

NEWS RELEASE

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University of Saint Mary Graduates Hooded, One Step Closer to Receiving Degrees

Spring Convocation Honors Graduates, Faculty

(Leavenworth, Kan.)— For the entire University of Saint Mary community, it was a time to celebrate the year’s accomplishments. That’s what USM president Sister Diane Steele, SCL, Ph.D. said at the opening address at Spring Convocation on Tuesday, May 3. Spring Convocation is an annual ceremony held to recognize community-wide achievements of the students and faculty at Saint Mary.

“These are the days we live to celebrate,” Steele said. For the graduates, she had choice words, “Remember, you’re not just graduates—you’re Saint Mary graduates.”

While all students were honored for their achievements, there were a few highlights that made the 2005 Spring Convocation one to remember.

Arguably the most special part of convocation was the “Hooding of the Graduates.” Hooding of the graduates is a ceremonial ritual where graduates are donned with cloth hoods to recognize their new degrees. The wider the velvet trim is on the hoods, the higher the degree. The ritual dates back to the original graduation dress of 12th and 13th Century Europe, but according to Dr. Sandra Van Hoose, vice president and dean for academic affairs, hooding all graduating seniors is a rare distinction.

“At most colleges and universities, the hooding of graduates is only for Ph.D. graduates. At Saint Mary, the hooding is for all our graduates.” Van Hoose said. “We hope it will make your experience that much more special.”

For one graduate in particular, the hooding ceremony was extra special. In addition to receiving her hood and honor chords, Joni Aukerman was awarded the Mother Mary Ancilla Award for service. The Mother Mary Ancilla Award is presented to a graduating senior who has demonstrated concern, commitment and Christian humanitarian service for others. By winning the Ancilla Award, Aukerman will also deliver the invocation, the opening prayer that officially begins commencement, Saturday, May 14.

“I didn’t know for sure if I would win or not,” Aukerman. “It’s such a great honor—it’s so exciting.”

Saint Mary students, faculty and staff nominated Aukerman towards the conclusion of the school year. Active in numerous campus clubs and activities, Aukerman was a four-year member of Campus Ministry, a Peer Listening Council member, she organized weekly prayer groups on Tuesday nights, dedicated time to visiting area homeless shelters and even coordinated a several campus Catholic retreats. Her collegiate highlight, though, are the three different spring break trips she used to benefit others.

As a freshman, Aukerman traveled to El Progresso, El Salvador to help build a water system for residents. As a sophomore and senior, she used her spring break time to help residents in the rugged Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky with home construction and repair. Substandard housing is a serious problem in rural Kentucky. While she wouldn’t say which trip was her favorite, it’s obvious she holds one just a little closer to her heart than the others.

“It’s hard for me to pick one because I like them all for different reasons,” she said. “I probably like it just a little more just because there’s something different about that trip. I liked El Salvador because for the most part, we were forced to communicate without words. Instead of hindering the mission, that actually helped with bonding to the community.”

A new award was added to this year’s ceremony. Tony and Sharon Albers were presented with the Caritas Award, the highest distinction in Saint Mary history. In fact, in three centuries of existence, Saint Mary has only presented the award two previous times. The Caritas Award was established to honor outstanding contributions in the fields of Catholic education and human services.

According to USM President Sister Diane Steele, SCL, Ph.D., the Albers were very deserving of the award. Both originally from the Midwest, Tony and Sharon left their California home to give up a year and a half of their life as volunteers for Saint Mary, working as special assistants to the president. Tony is a retired civil attorney while Sharon, a 1965 Saint Mary alum, is a retired first grade teacher.

“They (the Albers) gave us the gift of life. For the past year and a half, they’ve volunteered for us full-time,” Steele said. “They model what we’re all about. Our honor and thanks is not nearly enough to thank them for their gift of life.”

The Albers have been responsible for many activities including coordinating one of the university’s largest fundraising functions, the Spirefest Auction. They have also tutored students, escorted retired nuns on day trips, assisted with graduation and alumni reunions.

“We were overcome with joy at receiving the Caritas Award,” Sharon Albers said. “We will be leaving Saint Mary for our home in San Diego in mid-July, but our USM adventure has left an indelible mark on our hearts that will forever empower us to serve wherever we journey in life.”

The top faculty award went to Sister Kathleen Wood, professor of theology and chair of the theology and pastoral ministry department. The Sullivan Award for Teaching Excellence, University Leadership and Service was created in the spring 1990 to recognize supreme teacher achievement at Saint Mary. Wood was nominated by students, faculty and staff for the Sullivan Award. As part of the Sullivan Award, Wood also received \$1,000 from the university.

“I really am grateful for those that recommended me, but I suppose just for the opportunity to teach,” Wood said. “I love teaching. I appreciate the kind of students and the colleagues that we work with here at Saint Mary. I really enjoy being here.”

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