

Patsy Keech

2019 Inver Hills Alumni of the Year

Patsy Keech is truly an outstanding Inver Hills alumna. Arriving at Inver Hills in 1982 from Rosemount High School (as Patsy Neary), she went on to make a tremendous difference in the lives of thousands of students and thousands of parents of critically ill children.

Patsy was the first student to join the speech team that I coached at Inver Hills when I was hired in 1982 to re-start IHCC's forensics program. She was also active in the choir at IHCC. She earned her A.A.S. degree here and then went on to earn degrees in education and speech at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and later, a master's degree in Experiential Learning at Minnesota State, Mankato.

I ran into Patsy again at high school speech tournaments in the late 1980s when she had been hired to teach speech and coach the speech team at Burnsville High School, and I was helping coach two highschool speech teams. Her philosophy of bringing the best qualities on the institutions she had been involved with to her new job in Burnsville impressed me at the time. You could see her students had a committed teacher and coach.

With that commitment and speech coaching experience, I asked Patsy to substitute grading speeches a few times in my evening Public Speaking classes at Inver Hills over the years, and I knew those students were in good hands.

I next heard from Patsy when tragedy struck her family. She and her husband, Rod, had a son, Derian, who was born with a heart condition. Eleven surgeries and many long hospital stays taught them much about challenges facing parents of critically ill children. Sadly, Derian passed away at age 2 1/2. By now, Patsy was working in the district she attended as a high school student, ISD 196, where she taught at two middle schools and at Apple Valley High School. But the insights she gained from her struggle for Derian's health now took her in a different direction.

She called to tell me she wanted to do two things to honor Derian's life and to help parents facing similar crises: She wanted to write a book and start a foundation. I had taught journalism and advised the student newspaper at Inver Hills, so I was able to offer some general tips about publishers. Over the years others have asked me for the same kind of advice, but Patsy is the only one who actually followed through and wrote a book, *Mothering an Angel*, which was published in 2001.

Even more impressive is the foundation that she and Rob founded, called the Spare Key Foundation. Knowing from their experience that parents of children with critical health needs also face daunting financial challenges, they set up a foundation to raise funds to make mortgage payments on behalf of such

parents, so parents can devote their precious time to be with their children in the hospital and at home, instead of having to use most of the waking hours of both parents at work.

Patsy ran the foundation as the executive director for its first three years. Early on, the Oprah Winfrey Foundation gave them only its second "Use Your Life" Award of \$50,000 which helped their work get a good financial start. Patsy work with her foundation won her the "Woman Who Made a Significant Contribution to Minnesota" Award in 2001, and Comcast's "Change Maker" Award. Her Spare Key Foundation won the "Most Innovative Non-Profit of the Year" Award in 2005. Over the years, the Spare Key Foundation has awarded some 3,000 families in Minnesota, Iowa, and North and South Dakota at total of \$3 million so parents can ne with their children at that critical time in their lives.

In 2004, Patsy turned over the reins of the Spare Key Foundation to others, who continue to operate it in St. Paul today. With her newly earned M.S. in Experiential Learning, she returned to work in education. She was the customized training coordinator at Dakota County Technical College in 2004–2005, then returned to teach in District 196, this time at Eagan High School, where she has taught since. She is now teaching students in a innovative program in hospitality management, where students are finding jobs (and success!) in a fast-growing industry that needs trained and motivated workers.

Among the education awards she has earned for this service is the Best Prep Teacher of the Year in 2017, District 196 Outstanding Service Award in 2018 and the Hospitality Training Management Program Teacher of Excellence in 2018. Since 2014, she has also served as a guest lecturer/instructor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Minnesota Teacher Licensure Exam workshops.

I attended Inver Hills in the 1970s and taught here for 14 years in the 1980s and 90s before leaving and returning last year, and I've seen many students find success. But none of those graduates I know have done as much for students and for families in great need as Patsy Keech has. The Keech family has kept their connection to Inver Hills, too, as their son, Connor, attended here, and Patsy expects her 16-year-old daughter, Darby, might as well. I heartily nominate 1984 graduate Patsy Keech for Inver Hills Outstanding Alumni Award!

*Don Parker, Communication Faculty
Inver Hills Community College*