

Acceptance Speech, Alumnus of the Year Award

Our personal stories

Monica Arac de Nyeko

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

It is an honor to be back at the University of Groningen after nearly ten years. I cannot believe it has already been ten years.

I was last here in 2004. At that time I was young, much much thinner and of course naïve like most young people tend to be. But I was also ambitious, determined and eager to find my place in the world. I left Groningen to pursue an internship with the United Nations World Food Programme in Italy. It was part of the credit requirement for my Masters degree in Humanitarian Assistance. The course name has changed now to Masters in Humanitarian Action, I believe.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everybody who made it possible for me to be in Groningen at that time. My course coordinator Renée Bakker was incredibly organized, kind and very hard working. And many of my professors at the time were extremely supportive. I remember particularly Professor Caspar Schweigman. He supervised my Masters thesis. He was retiring at the time. Then there is Joost Herman professor of globalization studies and humanitarian action. He was very patient with us, gentle and clever. But above all, I would like to thank the Eric Bleumink Fund. They made it possible for me to attend the master's programme by fully funding it including giving me a very generous monthly allowance which made it possible for me to focus on studying fully and also enjoying life and my experience of being here. And I did enjoy my time here a lot. When I was not studying I was spending a good part of my allowance at the farmers market which is one of my fondest memories of being here buying smoked fish, chicken and enjoying finding out about Dutch culture and maybe learning to speak Dutch. I did not go very far with that. But I still remember 'tot ziens' because that is what the ATM machine at ABN AMRO always said.

The importance of a good education can never be overstated. I got that in Groningen. I know this because I have gone on to do some really interesting things on the bedrock of the instruction I got here. I have worked with the United Nations for many years now. I have worked in several countries – Italy, Sudan, Kenya and now Ghana where I oversee External Relations for UNICEF, the United Nations agency for children's issues. I also work very closely with our management teams on resource mobilization to support the advancement of children's rights. We at UNICEF believe that every child deserves the best start in life and it is our aspiration to guarantee that.

In my spare time, I write fiction. In my stories you find young girls finding their way in the world. You find mothers who are raising their children in the backdrop of complex social dynamics. But many times you find just little girls going about life and learning to find their place in a dynamic and changing world with all the beautiful wonderment, awe and playfulness of a child.

My fiction has taken me to several places, physically, professionally and metaphorically. I think because I am a writer, I often see the world, and my place in it through the lens of story telling. I believe in the power of stories to transform lives. I believe that other people's stories can often touch us in such magnificent ways and change the way we see something, a situation and even the dreams we pursue. But also our own stories are equally transformative. The stories we tell ourselves about our experiences of the world have the ability to determine the lives we lead, the opportunities we see, the openings we pursue, and the ways we choose to occupy the world. My story, the way I choose to define it, is that of persistence and due diligence. I always try my best. That is my pledge to myself and to the world.

When I applied to come and study here, I wanted to add a new layer to my personal story, I wanted to craft, to create a new life for myself. I imagined a different future. In this future, in my personal story, there was a good education that would be the doorway to a different and interesting life. I got that. I am a writer now and an international civil servant. My life and my work are both truly extraordinary.

My story is still unfolding. In fact in so many ways it has just begun. And this is why I am so honored to be a recipient of the Alumnus of the Year award. I see it as a nod, a statement of encouragement that I am on the right path. I see it as an important aspect of my present and future story. I think there are many more things to be done. There are several books to be written, several stories to be told, many more people to meet, many lives to be touched - still.

Which is why as I end my statement now, I would like to thank you for the assurance and the affirmation that I am doing the right thing with this honor.

Thank you.