

VIEWPOINTS

Letters To Graduates

By Katie Hunhoff

Thousands of young South Dakotans will celebrate graduations this month, and they'll hear heartfelt advice from well-qualified speakers urging them to dream big, change the world and dance like no one is watching.

In our 30 years of publishing South Dakota Magazine, we've met some interesting people who'll probably not ever be invited to give a commencement address, and so we decided to collaborate with some of them. The end result is a collection of 18 "letters to grads" published in our May/June issue. Their advice is unconventional, and perhaps more personal than what you'll hear on graduation day.

For example, one letter comes from Chol Atem, a 23 year old here in Yankton who fled from his home in Sudan at the age of 5 in 1988. He was one of the "Lost Boys of Sudan" and arrived in South Dakota 13 years later to study at Mount Marty College. His advice is to never take home for granted, a lesson he learned the hard way.

"It was as if someone took me out of my family at the young age and abandoned me on a deserted island," he says of being displaced and separated from his family. "It took 23 years before I was reunited with them in April 2011. And during that period there was no form of communication. That experience taught me that you do not know how important it is to have a home until you do not have one." Atem urges South Dakota youth to invest and build in their home state.

Demi Beautiful Bald Eagle, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, grew up in Dupree. She encourages youth, especially reservation youth, to try to ignore statistics and low expectations when they begin to carve their paths for the future. Easier said than done, but Demi is living it right now as a college student at United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck, N.D.

"Now that I'm in college, I see why so many drop out. It's not the work that's hard or being away from home. I'm weary from the expectations, the expense and the pressure. I was, and still am scared to fail. Fail in my community's eyes.

Fail in mine," she writes. Demi encourages youth to keep trying. Her motivation is to carve a path for her brother and sister, and "all kids who have great minds but get overlooked and repressed." She hopes to return home to teach.

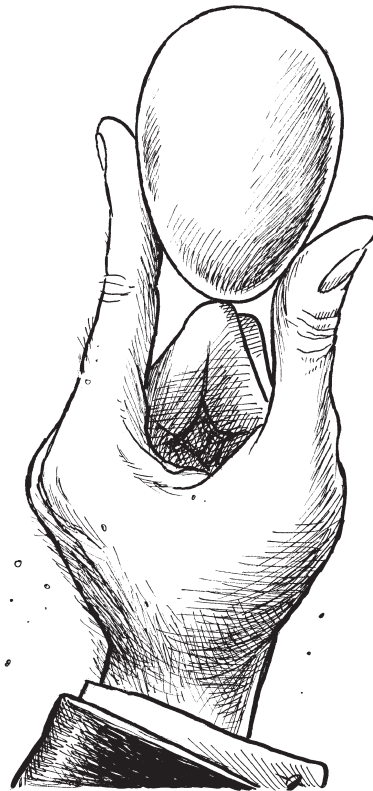
Another one of my favorite letters comes from writer Linda Hasselstrom. Linda has an enviable life. She is a well-known, well-respected author and lives on a beautiful West River ranch with her husband, Jerry. But as a young lady just leaving college, she envisioned her life a bit differently. "I expected to be a wife, mother, writer, teacher, rancher and Great American novelist," she wrote. "I'd ride Arabian horses across the South Dakota range with my gorgeous husband and our three beautiful children. At night I'd write brilliant novels that would sell millions of copies. We'd vacation in Paris, but live in South Dakota."

Now her best material is what happened to her instead of the life she planned. "Like most folks, I spend much of my time doing the small routine tasks of daily life. I spend more time picking up the waste products deposited by my dogs than accepting awards; more time removing hairs from my chin than counting my money. But she also learned that what her father used to say was true: A man is about as happy as he makes up his mind to be. "I was skeptical. Now I believe," she writes to young South Dakotans. "I create my joy by something as simple as watching a sunrise or scratching a dog's ears."

Other letters were written by cowboys, teachers, poets and even a young lawyer from Lemmon. Like them, we also wish congratulations to all our high school and college graduates. Enjoy your day in the sun. Wherever life takes you, be glad you started your life's path in South Dakota.

Katie Hunhoff is the editor of South Dakota Magazine, a bi-monthly publication that explores the people and culture of our great state. To see more letters to young South Dakotans, see the May/June issue of South Dakota Magazine. Visit www.SouthDakotaMagazine.com for more information.

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN...



THIS IS YOUR BRAIN after A CAREER IN FOOTBALL



Names Will Never Hurt You?

By Paula Damon

My mom was like most. A ferocious multitasker. Had to be with six kids and Dad only home on weekends for the first 14 years of their marriage.

No-nonsense. The only time she'd lighten up a bit was when our spirits needed lifting. "Perché sei triste?" she jabbed sharply in Italian, her tone laced with sarcasm, as if to say, how dare you be sad?

Her low tolerance for misbehavior was easily detectable, especially when she'd reach for the yardstick. Mom's celebrity preceded her. Everything about her made her stand out in our white Anglo-Saxon neighborhood from her distinctive Mediterranean appearance to the aroma of bubbling pasta sauce sifting through open windows and doors of our house.

With sharp features – her long pointy nose, thick dark hair tightly cropped at the base of her neck, disapproving glare and tall lanky physique made her an easy target. Especially when my two closest childhood friends and I were at odds over secret clubhouse rules.

"Your mother's a witch!" they shouted insults at the back of my head, moving me to tears. My shoulders flailing. My feet clumsily running home.

"She's a witch, alright," their words taunted. "She flies around at night with a broom and cauldron of witch's brew," their teeth seething

with a vindictive dossier of hurt until I was out of sight.

I always did take personally even the slightest criticism toward my mother.

Wearing my heart and hers on my sleeve called into question the old adage "sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me."



Paula DAMON

Their words stung, defeating me like a prizefighter's final blow.

From that day forward, I looked upon my friends dispassionately with regret. Their sudden onset of betrayal shattered the unbroken loyalty I imagined we shared.

Everything about protecting Mom's reputation coalesced around my appreciation of the life she single-handedly provided me and my siblings.

Even as a young child, my old-soul sensibility recognized her sacrifice.

Seasoned understanding in tow, I detected an eternal duality of despair and sadness in her disposition throughout her days hemmed in by diapers and dishes, tears and tantrums.

My ears remained fine-tuned to discern in her voice, which carried from room to room, whether she

was going to battle or going to bake a cake.

Mitigating the sharp attack by my friends, I pondered Mom. She had navigated life so skillfully without neglect or descent. I thought about these things and more as their insults shoved me homeward.

Mom was a healer of sorts, cheering us and tending to our hurts like a skilled physician, applying her strangely foolproof home remedies.

Wrapping our necks in woolen scarves when we felt a sore throat coming on.

Rubbing cuts and bruises with garlic cloves. Smearing our burns with petroleum jelly.

Massaging mosquito bites with a dry bar of Ivory soap.

Her remedy for ingrown toenails was equally organic.

Moved by the intense pain such a malady caused, she didn't bother with more common solutions.

Not my Mom. No. Instead, she'd reach for the nail clippers and then with an artistic flare carefully cut a good-sized "V" at the crown of her toenail.

"Relieves the pressure," she'd say in a language of conviction, looking up full-faced with sweet relief.

The other day, when reeling with pain at the slightest step, I pulled out the clippers to do the same.

I smiled heavenward and blessed her.

"Happy Mother's Day, Mom."

Retiring Boomers: Benefit Or Burden?

By Richard P. Holm MD

As Baby boomers are coming-of-age, that is, of retirement age... what is going to happen?

Starting nine months after soldiers of WWII came home to the US, there was a birth rate boom that has and continues to profoundly affect our culture. Baby boomers born from 1946 to 64, almost as a celebration of soldier survival, grew up as the richest and most privileged group of all time.

Often raised with a soldier-disciplined father and a not-quite-happy-work-at-home mother, boomers grew up watching too much TV, listening to Beach Boys and Beatles on transistor radios, and expecting more privilege to come. Boomer attitudes came out of a successful economy and a significant post-war social subsidy.

Graduating from Easy-&Perfect-Boomer High, they were shocked into reality by the draft, Vietnam, and inequality between sexes and races. This spoiled '50's sit-com generation of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, grew into an angry government-distrusting counter-culture that fought for social justice causes like feminism, civil rights, an end to the Vietnam War, all reflecting the right of individual choice.

These children of privilege and excess, as adults distrust institutions and crave control of their own and the collective fate. It is no surprise this group has also achieved the most wealth. Although accounting for 24% of the total US population, boomers hold onto something like 80% of the wealth of our country, account for 80% of all leisure travel, dole out 50% of all consumer spending and yet only provide 43% of all charitable giving. This would suggest some distrust of big charities as well as big government.

And now 76 million 51-69 year olds are a cultural demographic coming to retirement age, with a smaller cadre of youth to care for them as they eventually become very elderly and disabled unto death. How does our society prepare for this potential societal burden?

I predict that very old boomers won't be such a burden, as research finds 60% of those aged 85 or older do not experience significant memory loss, 75% still drive, 70% are not depressed, and in general the aged are as happy as any group. When boomers turn 85, they will not expect the next generations to pay for an expensive dying process as most will have taken the individual choice to have an advanced directive, bypassing futile efforts and a painful death. One can even anticipate that this group will find a way to help take care of their own.

And, oh, in these next years as boomers have more time on their hands, expect an increasing demand for social justice.

Long-Term Care Hits A Nerve For Many

By Trudy Lieberman
Rural Health News Service

Readers have been offering feedback to Thinking About Health columns. But never has a column inspired more emailed messages than the one I wrote in March about private long-term care insurance and the lack of a national system to pay for nursing home and community services for the country's aging population.

And once again, the emails illustrated the pickle families find themselves in.

Marty Callahan, who edits the Greeley Citizen in Greeley, Neb., told me in his area "costs are escalating at nursing facilities and more and more of my readers are entering facilities at alarming levels as Medicaid residents." That means those families had no money to pay the nursing home tab which in Nebraska now averages \$72,000 annually for a semi-private and \$80,000 for a private room. This topic "is getting far too little attention," Callahan said, adding, "This is, indeed, going to be the next health-care crisis."

Other emails offered more evidence.

One woman in Burlington, Colo., told me about her mother's Medicaid spend-down to pay her nursing home bills. Her mother had worked hard on the farm and supplemented the family income working in restaurants, cleaning houses, and as a caregiver. She spent "very little" of the \$50,000 left over from the farm sale, and continued to work. At age 89 she broke her hip. Cooper said, "It was a gradual downhill from there."

Eventually she went to a nursing home, and the family paid the bill

from the \$50,000 cashing out the CDs when the bills came due. When that was gone, she went on Medicaid, and the facility moved her from a small private room to a shared room. In the end she had less than \$2,000 in the bank plus her car.

The woman says the real tragedy was that her mom could not understand why she had no money. She would call the banks and ask where her money was. "I told them to make up a reason," she said. "How do you tell someone who sacrificed her whole life for others that she didn't have her money to spend in the end?"

One email from a 63-year-old man in Jacksonville, Ill., described an all-too-typical predicament — premiums for policies he and his wife bought when they were in their late 50's were rising so high they could no longer pay them. Last year they went up 83 percent. He said he had to shorten the annual benefit and the number of years the policy would pay in order to keep it in force, hardly an ideal solution. He says he will probably drop the policy in the next couple of years, another bad solution. The carrier said to expect another rate increase in 2016.

An 81-year-old woman from Rome City, Ind., wanted me to know that the monthly premium for a policy she bought for home care 19 years ago had increased from \$60 to \$124, but she would not drop the policy because she couldn't afford the cost of a new one. "I do have to say that having this policy has given me some peace of mind," she wrote. She wants care at home, and the policy will pay for some of it. But if she needs a nursing home, she may have to go on Medicaid like thousands of other Americans.

I turned to Bonnie Burns, a national long-term care expert who also works with California Health Advocates. These emails are typical, she said. Most people spending down are just short of being considered low-income, and "they exhaust every little bit they have." As for the larger thread running through them, it shows "we leave it up to every single family to figure it out on their own."

Burns has spent the last two decades trying to improve long-term care insurance in California, a state that has been a leader in consumer protection standards such as reforming home care benefits and "three serious attempts to regulate rates." The intent, she explained, "was to prevent the large rate increases we see today. All three have failed."

Legislation on the table in California would create a task force to consider the feasibility of a statewide long-term care program. It would examine everything from fragmentation of services to payment. California may well lead again, but it might take collective voices from across the country to effect change. Tom, a reader in Ridgeway, Colo., suggested "a lot of us are going to have to make a lot more noise if we're ever going to see any movement toward a more decent, humane, and affordable (end-of-life) strategy for the elderly."

We'd like to hear about your experiences with end-of-life issues. Write to Trudy at trudy.lieberman@gmail.com.

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