

Sarah E. Nutter

Faraway Places

*Faraway places
With strange-sounding names
Far away over the sea –
Those faraway places
With strange-sounding names
Are calling, calling me.*

“Far Away Places”
Lyrics by Joan Whitney
and Alex Kramer

When man first set foot on the moon on July 20, 1969, the whole world was watching. The whole world, that is, except for nine-year-old Sarah Nutter. As Neil Armstrong took one giant leap for mankind, the young girl was busy taking a giant leap of her own.

Her parents had taken her overseas for the first time to stay at the house of a family friend in Scotland, and there, she found a new world with its own culture and way of life. “It forever changed the way I interacted with the world,” she recalls now. “Taking that trip at that particular moment in my life was a tremendous gift, permanently changing my perspective. Like the rest of humanity at the time, I was learning in my own way that you can’t restrict your thinking to your own small sphere and geographical location. There are faraway places, and we’re meant to find more of ourselves in them.”

Now, as the Dean of George Mason University’s School of Business, Sarah’s mission is to empower people every day, one person at a time. More than 168 countries are represented on George Mason’s campus, and 40 percent of the 2014 freshman class is first generation American. “These students coming from all over the world tend to have a tilt toward entrepreneurialism and innovation,” she explains. “They see the world through different eyes, so they bring a new

perspective to solving the world’s problems. Indeed, they bring just as much to the vibrancy and diversity of the campus as the campus brings to them. And while other institutions measure their success in taking certain people certain places, George Mason is about taking as many students as possible from wherever they are to wherever they want to go. In truth, the magic of George Mason is about making those faraway places and achievements attainable.”

Having served in the School of Business since 1995, Sarah was asked to join the University’s Senior Executive team starting in 2012 to prepare for then-President Alan Merten’s transition from leading George Mason. When Angel Cabrera assumed the Presidency, she was tapped to run the University visioning process. “It was humbling and inspiring to lead that effort, wherein we sought the input of 4,000 voices to set the course for the next forty years of the university’s growth,” she recalls. “It was a time when we recognized that we had

grown from nothing to 34,000 students since we started awarding degrees in 1972. Our task was to capture the essence of the university’s identity in a new mission statement, painting a picture that would allow us to forge a future based on our accomplishments, strengths, and vision.”

From this process, the George Mason IDEA emerged. IDEA, or Innovative, Diverse, Entrepreneurial, and Accessible, marks the four components that thread through the DNA of the university. “We’re an inclusive and innovative academic community committed to creating a more just, free, and prosperous world,” Sarah avows, reciting Mason’s mission statement. “This fits in perfectly with my own mission statement, which is to empower people every day, and is reflected in the work and fabric of the business school.”

What truly sets George Mason apart as an



institution of higher learning is the way it measures success, judging itself not based on how many people it turns away, but on how many people with talent it can educate. The Business School alone has an enrollment of 3,200 undergraduate and 550 graduate students, and is home to the Mason Innovation Lab, a center where any student can come in and turn an idea into an action plan. Currently number 62 in the *US News and World Report* rankings of the nation's top undergraduate business schools, it attracts high-caliber faculty who are equally engaged in innovative research and in the surrounding community. Among the top 200 research universities in the world, two of its faculty members have received the Nobel Prize, and it is often recognized as a top up-and-coming school. "Mason is a place where magic happens," Sarah affirms. "It's a place where we're deeply committed to giving equal opportunities to those who might not otherwise have them, allowing them to take their lives to great lengths."

In many ways, George Mason feels like home to Sarah because she could have easily been one of the students she now works so hard to serve. A native of Big Rapids, Michigan, growing up on a fourth-generation family farm, she always knew she'd have to pay her own way through school. Still, her parents equipped her with a thoughtful, engaged, impassioned approach to life that would allow her to forge her own path forward and seize the opportunities that would come her way. "The only thing that was off-limits was the dairy when the milk inspector was around," Sarah laughs, remembering a time when, at three years old, she rammed her tricycle against the door of the processing plant and ran into the unsuspecting inspector. "Other than that, we were taught to have a big worldview."

This worldview was explored and expanded over family meals at the kitchen table, where the Emmons family kept two books—a Bible and a dictionary. "My parents were very politically aware and engaged in the world around them," she recalls. "Our conversations were animated and in-depth, and before the end of any meal, one or both books would be out on the table."

Emmons Dairy had graduated from raising cows by the time Sarah came along. Essentially born into business, she would ride on the bulk milk truck with her father to pick up milk

from the area farmers. Her first official job came at age five, when she would pick up the small empty half-pint containers and burn them behind the dairy for a penny a case. At the same time, she helped to support her parents' burgeoning political careers. Each took a turn serving as Township Treasurer, so she would help stuff envelopes with tax bills. Her father went on to become County Commissioner, while her mother eventually served in the state legislature.

"Today, my husband, David, says I got the best of both of my parents," Sarah relays. Her father, an incredibly smart and passionate person, taught her that whenever you put your mind to something, you should also put your heart to it. This created a symmetry between his mind, heart, and actions that served as an important model for Sarah and her younger sister, and became particularly important later on when the dairy was driven out of business by large farm cooperatives.

Rather than give up in defeat, her father launched a new career at age fifty, becoming an insurance salesman for the Aid Association for Lutherans. "It was an incredible demonstration of how resilient our family is, and how powerful that can be," Sarah reflects. "Now, I keep the glass bottles and bottle tops that display our dairy's emblem, reminding me of the importance of the small businessman. Large corporations may dominate the landscape in terms of dollar revenue generated and number of jobs, but it's the small entrepreneur that uses their own personal ingenuity to make the world a better place. They do it day after day in tough conditions, and I'm dedicated to honoring and supporting the individual amidst the large institutional structures." Having missed out on the opportunity to go to college in his younger years because he was running the farm, Sarah's father never gave up on his goal of higher education, and finally completed his undergraduate degree at age 75.

Sarah's mother, as well, was a remarkable role model. She earned a Home Economics degree from Michigan State University and taught school for a few years before Sarah was born, giving that up to focus on managing the books for the family business and volunteering as she raised her children. Later, she decided to start a political career at age 52 when a seat opened up in the state legislature. By the time she retired as the Floor Leader of the Michigan State Senate, she had made her mark as a woman of strong capabilities,

political prowess, and constructive communication skills that allowed her to connect, marshal, and move forward on important initiatives. "She really knew how to find common ground and help people move from total disagreement to agreement," Sarah remembers. "Her great gift was building consensus and moving things forward. What's more, she knew how to separate position from person. If you're in a high-profile role, you get a lot of attention, but it has nothing to do with who you are as a person. Coming from a long line of strong women, my mother was able to stay grounded even as she served in office—something I have always strived to do in the various roles I've served."

More than anything else, her parents instilled in her a curiosity about the world that led to a lifetime love of learning and education. She can still vividly remember coming home from her first day of kindergarten, upset that she hadn't learned a single thing that day. But the one-room schoolhouse taught kindergarten up through eighth grade, and the small girl quickly found opportunities to absorb the lessons of the older students. Before long, she mastered all the seventh-grade spelling words, developing flexibility in her approach to life and learning. "The school was like an incubator that encouraged curiosity and allowed me to develop in a very unconstrained environment," she recalls. "It was a very free place for learning and growing."

When the school closed down after her second grade year, Sarah switched to a parochial Lutheran school. It soon became clear that she was well ahead of her third-grade peers, and at the end of that year, she tested out of fourth grade and was sent directly to fifth. In high school, Sarah got a job working twenty hours a week at a key-punch operation, entering in the property tax information for the county. It never occurred to her not to go to college, so she knew she had to start saving up money early. She graduated first in her class of 180 students, with teachers trying to persuade her to go get her next degree and then return to teach alongside them.

Sarah enrolled at Ferris State University at age 17 because it was local and affordable, and it turned out to be a perfect environment for her. She was able to continue working for the family business, delivering milk to the entire Chippewa Lake School District while maintaining her studies. On top of these obligations, the school had a

program that allowed students to spend alternate quarters either taking classes or working, and the Department Chair of Accounting sought her out to offer her an opportunity to spend a work quarter at the Pontiac Motor Division of General Motors.

After spending two quarters working in that capacity, Sarah decided it wasn't for her, so the Department Chair found her an opportunity to try out a CPA firm. "I did that for a cycle, and I learned something else really valuable: I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life, either," she remembers. "The Ferris State faculty taught me the 'give it a whirl' philosophy, wherein you aren't afraid to try and fail, or try and change. I came to understand that you should take advantage of every opportunity that's given to you, because not every choice is a permanent choice. If you go down a path that's not right for you, you can just chart another course."

As she was working through these questions during her senior year of college, she met David Nutter, the son of a Ferris State professor of geology. He had an expansive worldview that had been forged through three years in the military as a trumpet player in Heidelberg, Germany. Sarah happened to come across an ad in the university's newspaper for a hiking trip to the Grand Canyon being led by David's father, and it turned out they had room for one more.

Both artistic, adventurous, musical people, Sarah and David had a lot to talk about as they traversed one of the seven natural wonders of the world. But when he told her he wasn't interested in dating anyone, and was instead hoping to find a wife, twenty-year-old Sarah quickly cut off the conversation by wishing him luck. When he called her up that January, however, to invite her to a hockey game, she decided to listen to her gut over her nerves. In February, he proposed. Shortly thereafter, Sarah took him to meet her great Aunt Julia, the first of the family to earn a masters degree. A true trailblazer, she had pursued a career in school social work, counseling the most troubled children from the most difficult backgrounds. A woman of remarkable courage, fortitude, and character, Julia recognized David's integrity and granted her seal of approval, and the couple married that September. "David is awesome," Sarah says today. "Through everything, he has always let me be who I am. And our worldviews fit together perfectly, leading us to

travel around the globe, driven by the prospect of empowering others.”

Their journey together started at Michigan State, where David finished his undergraduate degree and Sarah worked toward her MBA in accounting and finance at the suggestion of her Ferris State mentors. Her MBA professors began urging her to get her PhD and then come back to teach with them, but she had never tried teaching, so they gave her a class to lead. Then, the Nutters were given an opportunity to go to Germany together, where David would pursue a masters in German and Sarah would teach for the University of Maryland University College. Their first son was born there, and the passion Sarah felt for faraway places grew deeper.

While there, Sarah also developed an interest in the taxation of expatriates. When they returned to the U.S., they continued their studies at Michigan State—David, a masters in medical geography, and Sarah, a PhD—until David landed a job in defense mapping at Intergraph Corporation in Washington, DC. Fueled by her interest in expatriate taxation, and needing to finish her PhD, she approached the IRS with a modest request for data. “They told me that, as I had requested the data, it wouldn’t be useful for my proposal at all,” she recalls. “They needed someone to help train their young economists on tax accounting and policy, so they offered me a job which would allow me to come and go as I pleased while I worked on my dissertation. The experience was fascinating, and once I finished my PhD, I stayed on to look at international tax issues, exploring ideas for creating a system that puts U.S. businesses on level playing field globally.”

After five years at the IRS, Sarah was hired by the School of Business at George Mason University. She taught tax and accounting for several years, later becoming the Director of the Executive MBA Program and then the Department Chair of Accounting. Then Tom Hennessy, then Chief of Staff, urged her to come over and help with the transition in the President’s office. After leading the charge to develop the university vision, she was asked to step in as the Acting Dean of the School of Business. After a national search, she was formally named Dean—the most recent in a string of leadership positions she’s been tapped for since grade school. An institution-builder with a mind for strategy and politics like her mother, she realized that her added capacity for

administration meant that she could reach her mission more effectively in a leadership role rather than a teaching role. “Also, people often view these types of roles as stepping stones,” she points out. “I don’t. They’re opportunities to make a real difference by building an institution that’s sustainable long after you’ve moved on.”

Through her various leadership positions, and especially now at the George Mason School of Business, Sarah has focused on the little things that add up to make a big difference. As a *Washington Business Journal* “Women Who Mean Business” award recipient for 2014, she seeks opportunities for small innovations and contributions that can redefine a community or professional culture, allowing for greater collaboration and fuller thinking. “Leadership is modeling the actions, attitudes, behavior, and perspective you hope will inspire others to want to do the same,” she says. “Leadership is about being who you are, setting the tone, and creating an environment where people can thrive. As my mother would say, if you don’t care who gets the credit, you can get a lot done.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Sarah stresses the importance of knowing yourself and focusing on your strengths. “I’ve seen so many people who feel like they need to shore up their weaknesses, or work toward something that just isn’t a good fit,” she remarks. “Don’t live by other peoples’ expectations of you, and don’t waste your time working against yourself. Lean into your strengths.” Beyond that, Sarah underscores the importance of the curiosity that has driven her professional development.

More than anything, however, her success is founded on commitments made to empower people everyday. Just as others saw gifts in her she didn’t see in herself as she worked through school, Sarah makes a point to invest in individuals to help their gifts come forth. “I’m a big believer in the micro—in helping others be the best they can be,” she affirms. “My work has always been about changing lives, one person at a time.”

Sarah and David’s work with Empower International Ministries, a small nonprofit, is no different. The organization is committed to healing families, restoring communities, and transforming cultures through combating the root cause and lethal effects of abuse, abandonment, and injustice. As board members since 2009, Sarah and David

have traveled to developing countries around the world in support of egalitarianism and equality of all people in the eyes of God. “We help people understand that relationships between people can be so much more than transactional,” she explains. “So much of the brokenness people experience is based on cultural expectations imposed on them by the world around them. We work to free people through education so they can be the men and women God called them to be.”

Across all the places she’s gone and the people she’s helped, the mission statements of the various spheres of Sarah’s life coalesce into a song of opportunity and change. It’s heard by the people of Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and other developing countries. It’s heard by the students of George Mason University, whose education is guided by the vision she helped lay out. It’s heard by her three children and four grandchildren, who bring joy to her life every day. It’s a song about empowering people, one person

at a time, to reach their own faraway places and realize their own distant dreams.

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