“... a man who was going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one – to each according to his ability. Then he went away.”

***– Matthew 5:14-15***

Mary Eta and Breanda Mejia Palma were each entrusted with a gift, a scholarship from the Christ Child Society of Omaha to help them obtain a nursing degree.

Then they went to work as students at College of Saint Mary (CSM).

Now, after graduating in ceremonies May 15-16, the dividends are about to begin –not only for the graduates and their families but for the people they’re about to help in the Omaha area and across the world.

College life wasn’t easy for the single mothers.

Eta, who 11 years ago immigrated to the United States from the African country of Cameroon, juggled heavy loads of coursework while caring for her four children: Hanaul, 8; Jasen, 6; and twins Roselle and Marthelle, 4.

She graduated with honors at a May 16 ceremony at CHI Health Center Omaha, earning a bachelor’s of science degree in nursing in just three years.

Mejia Palma graduated the night before in a ceremony at CSM, earning a certificate in practical nursing.

The federal DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipient was 10 years old when she came from Mexico to Omaha with other family members in 2000. Her childhood was difficult, she said, and involved being separated from her parents, a year in foster care and becoming pregnant at age 15.

But “I guess I got it together after a couple years,” Mejia Palma said.

In May 2020 she began the 12-month nursing program at CSM.

Prioritizing the needs of her three children – Esmir, 15; Melyssa, 14; and Scarlett, 1 – meant studying at night and for long hours.

“There were times I honestly thought I wouldn’t make it, but God is good, and here I am,” Mejia Palma said following her graduation. She is set to begin working at a health clinic June 1 and will be the first Spanish-speaking nurse there.

The next step for Eta is board certification and licensing. Then she can begin searching for jobs.

Both women said they are grateful for the scholarships. Eta received a $5,000 scholarship that helped her afford her final year of school. Mejia Palma received a $2,500 scholarship, which combined with a CSM scholarship, made her education possible, she said.

Eta said she had a message for the people who made the scholarships possible: “I thank God for you for helping students like us. I was really fortunate to have the scholarship,” especially after trying unsuccessfully for several others.

“It gave me peace of mind to just be able to focus on studies,” Eta said.

“I think the scholarship was life-changing,” Mejia Palma said. “It really, truly changed my life. I’m a nurse now, and there’s employers competing for me.”

Several years ago, she said, she was cleaning hotel rooms for $8 an hour. Soon she’ll be making more than $20 an hour and moving forward with plans to continue her education and become a registered nurse.

“The scholarship was a big part of my success.”

Throughout the pandemic, the Christ Child Society of Omaha awarded $97,500 in renewable scholarships to parents in need, said Denise Snodgrass, president of the organization’s board of directors.

The local group also assembled and distributed 1,500 layettes for infants.

And the year 2021 “is definitely looking up,” Snodgrass said. Bellevue University has agreed to match every $5,000 scholarship awarded to applicants, she said. “This is life-changing for young parents in need!”

Mejia Palma and Eta said they went into nursing because they felt drawn to helping others.

“I have a passion for helping people, for making people feel better,” Eta said.

She saw how her late father wasn’t treated well when he was sick in Cameroon “and thought I could do better.”

As a student, she tried to help her classmates through study sessions and by encouraging them. Through her involvement in the nonprofit Solidarity Sisters of Omaha, she’s helped feed and clothe the homeless.

Now, with the promise of a new career and better income, she said, she wants to help improve the lives of people struggling in her native country, by helping them to pay for school and basic needs, like food.

“I believe in giving back,” Eta said. “I believe God sent me into the world for a purpose, and I’m going to fulfill that.”

Mejia Palma said she initially thought of becoming a social worker or substance abuse counselor, but people convinced her that the pay wouldn’t be sufficient for her family.

So she turned to nursing. Though she went into the field for financial reasons, “as I gained more knowledge, I thought, ‘Wow,’ I like doing this. I really like helping people who are vulnerable.”

People who are sick and dying, especially those who are dying alone, are vulnerable, Mejia Palma said. And the last face they may see are the faces of doctors and nurses.

She said she enjoys taking care of patients, holding their hand, giving them medication – “any little thing I can do as a nurse to make them feel better.”

Thanks to their scholarships, Eta and Mejia Palma said, they hope to multiply the gift of their scholarships and improve the lives of everyone around them.

***“Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your Master’s joy.” – Matthew 25:21***