

Norma Jean Anderson
1932-2006

Occasionally, in our universities, someone engages the campus and its people in an extraordinary, life-changing way. Universities, as places of discovery and creation, of personal challenge and achievement, and of excitement and fulfillment, are not easily moved by the merely charismatic, the ordinarily brilliant, or the expectedly wise. Yet sometimes we are blessed with the presence of a unique personality, an individual whose breadth of commitment, capacity for inspiration, and personal life's testimony has a transforming effect. Norma Jean Anderson was one of those rare individuals.

We who came late to Norma Jean Anderson's life approach her legend with awe and envy. Awe, in the presence of a record of achievement, accomplishment, and inspiration unlike any witnessed before; envy, in the presence of others who enjoy decades of engagement with such a powerful personality. We took what we could from the few moments given us, we absorbed the wonder and appreciation of friends, colleagues, students, and the legion of admirers, and we stood on the sidelines bearing witness to an exceptional human spirit. Indeed, to be with Norma Jean Anderson and her friends was to engage in a form of revival, a joyous crescendo of anecdote and remembrance, of battles won and obstacles overcome, of opportunity rediscovered, of personal growth made real. To become a part of a Norma Jean Anderson event was a form of total emersion in warmth, appreciation, and faith.

As we at the University of Massachusetts Amherst celebrated Norma Jean Anderson at a gala event on the occasion of her Distinguished Achievement Award almost two years ago, we surely did celebrate with enthusiasm, but underneath that joy, ran a constant, quiet, but clear note of power. Norma Jean Anderson was a power to be reckoned with, a force that moved people and programs. Hers was an insistent voice that, reinforced by her demonstrated competence and capability, required people to do what could be done, to do what must be done; and, when we imagined that something could not be done, she commanded us to do that also.

Norma Jean Anderson knew that we build the future by what we accomplish today, by who we move and inspire today, and by what we begin today. She saw the future we must have, and she worked constantly to bring others to share in the power of her faith in achievement and accomplishment. She leaves us with an obligation: to do more for others, to create opportunities for others, and to reach out with the power she knew lives within every one of us, as it lived within her, to help others achieve triumphant lives.

New friends and old, all touched to the core by this remarkable woman, we celebrate her life today and carry her inspiration with us always.

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April 30, 2006