

## **Graduation 2006: Stories of success**

By Dr. Debra Bowers, Superintendent

The following is the text of Dr. Debra Bowers' commencement speech, given to the graduating class of St. Louis Park High School on June 8, 2006.

“Tell me a story.” It’s just about impossible to be around a young child for very long before you hear, “Tell me a story.” For most of you, from the time you could say these words, “Tell me a story” powered your every waking moment. Sure there was time for Legos, Matchbox cars, and Pretty, Pretty Princess, but when those got old, it was time to find the ones who could tell you a story. And there was no time like bedtime when you wanted to hear your treasured bedtime story, old and tattered like your binkie, bunny, blanket or bear, again and again and again. I remember I could read my daughter’s favorite Mercer Mayer story in two minutes flat.

And now I am supposed to tell you a story. As if you couldn’t tell each other your own for hours. So settle down, and I will.

Of course, your story didn’t end with that bedtime story. You entered elementary school only to find an exciting, if bewildering, new gamut of stories. Your elementary teachers had story books, story boards, story problems, and stories-on-buildings-that-make-up-our-town. You learned made-up stories could either be fiction or a problem based on why you told them. You drew and learned to use letters, then words, to record the stories. Numbers, of course, let you dial into the phones of your friends whose stories mixed and mingled with your own, forming the shape of the new being you might become.

If you were very lucky, your story may have been punctuated by a teacher like Park Spanish Immersion’s Lee-Ann Stephens, named Minnesota Teacher of the Year 2006 by Education Minnesota. Senora Stephens teaches English language arts to students in grades five and six at PSI with humor, enthusiasm and joy. We are grateful Lee-Ann, and others like her, were courageous enough, bold enough, and believed enough in the story of children and blend hers with not only theirs, but also ours, as well.

Then, you left your neighborhood--and childhood--behind as you prepared to enter the Junior High. You moved from asking for stories to telling them. Or not, as your newly adolescent spirit moved you.

But your story continued as you emerged newly armored and strengthened from the metamorphosis that is middle school. It was time to take your story on the road as you moved to the high school with real dances, privileges, and drivers’ permits. Your story got footnotes, endnotes, in-text parenthetical citations, scientific notation, conjugation, argumentation, derivation, mediation, documentation, show-your-work, History Day, and your own voice—the *Echo*, *Echowan*, 36 and Senior Wall, old-fashioned notes, voice mail, email, chat rooms, cell phones, blogs, i-pods, and text messaging.

I now want to challenge you to pause and consider the story of a classmate of yours. Graduating with you tonight is a young woman who arrived in St. Louis Park five years ago without sight, without Braille, without English, and without any formal education. While her family nurtured and protected her, their move to America presented an entirely new challenge; this daughter, sheltered and sequestered, would be required by law to go to public school. And so she did. Her junior high geography teacher Jo Gibson would find 3-D maps to assist her new student in finding her way around the world, and,

more importantly, to the bathroom on the second floor. Science teacher Britt Karas-Gulstrand brought the physical world of the northern plains to the fingertips of a young person used to a safe room behind high walls. Slowly, those walls broke down and a new story began.

Meet, please, Ms. Hani Haji Ali.

Hani graduates with you tonight with a story told in at least three languages: the one of her birthplace, the English of her new country, and the international language of Braille. Imagine moving in the middle of your high school years—a grim thought enough on its own. Now imagine never having attended public school, moving to America, into an American high school and being expected to master all the skills the rest of you did. That Hani's story happened is the kind of miracle we love in The Park—a partnership of the community and its schools. Hani's ELL teacher, Deb Ranney and Curriculum and Instruction Director Barbara DeMaster pitched in creating tactile models of paragraphs. Community volunteer Shirley Bierma worked with Hani almost daily. When Hani sat to take the state writing test she had learned English, Braille, and how to write a paper in a little over one year. Hani's hard work paid off as she increased her writing score a full two levels on a six level scale. She learned how to rap, as well. As amazing as her story is, hers is one of the many I see before me tonight.

We are indeed here tonight to celebrate the stories you now tell and can claim as your own. You will receive a diploma attesting the State of Minnesota believes you can read, write and figure; but more importantly that this community, through its elected members of the School Board, believes your story deserved the best facilities, most careful attention, and essential education any community can bestow upon the protagonists of its communal story—YOU!

CONGRATULATIONS!