

STEVEN RISTAU, M.A.'80 - ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR THE SFSAS DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD

The School Of Family Studies Alumni Society honored alum Steve Ristau, M.A. '80 with the 2005 Lorraine Wetherell SFSAS Distinguished Service Award. Steve and his family were guests at the 2005 Annual Meeting and Dinner where he delivered a very inspirational acceptance speech reproduced in part here:



Thank you. I am so honored to be recognized by you as this year's recipient of the Lorraine Wetherell School of Family Studies Alumni Society Award. It is indeed a privilege to be recognized by an institution that played a formative role in my development as a person and as a professional and to be held in the same company as Lorraine Wetherell whose passionate leadership in Family and Consumer Sciences Education at this School is unparalleled.

As it turns out this event, 25 years after my graduation from UConn with a Master's in Human Development and Family Relations, comes two days before I will be attending the 30th reunion of my graduation from Assumption College in Worcester, MA.

But there are other interesting connections... meaningful coincidences... synergies about this event in my life. Just last month my son, Aris, and his girlfriend, Stacie, graduated from UConn with their undergraduate degrees. In addition, my other son, Ben, who is working at the National Cancer Institute in Washington, DC, will be starting medical school at UConn in the fall. We are so very proud of their accomplishments. I guess you could say we are a UConn family in more ways than one!

I've told you about my sons but as they say ... none of this would have been possible if it weren't for their mother and my wife of 27 years, Susan. She and I were married at the beginning of my second year of graduate school. She has been there for every important event in my life since we met so it is ironic that she is not here tonight. As I speak she is graduating from an 8-week training program to become a literacy volunteer in Hartford. She, like many of us, feels that she has been blessed with unexpected treasure over her lifetime, and wants to give back so that others may reach their potential.

And while I am talking about family and life cycles, I have to credit my mother and father for providing the foundation of love that has enabled me to be the person that I am. My parents are THE reason that I have dedicated my life to serving others. We lost my dad last year and he was a truly remarkable man. He didn't finish high school... he spent most of his life as a manual laborer...; he had modest means. But he met a

woman, and they fell in love and together they saw a future full of riches and abundance. They poured their hearts and souls into their family. And to this day, they have been generous beyond their means to serving those less fortunate than them.

So FAMILY... FAMILY... that is what has motivated me for as long as I can remember... way back to elementary school when I wrote a report titled "Family — The Building Block of Society." I am passionate about family, the bonds of love and intimacy, the commitments to care for and nurture one another, the place of protection and refuge from an ever-changing, complex, and sometimes scary outside world. I am grateful for my family.

I had the privilege of being in the company of Maya Angelou at an event in Hartford celebrating the work and dedication of minority mentors. Ms. Angelou spoke of the light in her and the lights in her life. She spoke about how important it is to let our lights shine. We are all gifted and those gifts are meant to be shared with others. But she acknowledged that most of us struggle at times with recognizing those gifts... with feeling our worth... with knowing our value... and it's pretty tough to share gifts with others when you don't see it yourself. And, she went on, that is why it is so important to have others whose light illuminates your value... whose light, like a matchstick, ignites the fire within you.

I have been blessed with so many lights that have shone their love, their guidance, their counsel and their consternation on me; they have imparted knowledge and wisdom regardless of whether I was ready to accept it or not. UConn and the many professors I learned from in my two years here, was a guiding light in my life. Preparing for tonight has brought a flood of memories of people and events that have shaped my life. Professors like Fred Humphrey whose national leadership of the marriage and family therapy movement inspired young professionals like me with a role model of what we could be... like Gene Thomas, whose internationally-renowned work in aging was eerily prescient in light of today's extended lifespan and who guided me in my major paper on family life at middle age and older adulthood. Robert Ryder, Les Strong, Nancy Sheehan and so many more.

Over the past several years, I have become passionate about the potential for baby-boomers to give back to society in dramatic fashion while helping them have a productive extended middle age, or third age. You notice that I didn't say retire, a concept I believe is outdated and does not reflect the desire of older adults to "work after work," follow their passions, develop a sense of purpose, use their skills and experience, engage in new learning and leave a legacy that contributes to the betterment of others. This is an emerging vision of older adult development shared by growing numbers of professionals and lay people alike. I am grateful to HDFs for planting the model of human development across the lifespan in my repertoire 25 years ago; it embodies a set of values, hopes and expectations that has even more relevance today and in the years to come.

I want to give you some background on The Governor's Prevention Partnership. Our organization was formed in 1989 by Governor William O'Neill and a group of private sector business leaders, led by Dennis Mullane of Connecticut Mutual. The goal was to protect Connecticut's current and future workforce by eliminating the factors that threaten young people such as drugs, alcohol and violence. We were known in those days as Drugs Don't Work.

Today our mission is to keep Connecticut's youth safe, successful and drug-free. We focus on mentoring partnerships between schools and businesses, school, campus, and community prevention programs, parental education. We also secure \$1 million in annual donations for anti-drug messages in the media.

Our mentoring program, which was formed in 1997 through a generous commitment from state government, is a priority because of the multiple benefits it offers. As most of you well know, kids with mentors are not only 46% less likely to use drugs, they are also more likely to do well in school, complete high school, avoid getting into fights and have improved relationships with their parents.

Here are some additional facts about Connecticut's youth and why the role of mentoring is so critical. There are well over 600,000 children in this state between the ages of 5 and 18. According to the most conservative estimates, 25 percent of these children are at risk for personal and academic failure, and longer-term economic failure with factors such as poverty; school dropouts; drug use; suicide; crime and family problems.

The potential loss of 25 percent of children who may never connect with the state's economic promise has profound implications for Connecticut's citizens, policy makers and education and business leaders. No state, no matter how strong or how affluent, can afford to write off its children.

Based on my years of experience working with families, and young people in crisis, I have adopted a simple but powerful perspective. Every person in this world needs to know that someone, somewhere out there cares about them. They need to have a light in their life. They need to know that they are loveable, capable and important.



This is the premise that drives what I do and feel good about every day, and, from my perspective, it's the key to truly lifting the human heart and spirit. If young people believe in themselves, they will set their sights higher. And they will outrun the expectations that others—and the circumstances of their lives—have set for them. They will be productive. They will contribute. They will teach others to do the same.

In closing, I want to thank you again for honoring me tonight. More importantly, I want to thank you for honoring the work that we — all of us — are doing to empower and support families and the young people in their care. We could not do it without the light of UConn, the light of this society, the light that each of you carries in your heart.

I want to leave you with a quote from Harold Whitman that I hope inspires you as much as it does me:

"Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive."

The Annual Report is published each year for the alumni, faculty, staff, students, and friends of the School of Family Studies at the University of Connecticut. Its purpose is to inform alumni, friends, prospective faculty, and students of the School's programs, activities, and accomplishments. If you have any questions about this publication, or the School of Family Studies, you can contact us by phone at (860) 486-4720 or by fax at (860) 486-3452. Every month during the semester, the Dean sends out, via email, an update on interesting happenings and news for the School. If you would like to receive this update, please send an email message to Janice Berriault at the School at janice.berriault@uconn.edu. You can also find additional information on our website at: www.familystudies.uconn.edu.