

NEWS RELEASE

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Aukerman Highlights Historic University of Saint Mary Graduating Class

Joni Aukerman Presented the Mother Mary Ancilla Award, USM's Top Honor



University of Saint Mary Class of 2005 graduate Joni Aukerman poses for a photo next to the Mother Mary Ancilla Award plaque that will always bear her name.

(Leavenworth, Kan.)— Her travels have taken her all over the world—from Oklahoma to Kansas, El Salvador to rural Kentucky—and back again. The journey, which she calls her duty as a human being, has been filled with countless twists and turns. But make no mistake about it—University of Saint Mary Class of 2005 graduate Joni Aukerman has dedicated much of her life to helping others.

For her service to the global society, Aukerman was awarded the 2005 Mother Mary Ancilla Award for Christian Service. The Ancilla Award is presented to a graduating senior that demonstrated concern and commitment of time and effort in service to others while at Saint Mary. The award is named in honor of Mary Ancilla Spoor, Mother General of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth from 1950 to 1962. By virtue of winning the Ancilla Award, Aukerman also delivered the invocation to officially begin commencement Saturday, May 14 in front of all 246-graduates, their families, and friends.

According to Campus Minister Kate Faggella-Luby, Aukerman deserved the praise, although it's not something she typically enjoys.

“One of the things that stands-out about Joni is that she never tries to stand-out,” Faggella-Luby said. “The kind of service she provides is never about drawing attention to herself, or praise or anything else. She does a lot of the behind the scenes help because she cares about them—not because she's trying to win awards.”

Aukerman was nominated by faculty, staff and students weeks prior to officially receiving the award at Spring Convocation May 3. Upon being nominated, a committee asked her to write a brief essay about the “spirit of service,” and what it has meant to her. She and one other person were selected as finalists for the award.

Aukerman realized she was the winner when Sister Kathleen Wood, chair of the pastoral ministry and theology department, read part of her essay out loud to the Spring Convocation crowd. She said she had to fight back tears while Wood was speaking.

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

The daughter of Rick and Linda, Aukerman is originally from Stillwater, Okla. Her family recently moved to Corpus Christi, Texas. She said she came to Saint Mary after receiving information from a college fair in Tulsa, Okla. while she was still in high school. Since Saint Mary offered majors in both art and information technology, Aukerman knew it was a possibility Saint Mary could be for her.

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When she made a visit to the campus she said the beauty of Saint Mary hooked her immediately.

An art and information technology major, Aukerman was extremely active in numerous campus clubs and activities. She was a four-year member of Campus Ministry, a Peer Listening Council member, she organized weekly prayer groups on Tuesday nights, dedicated time to cooking and distributing food at area homeless shelters and even coordinated several campus Catholic retreats. As a senior, Aukerman also assisted with the completion of the new University of Saint Mary website which went live in February 2005. Her collegiate career is highlighted, though, by three different spring break trips she used to benefit others.

As a freshman, Aukerman discovered the true meaning of service when she traveled with a small group of students to El Progreso, El Salvador. The group worked day and night doing anything they could to help the residents of El Progreso, a traditionally money-strapped area. Aukerman even helped raise money to build a water system for the El Progreso residents.

As a sophomore and senior, Aukerman again used two separate spring breaks to help residents she never met, this time she and other students headed to the rugged Appalachian Mountains of rural Kentucky. Substandard housing is a serious problem in rural Kentucky. Aukerman led the group in an effort to alleviate the problem. As a sophomore, Aukerman actually helped with the complete re-construction of a house in utter decay. Just this past March, as a senior, Aukerman renovated a home that had been badly damaged by fire.

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 the El Salvador trip just a little more because there's something different about that trip. I liked it 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."

It's not just the mission trips that have make Aukerman unique. Faggella-Luby said it's the complete package that makes Aukerman stand out.

"She's not the type of person to seek out awards or privileges based on what she's done," Faggella-Luby added. "She's very bashful about the award. She's just such a neat person, and such a great, great example for other students."

Even delivering the invocation at commencement is out of Aukerman's comfort range. While extremely honored, Aukerman admitted she would've rather just sat among her fellow graduates as just another Saint Mary student on the cusp of graduation. She knew, though, that she would never forget the journey that led her to Saint Mary.

"This is such an important thing," Aukerman said about the invocation just days before commencement. "It's like talking to God in front of the whole school—what do I say?" she joked. "What do I say to possibly encompass the last four years?"

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