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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Friday, April 9, 2010

Mother's Last Wish is to Graduate with her Daughter in May

LIVONIA, Mich. – Leola and Beverly Mayes, of Southfield, transferred to Madonna University in 2008 to complete their bachelor's degrees in criminal justice. With commencement less than a month away, both are praying that Leola, age 84, is well enough to don her cap and gown, to cross the stage and accept her diploma. She was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2009, after their second semester of classes.

“She is so brave,” daughter Beverly said of her mother, who not only is battling cancer, but also lost a son last Christmas. “All of the students and faculty at Madonna have been so supportive and helpful to me and my mother. It's like a family here. Whenever a classmate sees her they give her a hug,” Beverly explained. “Madonna stole our hearts.”

Leola has been Beverly's inspiration; telling her, “We're going to do this together.” And when the stress of school, fixing meals, doctor's appointments and hospital stays make Beverly consider throwing in the towel, she remembers what her mother has always told her; “No matter what challenges you encounter, follow your goal. Put Him first and everything will fall in place.”

Along the way, these determined women were honor students and were inducted into Madonna's Epsilon Gamma Chapter of Chi Alpha Epsilon, a national honor society. Their passion for knowledge and the support of students and professors kept them going. Every time the pair questioned how they would pay for classes, it seemed that a scholarship would come their way, Beverly explained. “God always answered our every need.”

Because Leola always put everyone else first in her life, Beverly said, “I don't want to step in her spotlight.” So while they both graduate, May 2, with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, Beverly is focused on celebrating her mother's achievement. After commencement, Beverly plans to go on to law school, and hopes one day to become a judge.

Leola's determination kept Beverly on track. Even when Leola was in the hospital, or too sick to attend class, she would make Beverly promise to go to class. “She loves school and she always asks me to tell her what I learned in each class,” Beverly said. “The teachers at Madonna were all so helpful and understanding of our situation.”

As the youngest child Beverly saw how important education was to her mother, who worked three jobs to make sure all of her children – seven boys and two girls – could get an education. She even helped out at the schools near her home in Detroit, to make sure the young people in the neighborhood stayed in school.

Leola has received many awards for her community involvement and commitment to education, but the most treasured award has yet to be bestowed: her diploma from Madonna University. The Chairperson of Madonna's Criminal Justice Department, Barry Sherman told Beverly, when Leola was first diagnosed with cancer, “As long as God has me here at Madonna, she'll graduate.” Sherman and other Madonna University administrators are prepared to present Leola with her diploma at home or in the hospital, if need be. Sherman told Beverly recently, “We really hope we can present it to her at commencement, though.”



Leola Mayes



Barry Sherman, chair of the criminal justice department, accepts a Spirit of Detroit Award from Beverly Mayes.