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November 5, 2007, Honors Program Welcome Back Ceremony

Welcome back to another year at SCU, and welcome back to the University Honors Program. I am honored to have been asked to speak at this wonderful occasion.

The Welcome Back Ceremony is a wonderful way for the school and your fellow peers to recognize and celebrate the choices, and sometimes the sacrifices, you have made in order to be a member of the SCU Honors Program.

But the choices you have made so far are just the beginning. I challenge you not to rest on your past achievements but to strive towards even greater goals.

And I encourage you to foster and forge relationship with faculty mentors in the program. Because I know that without Dr. Billings' mentorship and Dr. Osberg's support, I wouldn't be where I am now.

I was asked to speak to you tonight about HOW my present work has grown out of my experiences in the Honors Program and at SCU. In inviting you to see a short glimpse of my past and present life, I hope to show you the importance of taking small actions everyday toward your goals—even if these goals are not fully transparent to you. My hope for you—and for myself—is that we will cultivate a life backed by purpose.

Since I graduated college in June of 2006, I have been working in the field of immigrant integration and refugee protection. Currently, I work at a small non-profit in San Francisco called Upwardly Global, which provides the critical services needed to help highly-skilled immigrants and refugees reestablish their professional careers. And I can honestly say...each day at work, I am fulfilling my vocation.

But I haven't always had such clarity on my goals and aspirations. When I first came to SCU as a Freshman in 2002, I knew I wanted to major in English, but I had NO IDEA what I wanted to do after college. My first quarter was spent studying for math tests and Philosophy mid-terms, analyzing the nature of knowledge or arguing that the TABLE in front of me truly exists. BUT by the end of the first quarter, I was only more confused about my OWN existence. My friends were declaring their majors and telling me how they were planning to be lawyers or psychologists.

Not knowing what my own ultimate life goals were, I decided to take tiny steps toward understanding my vocation. I began to take more University Honors classes in the field of applied ethics and develop relationships with university professors. I took a course called Ethical Issues in Society with Fr. Ravizza. This class had an Arrupe placement in which I spent my Friday nights and Saturday mornings at Julian Street Inn, a homeless shelter that provides short-term housing for the mentally ill homeless population of Santa Clara County.

I remember talking to a homeless gentleman who had been born in Sri Lanka and had immigrated to the US as a refugee only a few years prior. As I sat across from this gentleman on that surprisingly warm morning, I felt I was being brought outside of myself into a wonderfully normal yet transforming moment. I was curious to understand how

the US was failing to provide adequate care for our homeless population, specifically for New Americans. How can a refugee come to the U.S. to seek safety only to be thrown out onto our streets?

This question ate at me as I spent my freshman and sophomore Friday nights and Saturday mornings at Julian Street and met more and more homeless immigrants. During my Junior year, I studied abroad at Oxford University on a year-long full academic scholarship from the SCU Honors Program.

At Oxford, I was blown away by the disparity between the educated Oxford University students in the center of Oxford and the low-income immigrant families on the outskirts of the city. I began volunteering for JACARI, an organization with the mission to improve race relations in Oxford. I tutored an eight-year-old Muslim Urdu-speaking girl, Maryam, whose Pakistani family had sought refuge in England ten years earlier.

I tutored Maryam in the family's small, dimly-lit living room. Each day, Maryam's mother would offer me tea while she listened to me teach Maryam. After about seven months, Maryam's mother said, "I came here when I was young—married young. No time for school. No time for me. It was all for the children."

As I came back to California, these words *echoed* in my mind. That summer—the summer before my senior year—I was awarded a DISCOVER Ministry Fellowship from SCU, which allowed me to work in the Refugee Resettlement Program at Catholic Charities in San Jose. It was there that I met Tenneh, a forty-two-year-old refugee from Liberia. And it was there that I first conceptualized my vocational calling. My job that summer was to teach Tenneh how to read and write in English. But as Tenneh and I became friends, I realized that I had more work ahead of me. Tenneh explained that her husband had been missing since 1994. She hadn't seen her husband since Charles Taylor's rebel force invaded her hometown in Liberia and forced her to flee alone with her children. As Tenneh crossed into the Ivory Coast, her youngest child was shot in the head by a rebel gunman.

In learning more about Tenneh's past I began to see my future with more clarity. That summer, Tenneh and I compiled and presented information about her missing husband to the Red Cross Tracing Service. We hoped that the Red Cross would be able to reunite Tenneh with her husband one day. Through this process, I discovered that Tenneh's two children had been denied refugee status and were still living in a refugee camp, Guinea. We requested second interviews for her children by submitting an affidavit to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Guinea.

For the last 2 years, we hadn't heard anything—nothing from the Red Cross...nothing from UNHCR. Then, last March, Tenneh received a call from her eldest child. They had been granted a second interview and had obtained refugee status. And a few months ago, they arrived at San Jose airport. Earlier this year, Tenneh also heard from the Red Cross; her husband who she hadn't seen or heard from in 13 years had been located. Now they talk on the phone regularly.

Energized by these experiences, I began to prepare myself for a career in resettling refugees. During my senior year, I devised and co-taught a now-permanent university ethics course...maybe some of you have taken it...called "Ethics and Globalization,"

through an SCU Hackworth Fellowship. In leading a panel discussion on human trafficking, I realized I wanted to spend my life serving the forced migrant community.

So after I graduated from SCU in June 2006, I began working at a law office specializing in deportation defense. My first client was a Sikh from the Punjab region of India who was fleeing due to religious persecution. The scars covering his arms betrayed the savage actions of Punjabi government officials. Over the next six months, I documented countless arrests and instances of torture in many countries, and I met men and women trying to forget the persecution I was trying to document precisely.

In building relationships with my clients, I learned that many highly-skilled refugees are trapped in jobs where their professional experience and education are wasted. For instance, Serge, a refugee from Cameroon, found himself pumping gas in the U.S. despite his Doctorate in Medicine. The Federal Resettlement Program funds initial services for refugees for the first eight months after arrival in the U.S. to help refugees like T find "survival" jobs that introduce them to workplace customs and offer them a chance to improve English. These low-skill jobs, however, relate little to many refugees' prior professions.

Upwardly Global offered me the opportunity to join their mission and create a new position to bridge its two programs. As the liaison between Upwardly Global's programs, I have come to recognize the need for the U.S. to develop a cohesive immigrant integration policy that addresses both labor market assimilation and human rights violations. Through I have come to understand where my vocation lies, I still have many decisions ahead of me to make.

How will I improve myself in order to better serve forced migrants?
What post graduate degree should I get? Where should I go to graduate school?

You see the questions---they don't stop.

But each small decision you and I make takes us one step closer. Remember the goal is to understand your purpose and create a vision for yourself. Leaders without visions can be likened to driving in a strange town without a road map: you are going to wind up somewhere; it just might not be in the best part of town.

While it would be easier to slide through life without a purpose, without a map, it wouldn't be fulfilling. Only by setting difficult goals and achieving them can we find true self-worth.

The fact that you are here today shows that you know how to set and achieve goals for yourself. I congratulate you. And as you journey through your years at SCU as a Honors student, remember what Mother Teresa said, "Life is a promise; fulfill it."