

Vennesa VanWyk

International Student Finds Direction and Purpose at Middlesex

While she was growing up, 26-year-old Vennesa VanWyk could never have guessed the winding road she might take from her home in Windhoek, Namibia, to Middlesex Community College.

After high school, VanWyk didn't want anything more to do with school. She came to the U.S. in 2007 to work as an au pair, returned to Namibia in 2009, and came back in 2011 to be an au pair for a Merrimack Valley family. Then, after four years of au pair work, she yearned for a "tertiary-level education," and began to focus on a legal career.

Tom and Sara Clay, parents of the three children she has been looking after, have been a blessing, explained VanWyk. "They sat me down and said, 'We really don't need a full-time babysitter anymore, and we would love to host you while you go to college.'"

The Clays helped her research her options. "Middlesex was close by, affordable and had an American Bar Association-approved Paralegal Studies Program. The Clays have made it possible for me to be a student here." VanWyk began classes in 2013 and expects to graduate in May.

MCC has been a good choice. "I feel a real sense of community on campus," she said. "People are friendly. I walk out of class and see lots of people I know. A bond forged in class is not lost after the class ends."

VanWyk is inspired by the diverse group of people at Middlesex. "Students at Middlesex are all ages, older and younger. I am inspired by those who are coming back from their own life struggles and trying to make a difference.

"It's not the end of the world if someone hasn't achieved something by a certain age," she continued. "The message here at Middlesex is that if you want something, you can achieve it at your own pace – when you can, how you can."

She is also thankful for MCC's supportive professors. "I've never felt discredited for the effort I've



Vennesa VanWyk, an international student from Namibia, enrolled in the Paralegal Studies Program and serves as student representative on the MCC Board of Trustees.

put in. I always found advice when it was needed. The teachers here want to see their students learn and succeed."

VanWyk has fallen in love with the paralegal field. "After I complete my associate degree, I'll get a bachelor's degree in the business administration field, then go to law school."

This past year, VanWyk served as the student representative on the MCC Board of Trustees. "When I applied, I wasn't sure what to expect. It has been a wonderful experience with lots of personal and professional growth as I've interacted with the other trustees, and attended meetings and events. My role is to bring the student voice, to share what Middlesex students are going through."

As student trustee, she had not expected to be part of a nationwide presidential search process. However, it was exciting to help select

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— Vennesa VanWyk, Student Trustee
MCC Board of Trustees

MCC's new college president, Dr. James Mabry – even though, "It is bittersweet to say goodbye to Carole Cowan, who is so well-loved."

VanWyk is also active in other areas across campus. She is one of 12 fellows in this year's Paul H. Sullivan Leadership Institute, a 10-month program that prepares students to become leaders, both in work environments and in their communities. She serves as president of the Paralegal Club, and is a member of Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society of two-year colleges.

"I'm actually shy," VanWyk said, "but the opportunities at Middlesex have helped me become more comfortable standing in front of a crowd."

As much as she misses her mother, two sisters, niece, nephews and extended family in Namibia, VanWyk hopes to stay in the United States to complete her bachelor's degree. "I haven't seen my mom's face in four years, though we talk every weekend.

"Starting school here and doing what I do now, I honestly feel I've grown as a person and matured inwardly and outwardly. I have found myself. I am proud and excited, full of the energy to keep working toward my law degree."

— Anne Broyles