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## Living Monuments: Freedom to learn and grow

Lisa Stevens Gilford '90

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## *Freedom to learn and grow*

**M**y fondest memory of becoming a Truman Scholar is of traveling to Independence, Mo., with my mother for the awards ceremony. I was living in Washington, D.C., at the time, having moved there with several Furman students and Professor Don Gordon to spend a term in the nation's capitol.

I was interning at TransAfrica, a public interest organization devoted to ending apartheid in South Africa. This was 1988. Nelson Mandela was still an inmate, not the iconic elder statesman he is now, and many of us believed (and many did not) that economic sanctions, peaceful protest and international pressure would soon bring racial justice to his country.

I got the call that I'd won the Truman as I was stuffing envelopes with flyers advertising a candlelight vigil outside the South African Embassy. I called my mother with the news immediately, and we made arrangements for her to visit me in D.C. for a few days before flying out to Missouri together.

Then disaster struck. After dinner one night, my mother tripped on an uneven sidewalk and fell flat on her face. Fortunately, she was fine — except for the eggplant-resembling welt on her head, two black eyes and a bruised ego. She looked a mess, but she didn't let the fall or her battered appearance dampen her enthusiasm for my accomplishment. She was extremely proud of me. And, as she has all my life, she told me so.

I don't remember much about the speeches at the awards ceremony, or what President Truman's childhood home looks like, but I do remember my mother, wearing outrageously oversized sunglasses to hide her injuries, clapping wildly when they called my name as a Truman Scholar.

Harry Truman did not have a college degree. After he graduated from high school, he went to work on the family farm because he was needed there. He rose to the highest office in our country without benefit of a formal education, but clearly he had the benefit of a devoted and loving family.

I have been fortunate to have those resources in my life. The best thing about becoming a Truman Scholar was that it allowed my mother, who raised me single-handedly, some freedom from worrying about how she would pay for my education. She didn't have to take the second job she thought about taking when I was accepted at Furman. She was able to retire on time.

Being a Truman Scholar also afforded me many freedoms. After working at TransAfrica, I actually got to visit Africa my junior year, traveling with Dr. Gordon again on Furman's wonderful study abroad program.

I attended law school at the University of Southern



California. Because of the Truman Scholarship, I was able to spend my first-year summer working at a non-profit legal services agency. My second and third years, I defended Cuban inmates at Lompoc Penitentiary and externed at the Federal Public Defender's Office.

After USC, I was a Graduate Fellow at Georgetown University Law Center, where I taught in the clinical program and represented public advocacy groups at Georgetown's Institute for Public Representation. I earned an LL.M. (Master of Laws) degree. I could afford to spend my time studying, teaching and representing people without money, because a foundation that honors a president who never was able to go to college gave me money to go to college — and a generous living stipend to boot.

Since Georgetown, I have not been as active in public service. I am a partner in a private law firm in Los Angeles; all of our clients can afford to pay. My public service involves serving on the board of the National Association of Women Lawyers, contributing to charities that support women and girls (such as StepUp Women's Network), and raising two children, Isabel Ana and Evan Donald, to be loving, responsible and caring human beings.

I am still the person, however, who naively believed that efforts like those made at TransAfrica could lead to the liberation of an entire country, that people without money should have access to the legal system, and that we should all use our talents for the greater good in whatever way we can.

I am still my mother's child.

— Lisa Stevens Gilford '90

*The author, a political science major at Furman, is a partner at the Weston Benshoof law firm, where she specializes in complex business litigation.*