



**CenturyCollege**

## ***News Release***

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### **Century College Alum of Year Rose from Poverty to PhD**

Dr. Daryl Parks, Century College's 2008 Alum of the Year, worked as an asbestos remover, nightclub disc jockey, forklift driver, corn shoveler, building cleaner, truck driver and lawn care salesman (among other things) before he arrived at Century (the former Lakewood Community College) in 1989.

Back then, Parks had a Mohawk hair style, a tattoo on his bicep and \$1,200 in his pocket. He spent half of it on an engagement ring and the rest on his first-semester college tuition. Both turned out to be good investments.

Today Parks is an associate professor of English education in Metropolitan State University's Urban Teacher Program, an author and a staff development consultant to area school districts. He has been married to his wife, Wendy, for 18 years. They live in Woodbury and have three children ages 9, 6 and 3.

In his speech during Century's May graduation ceremony when he received his Alum of the Year Award, Parks said he went to Century wanting to simply change jobs; he left wanting to change the world.

"Century College is powerful and divine," Parks told the capacity audience at Aldrich Arena in Maplewood.

In a recent interview, Parks said much of his success in life is due to "institutional insiders" at Century who went beyond their job descriptions to help him find his niche in the academic environment. He remembers that counselor Marv Cohan acquainted him with the unfamiliar world of college financial aid, Prof. Pat Gerster invited him and others to his home to talk about intellectual issues of the day and Prof. Lloyd Hackl told him his writing showed promise and helped him get a much-needed job in the college writing center.

Parks' eyes well with tears as he remembers how these individuals and others helped him unify his blue-collar worldview with his emerging academic identity. Parks transferred to the University of Minnesota and earned his Bachelor of Arts in English *Summa Cum Laude* in 1994, earned his Master of Education degree in 1998 and his PhD in Education in 2005. Much of the research for his doctorate and recent publications advanced degrees has focused on the intersection of social class, race and public education. The book, he recently co-authored, "High School Students' Competing Social Worlds," has been nominated for a national prize in reading research.

Raised in the region around Gary, Indiana, Parks, the youngest of five children, had a happy, challenging childhood that was marred by economic struggle and divorce. While his parents had

left extreme poverty in the coal mining area of southern Illinois in search of stability and a better life in the north, only two of the five children would actually graduate high school.

From his earliest years, Parks sought refuge in the public library, checking out grocery bags full of books. In high school, Parks never considered college attendance as his income from working was needed by his family. He completed high school in 1982.

After high school graduation, he worked a succession of dead-end jobs. Without a place to live, insurance or transportation, he began to consider a change. In 1989, he moved to Minnesota in order to pursue a relationship with a girl he had met – Wendy. Finding himself laid off from his first job as an asbestos remover for \$9 an hour, he began to think about pursuing some sort of schooling to accomplish two main goals: help others improve their lot in life, and also help himself provide for a future family.

Parks enrolled in Century College because it was the closest and most affordable college in the area. “I thought that if I went to college, somehow, someone would give me a good job,” said Parks. “Growing up, a good job was the Holy Grail. If you had one, you could get benefits, go to the dentist and have meat in the freezer. I was kind of thinking about being a teacher for those reasons.”

College changed Parks’ world, and he is grateful to Century and the University of Minnesota for opening doors to opportunities he never imagined he would have. “With the exception of the University of Minnesota, there are only two other places from which I received academic credits,” said Parks. “One is Century College and the other is Harvard Graduate School.”

As class segregation becomes more pronounced in this country, Parks is passionate about the role of community colleges. “They are the closest thing to democracy that we have in higher

education,” he said. “They are the access point for all people. If I were wearing my conservative fiscal taxpayer hat, I would certainly increase higher education money for community colleges.”



Photo: Daryl Parks