“Northeastern was a Lifesaver for Me”

In 1984, Milliaderre Syverain was in the midst of a grueling journey—one that looked like it wasn’t going to end well.

Soon after arriving in this country from Haiti at age 19, his parents abandoned him. He was living in public housing at the foot of Mission Hill and his job prospects were bleak. That’s when he found a flier on his doorstep, inviting residents of Boston public housing to apply for scholarships to Northeastern.

Syverain applied, won a full scholarship, and excelled in his studies. After graduating with a pharmacy degree in 1988, went on to medical school at Stanford University and now owns several highly successful weight loss and skin care clinics in California.

Now, Syverain and his wife, Yves-Renee, N’88, are...
paying it forward by establishing a $100,000 scholarship for underrepresented minority students at the Bouvé College of Health Sciences.

“Northeastern was a lifesaver for me,” he said. “For both of us.”

Prior to Northeastern, Syverain was taking courses at UMass Boston, but he was far from the star student he was about to become. It was clear he was not on course to achieve his dreams.

“I wasn’t doing well,” he said. “It was a tough time.”

The long shadow of Papa Doc

Milliard Syverain was born in Haiti during the brutal regime of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier. In 1964, the infamous dictator declared himself “President for Life” and built an international reputation for paranoia, erratic behavior, and roving death squads.

“Papa Doc was eliminating his adversaries, both real and imagined,” said Syverain.

One of those imagined adversaries was Syverain’s father.

When Milliard was 7 years old, his father was forced into hiding for two years after Duvalier’s police stormed their house. That’s when the real chaos began.

In May 1970, Syverain’s father fled Haiti for the U.S.,
leaving his five children with their stepmother. Four months later, the stepmother fled as well, leaving the children behind with their step-grandmother, who raised them for the next 10 years.

Papa Doc died in 1971 but not much changed when his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, took over at age of 19. Government death squads continued to terrorize the Haitian people, who lived in crippling poverty.

“Life there was very difficult. It was a struggle,” he said.

Finally, in December 1979, Syverain left Haiti to join his parents in Boston. It seemed like his prospects were finally improving. But that didn’t last long.

Three months later, in March of 1980, his stepmother handed Milliard a sealed envelope and told him to give it to his father. It contained divorce papers.

The next thing he knew, his father was gone and he could no longer live with his stepmother.

“I realized I had no place to be.”
Looking for a foothold
Fortunately, a caring aunt invited him to stay at her apartment until his transition to a housing project on Ruggles Street across from Northeastern. He enrolled at Dorchester High School, graduated a year later, and began taking courses at UMass Boston.

That’s where he met his future wife.

Yves-Renee, who had also recently arrived from Haiti, laughs heartily as she describes their unusual courtship.

“I first saw him in a very challenging chemistry class. My grades were dropping because I had been skipping classes. The class was in a big auditorium and I was looking around the room for the most studious person I could find. I saw this skinny young man with big glasses. They were huge. Milliard was always a geek, so I said to myself, ‘That’s the one.’”

She asked to borrow his notes, he agreed, and offered to help her with her coursework. She passed the class, they became friends, but Yves-Renee emphasizes that there was nothing romantic between them.

It was several months before they went on their first date, and they didn’t kiss until after their secret wedding in 1982. They didn’t tell their parents and continued to live separately for a while.

A year later, the scholarship flier arrived on Milliard’s doorstep.
Turning point

For Milliard, getting a full scholarship to Northeastern was the turning point in his life.

“This was my second chance,” he said. “I didn’t want to lose focus because I knew it was either this or nothing.

Meanwhile, he convinced his new wife that she should become a nurse. After earning an associate degree from the former St. Elizabeth’s School of Nursing she, too, won a scholarship to Northeastern.

“Milliard was the person who gave me direction and helped me discover who I am,” she said.

By the time the Syverains graduated magna cum laude in 1988—Milliard with a degree in pharmacy and Yves-Renee with a degree in nursing— their lives had been transformed. When Milliard applied to medical schools, he was accepted at Yale, Columbia, Stanford, Brown, the University of Pennsylvania, and Boston University.

“Northeastern opened all those doors for me,” he said. “I never imagined myself going to Stanford medical school.”

The brink of disaster

The challenges weren’t over.

After earning his MD, Syverain was working for a
doctor in San Francisco when the recession left him without a steady job. He found work as a part-time pharmacist, and his wife was worked nights as a registered nurse, while caring for their toddler, Rasid, during the day. But that didn’t provide enough income to live in the Silicon Valley, so he was forced to start his own practice in the midst of an economic slump.

“The first six months were a near disaster,” he said. “I hardly had any patients.”

The turning point came when a colleague referred him a patient who needed help losing weight. He gladly accepted the work. “But I was an internist by training—what did I know about weight loss?”

In typical fashion, he threw himself totally into the challenge, attending seminars and studying the latest research on weight management strategies. He had found his calling.

“I believe that nutrition is the passport to health,” he said. “Even in medical school, I was always interested in preventive medicine. All of my classmates wanted to be specialists because that’s where the money was. But the way I saw it, why would you want to perform million-dollar heart surgery if you could prevent heart disease in the first place?”

The business grew quickly by word of mouth, which he attributes to his deep commitment to his patients. He made himself available to patients 24 hours a day and
considered it his duty to serve his patients.

“These people are my extended family,” he said. “If I’m going to care for them, I’m going to care for them all the way.”

His practice has blossomed, with Milliard as medical director and Yves-Renee as assistant medical director. They opened several clinics in the San Francisco area and branched out into laser skin care.

Success was a long time coming. Yves Renee recalled that they “lived like paupers” for two decades as they moved from Haiti, to Boston, to California, to Florida (residency), and then back to California. But their business, which began with a single patient in a desolate warehouse, is now a massive success—a story of persistence and dedication which was made possible by the chance that Northeastern gave them back in 1984.

“For me, Northeastern was everything,” he said. “When I received that scholarship, I knew I had only one chance. By the time I graduated, I was eligible to go to any medical school in the country. But when I was undergraduate I had only one chance, and that’s why I’m so indebted to Northeastern.

“We have established this scholarship because we want to pass along to others the opportunity that we were blessed with.”
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