

A MESSAGE OF HOPE AND CHALLENGE

Author Tracy Kidder inspires students to follow example of Harvard doctor

Lucie Bryar'76*

Technical Writer, Office of College Relations, Rivier College

(From: *Rivier Today*, Fall 2005)



Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

Paul Farmer was volunteering as a young doctor in poverty-stricken Haiti when he saw a woman frantically collecting money from hospital workers to buy blood for her malaria-stricken sister. While she collected enough money to buy the blood, sadly the young woman didn't have enough cash for bus fare to the blood bank. "Tout moun, se moun, we are all human beings," the woman pleaded, as she watched her pregnant sister die.

Farmer was so disturbed by the incident that he decided then and there, says Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder, to build his own hospital in Haiti and bring accessible and affordable healthcare to the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere.

"The lesson is not to try to reproduce Paul's life; the lesson is to pay attention [to what needs to be done]."

— *Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder in his talk to Rivier students.*

Kidder recounted some highlights from Farmer's remarkable life and work during a keynote address at Rivier's academic convocation September 6, 2005, a traditional Mass and ceremony that welcomes new students and formally

"invests" sophomores into the academic community. Kidder's 2003 book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World*, was required reading for the incoming Class of 2009.

The book follows Farmer from the United States to Haiti, Peru, Cuba, and Russia, capturing his profound hope and strong belief in the Haitian proverb, “Beyond mountains there are mountains.” In other words, as you solve one problem, another problem appears, and so you try to solve that one, too. Addressing his remarks primarily to students, Kidder contrasted his own college years with that of Farmer’s. “I slept through classes and wasted my time,” said Kidder, acknowledging he came from a comfortable middle class background. “It never would have occurred to me that I should be interested in poor people in a foreign country.”

In contrast, Paul Farmer, who grew up in a school bus and on a small houseboat before enrolling at Duke University, spent time as a college student delving into the history of Haiti after meeting a group of Haitian migrant farm workers in the tobacco fields near campus.

That chance encounter between Farmer and the migrant workers would eventually lead Farmer—doctor, Harvard professor, infectious disease specialist, and anthropologist—to found Partners in Health, a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing healthcare to the poor.

After reading the book and hearing Kidder speak, first-year student Ashley Thoren of Charlton, MA said, “Paul Farmer did so much. I was inspired by that.”

Classmate Krystal Roukey, an elementary education major from Manchester, agreed, saying that Farmer helped many people who would normally be overlooked. “He made a lot of personal sacrifices, some of them outrageous.”

Kidder acknowledged that Farmer seems larger than life. “The lesson is not to try to reproduce Paul’s life, the lesson is to pay attention [to what needs to be done].” He encouraged students at the convocation to get involved in helping others and said, “It will enrich your own life.”

Tracy Kidder has been described as the “master of the non-fiction narrative.” In 1982, he won a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for *The Soul of a Machine*, a book that was recognized for its insight into the world of corporate, high-technology America. Other works include *House* (1985), *Among Schoolchildren* (1989), and *Old Friends* (1993).

In addition to the talk by Kidder, the academic convocation included welcoming remarks by Rivier President William Farrell and a Mass of the Holy Spirit celebrated by College Chaplain Brother Paul Demers.

* **LUCIE BRYAR** earned a B.A. in English Communications from Rivier College in 1976. She has more than 20 years experience in newswriting, marketing, and public relations, including nearly 14 years as a staff writer for Rivier College. In her current position, she produces the faculty/staff newsletter, *Campus Forum*; Bryar also writes marketing materials for admissions, copy for the college website, and feature and news articles for the magazine, *Rivier Today*.