

SHARE YOUR UNIVERSITY STORY

Speech delivered by Debbie Ingram, President of The University of Tennessee National Alumni Association at the 2007 Alumni Leadership Conference on June 23,2007.

It is an honor and privilege to serve as the President of the University of Tennessee National Alumni Association. Thank you for all you do for our five campuses, the 45,000+ students, thousands of faculty, staff & administrators, and 310,000 alumni. We are the University of Tennessee and proudly uphold the traditions of this great University system.

I am the Federal Affairs Liaison for the Education Section of the American Physical Therapy Association. To prepare me for this role, I took a course on effective lobbying strategies for Congress. Three steps were suggested that I think can be used as we deliver a united message about the value of higher education.

Step 1: Share a story to appeal to their hearts.

Step 2: Follow with the facts to appeal to their intellect.

Step 3: Make a request-ask them to do something.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a Tennessee tradition made famous by Davy Crockett and others. Sit back as I weave a true Tennessee story.

Her name was Minnie Morgan. Growing up in rural Polk County, deep in the hills of Tennessee, Minnie attended school in a one room schoolhouse in Springtown. At the completion of the eighth grade, because there was no high school, Minnie just stayed and helped the teacher with the children. Married at a young age, Minnie and her husband became the proud parents of nine children. It was one of the younger children that forever changed this family. For you see, the infant daughter became gravely ill and there was not enough money to provide the necessary health care. The baby girl died before her first birthday. Tragedy struck multiple times. Minnie was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, one of the most crippling of disorders and then abandoned by her husband and left to raise her children alone. She was a woman of great faith and believed that a brighter future could occur for her children through education. It is evident in the outcomes.

The miracle of this story is that all of Minnie's children graduated from Bradley High School. Seven of the children attended college with six earning at least bachelor's degrees and the majority earning graduate degrees. Her children dedicated their lives to education. They became teachers, college professors, school librarians, and elementary school principals. Their leadership impacted thousands of children in our state.

Children who grow up in families with educated parents are more likely to graduate from college. Fourteen of Minnie's adult grandchildren have already earned college degrees

with a third of these being doctorates. I know this story well because when I was four years old, my grandmother, Minnie Morgan Bryson moved in with my family. I shared a bedroom with her for several years. I promised my grandmother that I would grow up and become a physical therapist so that I could help people just like her. Because of my education, for the past 28 years I have had the pleasure of helping people whose lives have been forever changed by disease, traumatic events, and disability. My passion is now being fulfilled at UTC as I prepare the next generation of physical therapists who will provide care for you and me. We will be in good hands.

The FACTS

The southern states face many educational challenges. Let's look first at high school graduation rates. Sixty percent of Tennessee ninth graders graduate from high school and only 15% of these ninth graders actually graduate from college. Thus, it is not surprising that the state of Tennessee ranks 47th in the nation for adults with college degrees. In some of our rural Tennessee counties, only 5% of the adults have a college education. We don't have an alumni presence in those counties.

The impact is recognized in economic and healthcare challenges. People who don't earn high school degrees earn roughly \$10,000. High school graduates double that earning power while college graduates triple to quadruple it.

People with limited incomes often lack health insurance and delay access until facing significant health crises. It should come as no surprise to you that the 2006 Health Rankings by state listed Tennessee in the bottom 5 with Louisiana, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Arkansas. We were #47.

An even more telling finding by the Kaiser Foundation reveals Tennessee is ranked #1 in the nation for something! The most prescription drug use in the nation: 15.3 prescriptions per person per year.

Now comes the ASK

I believe alumni can help with a major theme of the University's strategic plan: improving student access and success in college. First, I want you to share your stories about how education changed your lives and the lives of your families. Volunteer to share the stories in you alumni meetings, social and service organizations, and local schools. Help with career fairs, speak to classes, or serve as advisors to clubs and organizations. This spring, Chancellor Brown and a group of UTC alumni and faculty visited and spoke to the students of Bradley High School. It was amazing to see a large group of students come forward to ask for advice about their dreams of a college education.

The *Alumnus Magazine* will be featuring some of your stories this year. Please share them with me (Debbie-Ingram@utc.edu)

The second thing I want to ask you to do is to find a high school or college student you can mentor. Students often need help to stay on track in the pursuit of education. You can make a difference in their lives. As a teenager, my only knowledge of a physical therapist was through a soap opera I watched with my grandmother. No one in my family worked in healthcare. Thus, I joined the Teenage Program for the March of Dimes. Our advisor was a young UT graduate and the social worker at our local hospital. She organized volunteer experiences for me to observe physical therapists. Since 1972-yes, that has been 35 years-she has been a mentor to me. She is Terry Denniston, the Assistant to the Chancellor and former Director of Alumni for the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. You never know-you may be helping the future President of the UTNAA!!!

Lastly, I think as alumni leaders we also need to financially support the University. Our alumni association provides scholarships to attract outstanding students. You may choose to designate your contributions for a particular department or scholarship. As an example, a recent *Alumnus Magazine* edition featured the story of a first generation college student. It was his lifelong dream to become a pharmacist. When he didn't have the money to stay in school, the Dean of the Pharmacy program at UT Health Science Center insisted no student was going to leave because of financial need and asked the student to remember the University in the future. The new graduate didn't forget that promise and he and his wife endowed a scholarship for pharmacy students with financial need.

I consider myself blessed because my parents sacrificed in order to pay for college for my sisters and me. Thus, when my family makes our annual contribution to the University, we give to a UTC scholarship fund for physical therapy students with financial need. Many of my students have loan debts of up to \$50,000 just for their graduate school education.

David and I are looking forward to visiting with many of you this year. David's story is also amazing. As a first generation college student and ninth of ten children, he was the only one in his family to graduate from college. He attributes his success as a business owner to the entrepreneurial skills mastered through his education at the University of Tennessee.

Education Changes Lives. We must do all we can to change a generation of our Tennessee families.

In closing, some lines from my favorite Tennessee entertainer, Kenny Chesney:

That's where I come from
Where I'll be when it's said and done
I'm proud as anyone
I'm an old Tennessean.