

Western Illinois University Young Alumni Excellence Award
Saturday May 16, 2009
Aundrea (Andi) Frieden

Thank you Amy, President Goldfarb, Trustees, and distinguished guests.

Since we are in the presence of a great Illinois historian, I thought I might share a little of my personal Illinois history, explain a little bit of why my husband Joe Gulley and I decided to honor my mother with a scholarship here at Western, and express my gratitude to those who came before me.

Gordy Taylor tells a story about seeing my mom walk up to his class – and, conscientious professor that he was back in the early seventies – he went to speak to her about the propriety of coming to class drunk. My mom laughed and explained that she did not drink, and that her staggered gait was the result of her Frederick's Ataxia – a rare genetic disease that is like MS and MD rolled in one.

Gordy remembers this story nearly 40 years later – not because of the stumbling young woman ambling up the stairs, but because of the love, and kindness, and hope that reacted to his concern.

Over the years my mom ultimately became wheelchair bound, and the disease took away her dancing, and water sports, and her beautiful handwriting, and her other fine motor skills, and ate away at her vision.

But it could not take her joy. My parents left WIU in 1974. They had seven children, traveled the world; they lived in nine cities.

Nothing, no disease or other obstacle stood in the way of the message of love, hope, and service that they shared across the country.

When I was in law school, with most of her children grown and out of high school (in her 40s) my mom went back to school and supplemented her WIU accounting degree with one in early childhood education. She opened a preschool and touched even more lives as she had ours – and the countless others that had attended her and dad's Sunday school classes and Christian summer camps over the years. Mom and dad were a team; and a force of nature.

At her funeral in 2005, it was astonishing to see the hundreds of young men and women who came, and those who came up to my dad with their own stories of how Mom had touched and shaped their lives.

I am *so blessed* to have my roots in the rich black soil of Western Illinois; in the examples of devotion and service and love set by my parents; in the bond of family and community.

In these uncertain times, I am grateful for this rich history, and am reminded that now, more than ever, is a time to lift up others. I am grateful to each of you here who have given your life in service to the students at Western, like my parents, my sister and I, and all our family members who came before us to help us establish these roots.

Although in my nine years practicing law I've had amazing opportunities, I would have accomplished little if not for the unseen heroes like my parents who paved the way.

An interviewer in Houston asked me recently: What are your future goals? And I thought about all the things left to do, and goals left to accomplish, but in the end my answer was simple: When I see my mom again, I hope she can say she is proud.

Thank you so much for this incredible honor, and this opportunity to return home.