

A Mother's Work – 2011 May/June Business Issue

Posted by Watchdog Ent. on May 10th, 2011



Scholarship founded by a single mom helps other women get a college education

by Louise Barden

Sonya Muhammed was trying to raise two daughters on her own, earn her degree at UNC Charlotte, and work a third-shift job when she was awarded the first Answer Scholarship in 2005. Muhammed still sounds amazed as she says, “When I heard Susan Andersen wanted to meet me, I thought that was wonderful. I had never known a scholarship founder who wanted to meet the recipient of the scholarship.”

Muhammed and Andersen declare that meeting was the beginning of a close personal friendship. “The amount of money I received from the Answer Scholarship pales in relation to the importance of my friendship with Susan,” Muhammed exclaims.

Support enables women to stay on course

Muhammed points out that she and the 16 additional scholarship recipients since 2006 have much in common.

“I believe the emotional support (from the Answer Scholarship Foundation) is as important as the money,” Muhammed says. “Many recipients are from families where no one has a college degree. These women need someone to say to them they just need to keep coming to school.”

Muhammed was an excellent student in high school, but she did not receive the financial support and encouragement she needed to go to college. Only when she found herself divorced after an 11-year marriage did she decide to try to get the higher education she had once dreamed of. Since receiving the scholarship, she has become a licensed therapist for children and adults with mental health disorders. She completed her bachelor’s degree in social work, earned a master’s degree (during a single year that she says “tested every fiber of my being”), and now is considering earning another graduate degree.

Muhammed is so appreciative of the emotional support she got from Andersen that she now volunteers for the Answer Scholarship Foundation, and she serves as a mentor for other scholarship recipients.

“If you are lucky enough to win one of these scholarships, you will be part of a great family for life,” Muhammed says. “It’s not just about receiving the reward and riding off into the sunset. You extend it by helping others. You have the wonderful experience of being part of something.”

A dream she was willing to share

For Andersen, creating the Answer Scholarship was the fulfillment of a dream when she became a single mother who was divorced after 22 years of marriage. She wanted to help single mothers like herself pursue their goals for a better life while setting an example for their children. Andersen was able to graduate from college because she received a scholarship. She wanted to return the favor by helping others.

With help from The Foundation For The Carolinas, she established The Answer Scholarship Foundation and developed a website (www.answerscholarship.org). Applicants must be single women over age 24 who are residents of Mecklenburg or surrounding counties, primary parents of school-age children, and full-time college students pursuing a four-year undergraduate degree or a two-year nursing degree.

In recent years, in the face of need created by the economic downturn, she has sought additional donations. Even after The Leon Levine Foundation and Myers Park United Methodist Church and individual donors have helped the foundation continue to offer scholarships,

Andersen notes more money is still needed. There are always more qualified applicants than funds to help them.

However, just five years after Susan Andersen established the endowment that has given 30 scholarships to date, Andersen can say with pride, "This scholarship is changing the lives of families. When you change the life of a mom you change the lives of her children...This really is making a difference. ... The scholarship recipients' kids are starting to attend college ... they are following in their moms' footsteps." Andersen knows Muhammed's daughters are among them; the older attends Tuskegee University; the younger is a high school honor roll student and cheerleader.

Moreover, there is clearly an intangible payoff for Andersen. When she talks about the women who have received the scholarship, her pride and kinship with them is obvious. They are women who are now entering fulfilling careers and attending graduate school after receiving the scholarship Andersen founded. Muhammed is typical of these women, Andersen declares, "Sonya is a ray of sunshine. She is someone who lights up the room when she walks in."