

A Grateful, Tail-Wagging Graduate

Written by Vivian Bikulege

Education does not exist in a vacuum. Hillary was right. “It takes a village.” In my case, it took family, friends, teachers, classmates, co-workers, my dog Toby, and me.



I began my studies in 2007, and on May 30th, at the established age of 51, I earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte. I learned about this low residency program (a program that combines on-campus classes with Internet workshops) from Sally Drumm, one of our local writers and the founder of Milspeak, a lowcountry program for people who write about their military experience. Margaret Evans, editor of *The Lowcountry*, also supported me in my application to Queens. I thank both of them.

All along the way, my mother Irene listened to every word of my workshop submissions and each page of my thesis. We would sit in the car at various boat landings around Beaufort County. She would look out on the water as I read paragraphs of a story about my life as a military wife in Yucca Valley, the theme of my largest piece of written work. At the start of 2008, Mac and I got a new dog. Toby had been hit by a car, and left on the side of Highway 21 to die, when we found him. My third residency began in his early days of recuperating from a twice-broken hip, and so Toby went to school with me, hanging out in the car (I was lucky to have 40-50 degree January weather) or at the Marriott Residence Inn while I attended class. Now, he sleeps beside me as I type, gently snoring with his head under my right forearm, creating a bit of challenge for typing.

Since my mom does not drive anymore, she lodged at my brother's house in Greer when I traveled to my one-week residencies in Charlotte. My sister-in-law Paula made certain that Irene was in the mix with her grandchildren's busy schedules. When I would arrive in Greer to pick up my mom and head back to Beaufort, Paula always sent Mom home with frozen homemade dinners, careful to conform to the dietary needs of a diabetic.

My sister Stacie made numerous trips to Beaufort to help my mom and me during my studies. Stacie sent me off to school with a pink Vera Bradley bag packed with notebooks and journals, pens, highlighters and sticky notes. She read my thesis. She flew down in the final weeks of spring to help me when work, business travel, my mother's health needs and school were on a collision course towards insanity. My brother Stan peppered the journey with humor and the occasional nudge to keep going.

Diane Baker, my neighbor and friend, continuously cheered me on, assuring me of my skills as a writer. Friends at church were aware of my efforts and would check in to see how I was progressing and let me know they were behind me in prayer.

Last September, I conducted “Pottery and Prose” a community workshop held in cooperation with the Arts Council of Beaufort County under the tutelage of Trevor Foster, one of our region's talented potters. Local students participated in writing exercises and pottery making sessions. These efforts were the foundation of my graduate craft seminar whose theme was based on the idea that being open, like handcrafted bowls, presents us with the possibilities of growth and creativity.

One of my greatest lessons was a reminder that many talented people bless this world. My classmates twisted words into pretzels and then unwound them, satiating hungry readers with prose, poetry, and plays. In workshop, thoughtful readers dissected my work, questioned my story, and offered suggestions for improvements. My teachers focused on structure and form, and pushed me to slow down and reflect to add depth to my writing. Even my co-workers, the people left behind in my “real job,” supported my pursuit of a dream outside of my chemical

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sales career.

Of course, there is always Mac. My husband took the brunt of this endeavor, quietly going about life as I spent weekends reading and writing, depleting one of our investment funds to pay my tuition. In light of the economic environment, that money may have evaporated with no tangible benefit. I am hopeful our investment in my education has long term benefits for both of us.

Graduation brings closure, and in my case, it represents two and one-half years of grappling with words, books, and writing. Goals are fickle things. They are set. We achieve them or they crumble, becoming like dust blown through the hollow halls of lost memory. The euphoria of a cap and gown is brief. The real pomp and circumstance of obtaining an education is the promise for a future of unlimited possibilities.

On the mantle above my gas fireplace, a stuffed dog stands motionless. He is a cross between a dachshund and a beagle, and he is wearing a black graduation cap. Across his plush brown body are the words, "Let's Celebrate," and when his front left paw is pressed, the song Celebration, made famous by Kool and the Gang in 1980, rings out. The little dog's ears pop up and down on either side of his mortarboard, and his teeny tail wags like a spastic windshield wiper. The animated canine graduate was a gift from my dog Toby, via my husband Mac, a purchase he made at the Sea Island Walgreen's. I need to give that toy a name. Maybe I will call him "Shakir" meaning "thankful" in Arabic. Shak for short – a constant reminder of my gratitude and understanding that it takes a village for each member to succeed. Hell, maybe I'll even wag my tail a bit!