I remember you.

So young, uncertain yet undaunted, electric with curiosity and excitement, all present tense and future plans. You came to me, each of you for a time, and I opened my doors to you. Day after day, year after year, by the thousands and tens of thousands, you came. And I welcomed you, gave you a place to belong, a place to ask, to learn, to prepare, to become.

You filled my empty rooms and stairwells with talk and laughter. And I watched you—listening, taking notes, so eager to understand. I saw you studying in my courtyard, chatting in my hallways, kissing in shadowed corners. And when you sometimes nodded off, or when your chairs sat empty, I noticed that, too.

All the while, I was watching over you. All these years, I have kept your secrets. Most of you were hardly more than children when you came. But how you grew! Knowledge leading to comprehension. Comprehension leading to ability. Ability leading to confidence. By the time you left me, you were children no more, but women and men, ready to build lives and careers, families and communities, states and nations.

In truth, we grew together, you and I and the city we shared. Before me, there was nothing where I stand but nature itself. Rabbits and rattlesnakes atop a lonely windwept mesa seven long miles from town. Standing here then, facing in any direction, you could see only sky and chaparral. At night, not even a light, though if you listened long enough, you might have heard coyotes singing.

Only a few believed that someday such a barren mesa could support a university, much less anchor a community. Only a few. But I remember them well: Edward L. Hardy, the college president; Howard Spencer Haaren, the designer; Mark Daniels, the landscape architect; and Alphonzo E. Bell, the land developer. Big thinkers all, and courageous, not the sort who would allow even the Great Depression to thwart their dreams. I am proof of that.

It was Bell who donated the land—125 acres—for a new campus. Enrollment at San Diego Teachers College, just blocks from downtown, had far exceeded capacity. It was time to re-invent San Diego’s first and only institution of higher education. And Hardy seized the opportunity.

He was convinced that architecture affects attitude. And so he and Haaren together set out to build a truly beautiful campus, a reflection of California’s Spanish colonial heritage. I and my fellows, still the core of today’s expansive university complex, were intended to inspire you with our white walls, our red roofs, our voluptuous curves and soaring towers. We were built to shelter you under our arches and arcades. To soothe you with fountains, courtyards and gardens lush with the native plants of the Mediterranean.

And I, especially, was designed to greet you, with twin turrets and a bold tower echoing the campanile of California’s first church, the beloved Mission San Diego de Alcala.

From the beginning, we were meant to be more than buildings. Hardy envisioned “a harmonious expression of learning and architecture,” a physical complex to accommodate his progressive approach to education. Under his guidance, teacher education would expand beyond rote memorization and pedagogical methods to invite interest and understanding, to promote development of the whole person, both mind and body. Women would enjoy the same academic opportunities and expectations as men. And the teaching profession itself would gain substance and stature.

Such were the dreams that I embodied from the first. Today, nearly eight decades later, I have become even more. I am an icon now, the face of an institution. But that is only because of you. Alone, I am still brick and stucco, beams and plaster. But you—your faces, your voices, your energy, your dreams—have given me life. Together, we make up the stuff of legend.