Herman Smith felt right at home on the Washington Park playground he grew accustomed to as a kid. On this hot Chicago day, the names were different, but the faces were the same as when Smith was growing up. The playground was full of African-American youth living a day-to-day existence, hoping someday to escape poverty. Smith had been there a thousand times before when he was younger, spinning his way clear of defenders on his way to an easy layup or jump shot. It was like his second home.

This playground in the heart of Chicago’s South Side neighborhood, and many just like it, are the places Herman Smith worked so hard to get back to after he graduated from Viterbo College in 1991.

Not so he could play the game he so loves, and not to hang out in a place he always felt safe—Herman Smith was back on the streets of Chicago’s South Side to help others realize that they, too, could help themselves find a better life.

You see, as an 18-year-old kid fresh out of high school, Herman Smith was given a chance not many before him and not many after him have received. He was given a chance to leave the violence of Chicago to pursue his dream. Viterbo College offered him the education and basketball offered him the window of opportunity to a better life. Herman Smith did the rest. Although Smith’s life story sounds like a Hollywood rags-to-riches script, it didn’t come without its share of heartache, hard work and disappointment. Smith had to leave a lifestyle where he was the norm to come to a place where he, in many cases, was viewed as an outcast. “La Crosse was very small compared to Chicago, and not just in size,” Smith said. “I was apprehensive about going, but it gave me a chance to get away from the wild life and see a different side of life. “I was able to see how other people lived, and how other ethnic groups functioned from day to day. That perspective opened my eyes. It made me see what I wanted for myself and for my family one day.”

But the La Crosse life Smith was living was very different from the life he was used to, which meant many adjustments. “We were very poor,” Smith said. “I grew up in a single-parent family. My mother was the only parent we had, and she was always on welfare. I remember living on welfare my whole life, raising my brother while my mother was out trying to better herself. It was something you got used to.”

Smith, who is now 28, wasn’t really interested in going to college after he graduated from Harper High School on the city’s South Side, but at the last minute changed his mind. Viterbo
College just happened to be at the right place at the right time. “Viterbo had sent me some information about the school, so I went up there for a visit,” Smith said. “I ended up staying for two weeks trying to get in school there but my grades were not good enough.” Just as he embraced a challenge on the basketball court, Smith looked at this bit of bad luck as a challenge and set out to overcome it. And overcome he did. After a semester at Morristown Junior College in Tennessee, he transferred to Viterbo where he played basketball and eventually graduated with a degree in sociology in 1991.

At Viterbo, Smith was successful in the classroom, as well as on the basketball court, but neither came easy.

Smith attributes his success in the classroom not only to hard work, but to individuals in the Viterbo College community who reached out and helped him in times of need. Sociology instructor Darrell Pofahl, who was Smith’s academic advisor at the time, was one of those people. “Darrell literally took me under his wing and showed me how to study,” Smith said. “I mean, he was coming to my house after practice—6 to 9 o’clock at night helping me prepare for tests and teaching me how to study because I didn’t learn these things in high school. “Without Darrell, I never would have made it through college. And that goes for people like Dave Schoonover (’76) and Marv Friedewald (business faculty), too. They opened their arms and invited me into their homes and shared everything they had. These are the kinds of experiences you never forget.”

Although academics became just as important as basketball for Smith, he admits the latter is why he really came to Viterbo. But he will also tell you that he couldn’t have succeeded at one without the other. “Playing basketball for coach (Rod) Popp made a big difference in my life,” said Smith, who was one of only a few black basketball players in the program. “He taught us all discipline. He instilled in us that if you really wanted to do something, you were going to have to work for it. “That carried off the basketball court into the classroom. That’s when my whole focus on school turned around.

“Coach Popp touched all of our lives in a positive way. There’s nothing negative I can say about him.”

On the court, the guard known for his tenacious defense also excelled on the other end of the floor. In his four-year playing career, Smith averaged just over 10 points a game and scored 1,120 points. He also averaged more than five rebounds a game. For his all-around play, Smith earned Midwest Catholic Conference All-Conference honors his junior and senior years, and later was inducted into the Viterbo College sports “Wall of Fame.” “Making the ‘Wall of Fame’ was real gratifying because I’m the first black person inducted,” said Smith, who was inducted in 1996. “A lot of times when you play the game of basketball, especially for a person of my nature who does a lot of tangible things that go unnoticed, it’s good to have the recognition. It was nice to have the people at Viterbo and the community recognize that what I gave to Viterbo was of some importance.”

Smith believes his Viterbo College experience was a good one and says because of it, it is important to help those less fortunate in his community, just as the Viterbo community helped him. And his job as a social worker allows him to do that every day. “I believe in payback,” said Smith, who works as a Father Specialist for Children Abusive Prevention Services primarily with young African-American fathers trying to enlighten them about fatherhood, the responsibilities of raising a
child and the need to nurture a child. “I think I’ve given back to my community, but there’s always a lot of work that can be done. I like to think that some of the people I’ve come in contact with are better off for knowing me than not knowing me.”

One of those who is definitely better off for knowing Smith is Darnell Stirgus, a 26-year-old cosmetology student who is involved in Smith’s program.

“He’s like a big brother to me,” Stirgus said between basketball games at Washington Park.

“He gives me advice about my 2-year-old son, Devony, about school and about my career. It’s not always easy to talk to someone about these things, but it’s never been a problem with Herman. He’s been a big help.”

Smith also is very committed to his work because of the parallels between himself and some of the fathers he works with. In his own life, Smith was without a father his entire life.

“I’ve seen my father twice in my life. The last time I saw him was when I was 12 years old and graduating from eighth grade,” Smith said. “If I saw my father right here, right now, I’d break down and cry and hug him because I missed that in my life.”

“I would love to have a relationship with my father. I tell the guys I work with that it’s never too late to start bonding with your child and that it is the most important thing they can do. Hopefully it gets through.”

One thing is for sure, though, Herman Smith will not stop trying. If he can help one person become a better father, it will be worth all the hard work.

“It’s a battle every day, but if I can reach one person, I’ve done my job,” Smith said. “I owe it to those who have helped me along the way not to give up, and I won’t.”

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**Viterbo Standout Travels Long Road to Big Leagues**

Damian Miller has his own field of dreams. It’s not in the middle of some Iowa corn field. It’s not on the East Coast or even the West Coast. And it’s not in Salt Lake City, where he currently resides. Damian Miller’s field of dreams is surrounded by tall buildings and parking lots and doesn’t even have real grass. Damian Miller’s field of dreams is none other than the Metrodome, home of the Minnesota Twins.

Although he’s an unrestricted free agent, meaning he could possibly play in the major leagues sooner with a team other than Minnesota, the former Viterbo College star has his heart set on catching for the Twins. Even with six years in the minors under his belt, he isn’t about to shop around at this time. That’s why he re-signed with the Triple A Buzz in Salt Lake City this year.

“I like the Minnesota Twins and I like playing for them,” the 27-year-old Miller said recently from his home in Salt Lake City. “I wouldn’t mind staying with the Twins because I would love to come back to Minnesota and play in the majors there. I have no regrets signing with the Twins.”

Miller’s road to the majors had its beginnings in the Coulee Region, where the 6 foot 3 inch catcher was a standout for West Salem.

That road took an even better turn while in a V-Hawks uniform. The year was 1990. After leading Viterbo College to the National Association of Independent Athletics District 14 final four, and being named the District 14 player of the year his junior season, Miller was
drafted by the Twins in the 20th round, which was unheard of for a player coming from a virtual unknown in the NAIA ranks.

Miller set a handful of school records that year, including a .519 batting average, 55 hits, 13 doubles, 46 RBIs, a .620 on-base percentage and an .826 slugging percentage. He also helped his team to the school’s best record at 29-9.

“Going to Viterbo was a great experience for me,” Miller said. “I was able to do a lot of things there and came into my own in a Viterbo uniform. We had some great teams there. I was lucky to be a part of that.”

In his three years at Viterbo, Miller helped the V-Hawks amass 74 wins, while setting school marks for best average for a career at .423, number of doubles with 29 and most RBIs with 86. He also was just two hits shy of tying the school mark for most hits in a career. In his three years as a V-Hawk, Miller had 124 hits.

Miller’s success in La Crosse led him to Tennessee, where he played for Elizabethton, the Twins’ rookie league affiliate. Although he hit just .222 in 14 games, the steady-hitting catcher began his major league career on the right foot, belting a two-run homer in just his second professional at bat.

The next year, Miller moved up to Minnesota’s Class A team in Kenosha, Wis., where he hit an unspectacular .232 on his way to a dismal season. Miller got on track the next season, however, and was named to the Midwest League post-season All-Star team after hitting .292 and driving in 56 runs.

The 1992 season proved to be a springboard for Miller as he eventually ended up in Salt Lake City. His last two seasons with the Buzz, in which he hit .285 with 41 RBIs in 83 games in 1995 and batted .286 with 27 doubles, seven home runs and 55 RBIs in 104 games in 1996, have turned some heads in the Twins organization.

Miller hopes all his hard work and patience will pay off this year with a call-up to the big leagues. “This year it looks like things might happen,” Miller said. “Hopefully I’ll get my opportunity.”

Jim Rantz, director of minor leagues for the Twins, said whether it’s for the Twins or another organization, Miller would someday make it to the majors. “Damian is knocking on the door,” Rantz said. “We know who he is and so does the major league team. “He’d be our number one guy if one of the two major league catchers were hurt and sent down. I know he’ll catch in the major leagues someday.”

Whether or not Miller ends up in Minnesota is a toss-up. But one thing is for sure, the former Viterbo star isn’t about to stop chasing his dream.

"Sunset Boulevard" Gives Viterbo Graduate Star Power

Linda Balgord has the kind of voice that attracts attention. Her sometimes tenuous, sometimes vulnerable, and always powerful sound is never absent of passion. Her voice moves people.

From her early days on the Viterbo College Fine Arts Center stage to her latest role as Norma
Desmond in the national touring company hit “Sunset Boulevard,” Balgord, a 1982 Viterbo graduate, has turned many heads.

One of those heads was Andrew Lloyd Webber, the composer who wrote the music for the off-Broadway hit based on the musical version of Billy Wilder’s 1950 Hollywood production of the same name.

As the story goes, Balgord was honeymooning in Europe with husband Andrew Fenton, a Broadway stage manager from England, when she got a call from her agent. The year was 1993.

The agent said she had an opportunity to audition to be Glenn Close’s understudy in the Los Angeles company of “Sunset Boulevard,” so Fenton and Balgord cut short their honeymoon and returned to the U.S.

Balgord didn’t get the part, but Webber called her to London a short time later to sing a number from the show at a lavish banquet given by media mogul Rupert Murdoch. The composer introduced Balgord, and after she finished the number, said she would be singing the role of movie queen Norma Desmond some day.

That day came in January 1996 when Balgord got the part of the touring Norma Desmond in the show that opened June 28, 1996, in Denver and ended June 7 in Chicago, with a stop in Minneapolis in between.

Balgord was overwhelmed at the news. “It was really amazing,” said Balgord from her apartment in Chicago. “I knew I had done a good audition but it’s one of those magical moments when it all seems worth it. I was just thrilled.”

Compared to the other women who played Norma Desmond on stage—Betty Buckley, Elaine Paige, Diahann Carroll and Glenn Close—Balgord was a relative unknown in theater circles, which brought about mixed reaction. “I wasn’t surprised by the reaction because the role had only been cast by movie stars and famous people,” Balgord said. “The only thing that bothered me was that the speculation was negative.”

To those who saw her during her performances as Desmond, the larger-than-life silent-film star who tries to revive her career 20 years later, there was nothing negative about Balgord’s performance. She was able to give the character a real-life feel the audience could relate to.

One of those people was Sister Marie Leon La Croix, Balgord’s mentor at Viterbo. “That’s a very, very difficult role for a young person to play,” said La Croix, who thinks of Balgord as a dear friend and a rising star. “I watched her very carefully on stage and she assumed the Norma Desmond role very well—in her gestures, her voice and her body movement. She did a fantastic job.”

Balgord gives much of the credit for her success in theater and music to La Croix and the theater program at Viterbo. Coming from New Lisbon, a small town of about 1,300 people between Tomah and Wisconsin Dells on I-90, Balgord wasn’t looking for a large school to attend.

“I really wanted a place where I could feel at home,” Balgord said. “When I toured Viterbo with my father, we really felt that attention would be paid to the individual there. I really had a good feeling about Viterbo.”

Once at Viterbo, Balgord rose to the top of the class very quickly. “Linda came to Viterbo as a young girl from New Lisbon without much theater training, but when she auditioned for her
very first play, “The Importance of Being Earnest,” immediately she stood out as a person who had innate talent,” said La Croix, who played a big part in bringing the arts to Viterbo College. “We usually don’t cast freshmen in leading roles, but she just showed that she had the talent. It was something she had right from the beginning.

“Linda was a wonderful person to work with and very talented. She never felt herself a star, which is what she was in the group we had.”

That talent, according to Balgord, was cultivated and refined by the faculty at Viterbo. “The faculty was encouraging and very passionate about their work,” Balgord said. “They kept pushing us all to succeed. There was a great deal of fairness at Viterbo. It was where I was supposed to be.”

And encouragement is what Balgord gives to students who want to follow in her footsteps. “Performing is what I started out doing. It’s a combination of talent and luck,” Balgord said of a career in theater. “I never want to discourage kids from this career. As long as doors keep opening, go through them.

“There aren’t many guarantees in life, but if you want it badly enough, you have to at least try.” If Balgord wouldn’t have gone for her dream, she never would have captivated audiences in “Sunset Boulevard,” or a number of other shows on and off Broadway, including the U.S. and Canadian tour of “Aspects of Love,” Stephen Sondheim’s Broadway hit “Passion,” and on the Chicago stage, “Funny Girl,” “Man of La Mancha,” “Evita” and “Sunday in the Park with George.”

Balgord is currently resting from her long tenure as Norma Desmond and will continue to audition for parts in New York. If she has her way, she’ll be back on Broadway. “The auditioning never ends,” Balgord said. “I would very much like to do a Broadway show. I do love touring, but you have to balance it.”

And if all that ended today? Balgord is certain she would be satisfied with what she’s done, where she’s gone and how she got there.

“I’ve done a lot in my career,” Balgord said. “That’s not to say I wouldn’t be saddened if I had to give it up. “It has taken every experience I’ve had to get where I am today. I got my start at Viterbo and I owe a lot to that great little school.”

The Gate Experience: A Busload of Fun

During three college summers of working out West in Grand Canyon, Death Valley and Glacier National Park, and during three years of flying to the Far East with Japan Air Lines, I’d seen uncomely features of group travel: tour guides waving flags and shouting through bullhorns, vacationers sporting nametags and matching shirts, busses jampacked to the hilt, and itineraries crammed with minute-by-minute activities (including instructions on when to take pictures, when to use the restroom, and when to clap at performances). So naturally I grew averse to anything remotely resembling a group vacation or a package tour, and before I embarked on the recent Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration-sponsored Gate Experience to Mexico City—an organized trip consisting of 17 assorted members of the Viterbo faculty and administration—my mind was plagued with doubts: What if they bus us around on big
Latinocruisers, making us stop for cheesy photo-ops? What if we look like a bunch of ugly gringos, bouncing around in Nike sneakers and baseball caps, blabbering Spanglish and singing cliché renditions of “La Cucaracha”? And how would we all get along, this motley assemblage of nurses, nuns, administrators, a sociologist, a visual artist, a musician, a psychologist, a biologist, a nutritionist — and me, a writing specialist? Granted, I did “know” the other group members, professionally that is, but did I know them well enough to share a bathroom with them, to tell them about my recent divorce, to spend ten days with them in a foreign country?

Adding impetus to these fears was the fact that I am by nature a loner, tending to shun all groups in favor of personal freedom — the freedom to go wherever I want whenever I want, and to stay for as long as I so desire. Perhaps too, before the trip, I feared that by joining with others I might be prone to “groupthink,” and thereby lose my own beliefs and identity.

Well, I’m happy to tell you that something amazing transpired on the trip: the things that I thought might happen — didn’t, and the things that I never imagined—did. Pleasant surprises, in fact, began immediately, right after take-off. I was sitting next to Jack Havertape, my boss (twice removed), and there we were, enjoying an aerial view of the Mississippi, discussing geography and agreeing how blessed we are to be living in the driftless zone, a place scarcely touched by glaciers, and now beautifully graced with bluffs and rolling hills.

Hey, I thought to myself, this trip might be fun. I’m getting to know these people, my colleagues, personally — and they’re nice, down-to-earth, and very easy to talk to. Later, as I sipped Evian and chewed peanuts, I had a revelation: Every fear, every dislike, every negative opinion I’d ever formed about group travel, had been gathered from the outside looking in. But now, now that I was actually on a group tour, the feeling was something different — secure, communal, familial, exciting—more like that of a Boy Scout camp-out.

Space restrains me from listing all the great things I learned from sharing the ten-day journey with my fellow travelers, and how, through their perceptions, skills, and knowledge, my own experience was much enhanced. But here’s a small sampling:

One day, as our bus descended on tortuous roads into the Valley of the Mezquital, Carol Klitzke identified various species of cacti—organpipe, barrel, maguey, ocotillo—which in turn helped me to see agaves (the source of tequila) and tumbleweed. Ed Rushton’s keen eye for graphic designs enriched my appreciation of billboards, newspaper dispensers, bus shelter panels, and storefront windows. Ed also honed my vision when we stumbled upon a retrospective of Pedro Cervantes, a Mexican sculptor renowned for his iron horses and torsi of Venus.

On a visit to the Zócalo, Mike Lauer helped me understand the process of how depleted groundwater beneath this ancient lakebed, along with earthquakes, has contributed to the sinking of the Metropolitan Cathedral, which now leans out like the Tower of Pisa.

Sister Jean Moore, with her wonderful Spanish and thorough knowledge of Mexican culture, proved an indispensable source for us all, especially when serving as translator, allowing us to speak with people from all walks of life—cab drivers, subsistence farmers, barrio nurses, cocktail waiters, and mariachi players. It was from Jean that I gained a new insight on foreign exploration: You’re never really in a country until you speak its language. Without the ability
to talk to the locals, the sights go by like slides in a Disney Viewmaster. You might as well stay home and watch TV.

So, regarding group travel, this trip expanded my scope tenfold, superseding all bad visions I’d gleaned from working on 747’s and waiting tables for the Golden Seniors of Sun City, Arizona. Now I heartily welcome the nametags and matching shirts. Why? Because these are mere trifles compared to the essence of sharing a trip with wonderful people: the camaraderie, the sense of community, the chances to learn, the busloads of fun.