



Great Conversation gives honors

By Emelie Heltsley
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Great Conversation students, faculty, alumni and guests gathered in the Valhalla Room March 9 to honor Great Conversation Student of the Year Mary Sotos '07, as well as retired German professor Norman Watt, who re-emerged from retirement to teach the 2004-05 cycle of the Great Conversation.

Professor of Religion and Great Conversation Director Ed Santurri opened the evening by welcoming all in attendance and noting the night's importance.

Santurri also welcomed two notable guests, Lowell and Barbara Johnson, who established the Great Conversation Student of the Year Scholarship.

Santurri then yielded the podium to Professor of Religion Charles Wilson, who teaches in the 2004-05 cycle of the Great Conversation. Wilson presented Watt with an honorary certificate to be signed by all members of the Great Conversation program and a miniature of Goethe, signed by the artist.

Santurri took the podium again to name Sotos as the Great Conversation Student of the Year. Previous winners include Christian Huebner '06, Christopher Schifani '05 and Amanda Johnson '04. Sotos will receive an annual merit-based scholarship endowed by Lowell and Barbara Johnson.

"Overwhelming" was the word Sotos used to describe the evening, remembering the second of hesitation between when her name was called and when she took the stage. She remembers wondering, "What do I do? Bow? Wave? OH ... I'm supposed to talk," as Santurri directed her up to the podium.

"I could easily envision a dozen other people receiving this award," Sotos said. "[Being chosen] runs through your mind, but you don't really take it seriously."

Overall, the Great Conversation has been a positive experience for Sotos, and she stressed the importance of the environment and intellectual stimulation the program provides.

"Whatever good qualities they saw in me came to light only because of the environment the professors and the students created," Sotos said.

From the Great Conversation, Sotos learned the incredible importance of context when reading and studying works.

"These works were not written in some random order," she said. "I saw how ideas fed off of and responded to each other, how voices fit into history."

Sotos remembered her favorite Great Conversation memory, a spur-of-the-moment snowball fight that Great Conversation students started with American Conversation students during spring semester last year.

She noted that she captured Great Conversation professors Wilson, Watt and Associate Professor of English Colin Wells on camera, throwing snowballs at each other and students.

"It shows that our spiritedness extends outside of the classroom," Sotos said, laughing.

Even when she was a prospective student, Sotos felt the draw of the Great Conversation program; the program solidified her decision to come to St. Olaf.

She remembers visiting St. Olaf and sitting in on a Great Conversation class, impressed with the "great discussion and smart students."

Sotos urged future Great Conversation students to take advantage of the strong learning community. "Use the community you have," Sotos said. "It will challenge you and support you, and you should use both."