

ADRIANE WILLIAMS, Ph.D.

Summer 2008

When I heard the word “congratulations” come out of my advisor’s mouth after my dissertation defense, I paused in disbelief. I actually asked him if he was joking. I could not believe that this journey was almost over. I had successfully defended my dissertation and would, after a few revisions, be able to file it and walk away as a newly minted Ph.D. On July 26, 2008, I filed my dissertation. I left the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus with a small pink piece of paper stamped, ‘PAID’. It has become one of the most important mementos of this experience.

In the acknowledgements of my dissertation I thank Dr. Shireen Lewis for founding SisterMentors. I also thank the men and women who make the organization possible and the women with whom I have worked over the past few years.

When I joined SisterMentors I had already waited for almost a year to gain access to a school to conduct my dissertation research. I was discouraged and demoralized. I wanted to quit. At the same time, I knew that neither my family back in Memphis nor my partner would let me walk away without fighting. Discovering SisterMentors through a former participant, completely changed my course. Even after a month or more in the group, I was not certain of how I would finish, but I began to believe again that I could and would finish.

I have determined that I cannot place a value on the gifts of SisterMentors. Just knowing that I can pick up the phone and call women who absolutely understand my situation and are willing to listen and advise is sometimes enough. I may not always make the call, but I gain strength from knowing the network is there. And on the occasions when I do call, I get exactly what I need. I have attended some of the best institutions money can buy in this country, but the without the benefits of this group—provided to me for zero dollars—I might well have stopped short of my most important accomplishment to date.

The dissertation writing process is horribly isolating. I have no research to back me up here, but I firmly believe that it is the isolation more than any other challenge that slows momentum and leads some of us to fail. I have been fortunate because I had an incredibly supportive advisor and a group of women to sit with on a monthly basis and hold my feet to the fire. I had a supportive partner who made sure I had a place to live with food to eat and a group of women to cry with when the stress of it all—even the stress of life itself—became too much. And I had a family of cheerleaders who, with no knowledge at all of this process or its toll, believed in me and a group of women who, with complete knowledge of this process and its toll, believed in me as well.

As I move on to the next phase of my life, I take this experience with me. I have even adopted some of the basic principles of goal setting and monitoring in a supportive environment to mentor friends and colleagues through this process. I had one such young sister at my home for a week the summer after I finished. It was very rewarding to see the sense of hope and accomplishment in her eyes at the end of

one single week of work. And I will continue to mentor others in this way in an attempt to pay it forward—to make sure that the spirit of SisterMentors travels far beyond its home in Washington, D.C.