to put my finger on any one thing that effectively described the influence St. Ben’s has had on me, and still has on me today. That’s because St. Ben’s really turned my world upside down --- and I don’t mean that in a negative way by any means. During my freshman and sophomore years I was moving along a very straight and narrow, science-oriented, pre-med path. But after my study-abroad program in Koenigstein, Germany, I returned to campus with interests going in every direction … linguistics, art history, philosophy, comparative religion. I had suddenly lost my focus. I soon learned, however, that the real beauty of a liberal arts education is that it develops an inquisitive mind. St. Ben’s opened so many doors for me by allowing me the opportunity to explore, and nurture, a wide variety of interests…and these are doors that remain open for me today.

But that was all 25 years ago. Over the last few decades I’ve often wondered to myself, is St. Ben’s still as wonderful as it was when I was there? Are the students still inquisitive, open-minded and striving for excellence? Is there still that palpable sense of community?

Well, I got my answer…three weeks ago, on the top of Mount Tabor in Israel.
It was there that I was taking a tour of the Holyland with my Mom and other members of her parish from Phoenix. One day during our travels, we were coming down from the top of Mount Tabor, where we had just celebrated a lovely mass in the church commemorating the site where the Transfiguration of Christ was thought to have occurred. On the way down, we ran into some really nice young people who were so genuinely warm and friendly, very inquisitive and engaging …they just seemed to draw us in. They also seemed very mature and confident, especially for such young people. During our conversation, someone from our group asked them where they were from, and they said, “Minnesota -- from the College of St Benedict and St John’s University.”

And my immediate reaction was …. “Well of course you are!” These students embodied for me what it means to be a Bennie and a Johnnie…and what it means to be part of this wonderful, embracing community; this community that is grounded in the Benedictine values of work, worship, balance, hospitality, generosity and acceptance. These are the values I took with me when I left St. Ben’s in 1984, and these are the values that stick with me today. When I talk to other people who have met alums from St. Ben’s and St. John’s, they often mention that there is something different about us…something special. And I really think that it’s this tremendous sense of community -- a sense of belonging -- that we get to take with us wherever we go. That’s what makes us special. And that’s what makes this place special.

I actually had a very emotional reaction to those students on Mount Tabor. In fact, as my Mom can attest, I got a little choked up as I was trying to put into words for her just how I was feeling. But I then realized that how I was feeling was both proud and grateful; proud that I am a product of this wonderful institution, and so very grateful to have a life-time membership in this community.

Let me close by thanking several important people:

First, my very dear friend, Kassy Kenney, also from the class of ’84, who obviously thought enough of me to nominate me for this award.

President MaryAnn Baenninger and the selection committee, who had the difficult task of working their way through a number of impressive nominations.

My parents, Paul and Irmgard Sutherland, who have always supported me and guided me by their example.

And of course my best friend, and dear husband, Brad Neary, a very proud Johnnie alum from the class of ’81, who for the past 20 years has loved me unconditionally and supported my every endeavor.

I’m very honored to receive this award this evening and to be sharing this weekend with all of you, the women who embody what is right and good about the College of St Benedict.

Thank you so very much.