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Sarah Buchanan is recipient of the UMM Alumni Association Teaching Award

Summary: Sarah Buchanan's gifts of teaching and mentoring students as well as what her students contribute both in and outside the classroom are an unwritten piece of Buchanan's teaching "syllabus" and a key to why Buchanan was chosen as this year's recipient of the UMM Alumni Association Teaching Award.

(April 4, 2007)-Leaning against a wall just inside Sarah Buchanan's office is a kora, given to Buchanan by one of her students, Nii Anyetei Akofio-Soweh, aka Tei. Tei's father is from Ghana and imported the kora, an instrument used by West African griots who are oral historians and storytellers, to the U.S. from Ghana. "Tei gave it to me as a thank you for my mentoring him through his Minority Mentorship Program (MMP) research project last year. His research compared British and French colonial styles in Africa," said Buchanan, an associate professor of French at the University of Minnesota, Morris.

Her gifts of teaching and mentoring students as well as what her students contribute both in and outside the classroom are an unwritten piece of Buchanan's teaching "syllabus" and a key to why Buchanan was chosen as this year's recipient of the University of Minnesota, Morris Alumni Association Teaching Award.

Thanks to the generosity of the UMM Alumni Association, the Morris campus recognizes its outstanding professors through the UMM Alumni Association Teaching Award, an annual award created by the alumni in 1994 and approved by the UMM Campus Assembly in 1995. This honor was bestowed for the first time in the spring of 1997. The purpose of the award is to honor individual University of Minnesota, Morris faculty members for their outstanding contributions to undergraduate education.

"As a freshman during the 2004-2005 school year, I was already quite active in the French discipline but had no intentions of exchanging my pursuit of a political science degree to a French degree," shared UMM junior Rebekah Deutl in her letter of nomination on behalf of Buchanan. "Soon after meeting Professor Buchanan, she convinced me that I should not let my talent for the French language be wasted and go unnoticed.

"She agreed to take me as an advisee and helped me map out a four-year plan with a double major including political science and French, which I am currently still following, to show me that a double major in these two disciplines is possible within four years. Thanks to the help of Professor Buchanan, I can use my passion for politics and my talent with French to help me get the most of my liberal arts education to pursue a career outside academic walls," added Deutl.

UMM assistant professor of French, Tammy Berberi, considered it both a pleasure and an honor to nominate her colleague: "Sarah has harnessed a number of grant opportunities in support of the creation of a Francophone studies curriculum," said Berberi. "Moreover it is thanks to Sarah's initiative that we undertook a complete revision of the French major and minor. Sarah is a passionate and capable teacher...popular and highly respected. Like many teachers at UMM, (her) teaching and mentoring reaches students outside of the classroom."

“I work hard on making connections with students on both a personal level and in the classroom,” shared Buchanan. “I ask about their families. My classes are student centered students do the talking. They know they need to be prepared, but I get just as much from them as I receive.” Buchanan is a meticulous grader, spending as long as two to three hours per paper and commenting extensively in the margins of each student’s composition. In addition to teaching, she has 25 “official” advisees, and guessed an additional 10-15 students stop by her office on occasion for advice on one topic or another.

A Willmar native, Buchanan said she chose to teach at UMM due to its smaller, tight-knit community where students are disciplined and hard working. At the same time, though, said Buchanan, UMM students are also “engaged with the world, pushing the political system and their professors.

“UMM students are talented,” said Buchanan, who encourages students to develop research projects. “I see that first glimmer in their eye and I push them to develop that first idea into a UROP (Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program). “They develop the topic in depth and feel good about producing a 20-30-page paper to present at a conference.”

The importance of travel for students cannot be overstated,” said Buchanan. “It’s important to travel in the U.S.,” she said, but added that domestic travel should not replace travel abroad. “Americans can travel four or five days before entering another country and we risk being rather insular. It is therefore vital for Americans to go abroad, to learn about other people, their histories, their cultures, their languages and their ways of solving problems. Living and studying in another country pushes one intellectually and individually, but even more important, it’s fun!” she said. Last summer, Buchanan led a group of UMM students to Morocco through the UMM Center for International Programs. She has also led the July in Paris Program twice, once in 2002 and again in 2005. She is slated to take the July in Paris Program again next summer, in 2008.

Buchanan is “honored and humbled” to receive the UMMAA Teaching Award and is very grateful to those who nominated her for the award: “It is a wonderful testament to the strength of the institution that alumni feel it’s important to set aside funding for this award. There are few jobs as important as education,” she said.

Photo by David Nieves ’10, El Paso, Texas: Sarah Buchanan

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