

# a Foundation for Learning

When Mary Lou Jennings thinks of the Sister Thea Bowman Foundation, a quote from American writer Willa Cather comes to mind: “Where there is great love there are always miracles.”

Jennings says that for many students, the foundation—which aims to send young African-American students to a Catholic college or university—is their last hope for getting a college education, but often the springboard that launches them into academic and professional success.

Duquesne University has played a large role in the foundation’s history—approximately 40 of the nearly 100 students who have received the scholarship funding have gotten their undergraduate or graduate college education at Duquesne.

Jennings, the foundation’s executive director, points out two tremendous success stories, both of them involving Duquesne students. The first story involves a student who was homeless. The student went on to graduate from Duquesne after receiving a scholarship from the foundation, and is currently gainfully employed and has his own apartment.

The second story involves a young woman who the foundation supported all the way through high school and Duquesne. She went on to receive her MBA and now owns her own home.

“I want to say the foundation is inspirational, when you see the effect it has on people, on their lives,” says scholarship recipient Alexis Farquharson, B’05, GB’08. “It’s made a world of difference—if Thea was around now she’d be very excited.”

When she was alive, Sister Thea Bowman was described as the “springtime in everyone’s life” and as having a “God-gilded voice sent dancing, swaying, sashaying into our lives.”

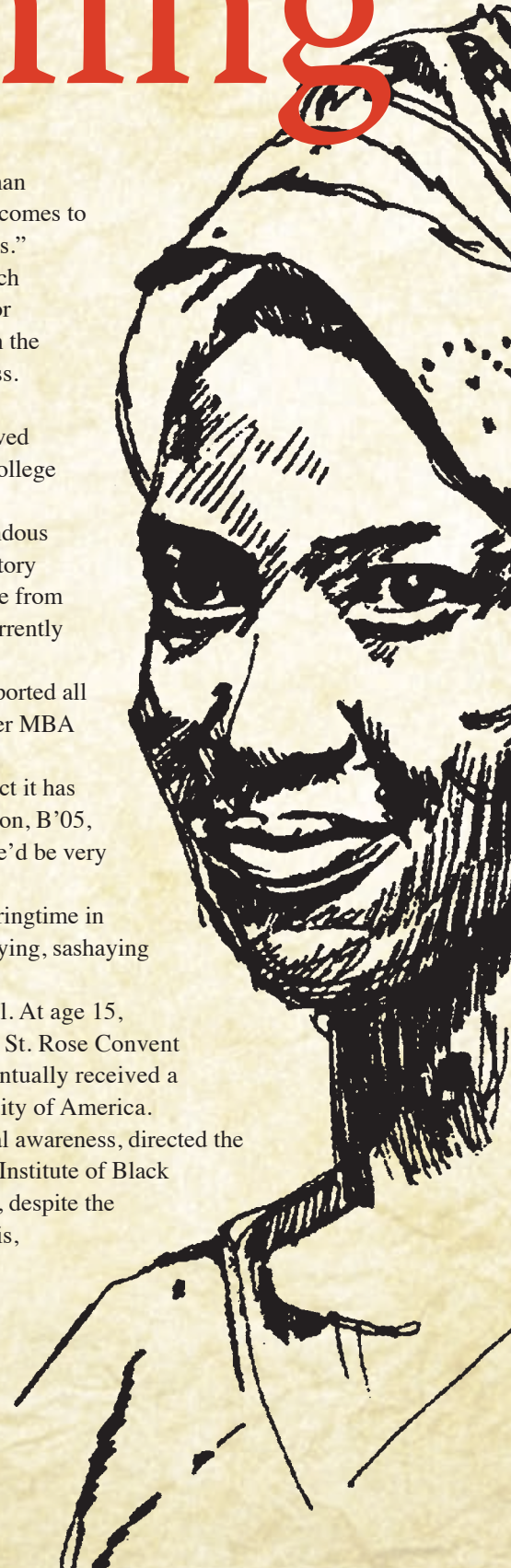
Sister Thea, the granddaughter of slaves, was always very spiritual. At age 15, she joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration by entering St. Rose Convent in LaCrosse, Wis. She pursued her education with a passion and eventually received a doctorate of English literature and linguistics from Catholic University of America.

She served the Diocese of Jackson, Miss., as director of intercultural awareness, directed the Hallelujah Singers at Viterbo University, and helped found the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. In 1984, despite the death of both of her parents and her own breast cancer diagnosis, Sister Thea continued a very active schedule of speaking engagements, teaching and performing.

In October of 1989, Sister Thea and Jennings, who were friends, founded the Sister Thea Bowman Foundation. Less than a year later, on March 30, 1990, Sister Thea died in Canton, Miss.



Sister Thea Bowman





Most, if not all, of the scholarship recipients are the first generation in their family to receive a baccalaureate degree. This is the case for Farquharson, who works for Bank of New York Mellon as a compliance consultant in the wealth management department.

“I’m a Duquesne fanatic,” she says. “I learned great things and I was exposed to great people.”

A scholarship from the foundation allowed Cleodis Williams, an integrated marketing student scheduled to graduate from Duquesne in 2010, to stay in school.

“After my freshman year, I ran into some academic troubles which in turn gave me some financial problems,” he says.

Debra Zugates, associate director of Duquesne’s Admissions Office, told Williams about the Sister Thea Bowman Foundation and introduced him to Jennings.

“I was very grateful because at that point I was down on my luck and looking for anyone to help me out—the fact she was able to do it for me I took it as a blessing and said that somebody’s looking out for me, there’s a reason that I’m here,” says Williams. “I’m fine now—I’m back on track.”



Alexis Farquharson

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Wolguine Stervil, B’01, doesn’t think she would have attended college without the scholarship. She now works at Dap, a caulk and sealant company in Baltimore, as an accounting supervisor.

Dara Smith-Butler, N’08, was almost finished with her yearlong nursing accelerated second degree program when she found out there was a mistake with her loans and she would receive none of the funding she anticipated.

“I thought, ‘God, how am I going to make it through this program?’” says Smith-Butler.

Dr. Daniel K. Donnelly, associate provost/associate academic vice president for administration, and his assistant, Renee Stockey, told her about the foundation and she ended up receiving a scholarship.

“I consider it to be a miracle—the scholarship and the people I’ve met,” says Smith-Butler, who now works in the medical/surgical intensive care unit at a Pittsburgh hospital.

But there’s more to the Sister Thea Bowman Foundation than just money, according to both the scholarship recipients and Jennings.

“The commitment we make to them is forever,” says Jennings, who regularly keeps in touch with scholarship recipients and even hosts some of them for holidays at her home.

“Mary Lou is like a parent, a mentor and a friend—she’s caring, it’s a personal connection,” says Smith-Butler. “It’s a welcoming, loving environment. It’s God working through people.” ■

The Sister Thea Bowman Black Catholic Educational Foundation Scholarship funds are given to young African-American students towards tuition at a Catholic college or university. Funds are available on a year-by-year basis as donations are received by the governing board of the foundation. For more information on the Sister Thea Bowman Foundation, please email Mary Lou Jennings at [Marylou11@aol.com](mailto:Marylou11@aol.com) or visit <http://www.cermusa.org/sistertheabowmanfoundation/index.htm>.

By Megan Tressler