



UNDER THE DOME

Richard Westman

A couple of weeks ago I went to the Honors Convocation at Johnson State. At the event I received this year's 2011 Distinguished Alumni Award. I've rarely attended events like this at the college since I graduated. When I graduated in 1982 I attended an Alumni Event after my graduation with my Grandmother. She had graduated from the school in 1932 and was attending her 50th class reunion.

I didn't, at that point, realize the significance of the event or the significance Johnson State College had played in her life or would turn out to play in my life.

She was the oldest child in her family and at a very young age took on the responsibilities of taking care of her siblings. Her mother died of cancer when she was in her very early teens. Her prospects at a very young age seemed very limited. A distant family member made it possible for her to attend Johnson and she went on to teach school for many years in Cambridge and Essex. She was even one of my teachers at one point at Cambridge Elementary.

I grew up in a farm family, an only son. The logical expectation

when and where I grew up was that I would spend most of my life on the farm, and I did work on the farm till my late 30's. In school, more than once teachers said, "You don't need to worry about college, you will be on the farm." But the economics of farming have changed dramatically in my lifetime.

Although a number of family members in the generation before my parent did go to college, my parents did not. I was very much like a first generation college student. For a lot of the process of figuring out how to get into school I was on my own.

I ended up going to Johnson State because it made it possible for kids like me to go to college. It changed my life and my expectations of life, as it had changed my Grandmother's life a couple of generations before.

We don't always recognize at the time what we have around us, but there is that moment when it becomes clear. The role the college has played in many of the lives around here is sometimes forgotten. Thinking about what I might say in accepting the award made me grateful for the college and the opportunity it has given so many of us.