I have many reasons every day to be proud of the University of Hartford, but this year has brought me two moments in particular to be so proud that my heart felt as if it would burst through my chest.

One happened on April 8 during President Barack Obama’s wonderful visit to campus, which is chronicled in this issue of the Observer. This was the first visit of a sitting U.S. president to the University and a moment of great pride generally for all of us.

Preparing for and putting on the event was a massive undertaking. It required transformation of the Chase Family Arena in the Reich Family Pavilion into a setting for a presidential address that would honor families from Newtown, Conn., and focus national attention on the issue of gun control. The task was extremely challenging and required the help, expertise, and understanding of hundreds of people on campus and throughout the region. Our staff, our faculty, and our students all made sacrifices to make the event possible.

The event was emotional for me. I was seated just on the other side of the podium from Nelba Marquez-Greene ’97 and Jimmy Greene ’97, parents of 6-year-old Ana Grace, who died in the tragic Newtown shooting; and from Mary and Hannah D’Avino, mother and sister, respectively, of Rachel D’Avino ’07, a teacher who also died in the Newtown shooting. Memorial events for both Ana Grace and Rachel were held on campus, but seeing the two families being embraced by friends and honored by the president was very moving.

I knew everyone on campus was thrilled by the prospect of the visit, but I had also fielded expressions of concern after some students, faculty, and staff who waited in line for three hours were unable to get tickets. I also knew that everyone in the arena had waited in line for two hours to get in and then another hour or more for the president to arrive. So, as I looked around the arena, which was filled to capacity, I wondered what the reception would be.

Early in his remarks President Obama said, “I want to thank the University of Hartford for hosting us,” and a thunderous roar of cheering and applause rose from the crowd. It was a moment that will stay with me until the day I die. The pride we showed as a university and the enormous expression of support, revealed as we came together as a community for others who had suffered, are everything I have ever dreamed of for the University.

In late fall I experienced another moment, this one in Lincoln Theater, watching the Broadway musical Miss Saigon, directed by Kevin Gray, associate professor of theatre. Kevin had played the role of the lieutenant in the traveling company of Miss Saigon, and he brought his experience, his talent, and his deep understanding of the play to this production. I had seen the play in London 25 years ago, and as I sat there that evening, I realized that Kevin had managed to provide us with a production that was every bit as good.

During the standing ovation after the play, I thought about an experience I had had 15 years ago, when I was a vice president at the University of Michigan, cheering as Michigan’s football team won the national championship at the Rose Bowl. I remember thinking: Michigan has provided all of us with an experience few people ever have, experiencing something that is unmatched by most universities in the world. I had the same feeling about the University of Hartford’s theatre production during that standing ovation: you can’t experience something that moving on many university campuses.

A month later Kevin Gray died suddenly and tragically of massive heart failure, stunning our campus and all those whom he had touched throughout his life and brilliant career. We were blessed to share the last year and a half of his life here at the University. He changed our lives in ways grand and small.

Two events—one that reflects the substance and stature of a university that can attract a major speech by the president of the United States, and one that reflects what has always made this University great: the magic and majesty of a great teacher and his effect on students and community.

These are moments we should all treasure. I am so proud to be a member of a university that can offer them.