



## Leading a Mission-Driven Life

photos and story by Matt Thomas '00

Several years ago, Gustavus alumnus Matt Swenson '06 was invited back to his alma mater to speak to a group of current Gusties. His talk was titled "A Mission-Driven Life: Living with Integrity and Purpose." Early on in the speech, Swenson told the audience this: "College is a time of discovery – not only a discovery of the world around you, but most importantly what lies within you; an intentional exploration of what you are capable of contributing in the short time you share on this earth. Gustavus Adolphus College is the place to begin asking yourselves those important questions."



Swenson was speaking from experience as someone who utilized every day he had at Gustavus to experience new things, acquire leadership skills, grow as a person, learn from wise mentors, and reflect on the meaning of life.

Swenson's Gustavus journey began when he was in high school as he made several trips to St. Peter to visit his older sister Katie '04. After witnessing what an incredible experience his sister was having, Swenson says he fell in love with the College.

"From the moment I stepped foot on the Gustavus campus, I could feel a distinct sense of community – a sense of genuine joy and belonging I had never felt before. To this day, I strongly believe it is that indisputable sense of community that has made Gustavus the extraordinary place it is today, and has been for 150 years," Swenson said. "Truly, it is the people more than the place itself that defines the Gustavus experience. It is a shared sense of community and belonging that I wish more people could have the opportunity to experience; because unless you have lived it, I am not sure you can fully understand it."

Midway through his freshman year, Swenson made a decision that he says changed his life. That decision was enrolling in the January Term class "Changing the World" which is taught annually by Chris Johnson '85, Director of Vocation and Integrative Learning in the College's Center for Servant Leadership.

"It was in Chris' class that I began to ask myself difficult questions about who I was as a person, what I hoped to gain from

a Gustavus education, and how I would use that education to make our world – and the lives of those around me – somehow better," Swenson said.

Swenson decided that the best way to find answers to those questions and ultimately prepare himself to change the world someday was to immerse himself across campus in a diverse

assortment of activities. He performed in three main stage theatre productions his freshman year, spent three years as a Gustie Greeter introducing first-year students to the College, spent three years as a Gustavus Ambassador, was active in the Christian group Proclaim, was chosen to participate in the Summer Servant Leadership Program, volunteered in chapel as a lector, and spent Spring Break of his junior year in Jacksonville, Fla., helping build homes for low-income families through Habitat for Humanity.

Whether Swenson was born a leader or developed into a leader during his time at Gustavus is debatable, but his ability and willingness to lead was evident to many who knew him on campus.

"From the day I first met Matt in class, he has struck me as among the most committed and authentic people I know," Johnson said. "I often introduce him to others as one of my heroes,

because of the way that he leads, works, and lives his whole life 'from the inside out,' so to speak, doing amazing things to make a difference in the world while always remaining grounded in who he really is."

Near the end of his sophomore year, Swenson helped to develop

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a men's bible study group called Men's Christian Fellowship. The group brought together men of various faith denominations to have meaningful conversations about faith on a weekly basis.

"It was an excellent opportunity to grow in my faith and be challenged to consider different perspectives on Christianity during my time at Gustavus," Swenson said. "Many of the guys in MCF are still among my closest friends today."

During the first week of Swenson's senior year, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast. Over the next three months, Swenson organized a group of 23 fellow students to travel to Ocean Springs, Mississippi during the month of January to help families affected by the storm. Swenson and the other Gustavus students lived in tents, gutted flooded homes, and distributed aid to hundreds of displaced families. It was another life changing experience for Swenson.

"This was by far the most formative moment of my Gustavus experience. It ultimately caused me to delay enrollment in the seminary and enter a life in politics and public service," Swenson said. "Those four weeks in Mississippi changed the course of my life and helped make me who I am today. The faces and stories of the people we met on the Gulf Coast, and the Gusties I served alongside, are a constant reminder to me of why I got involved in public service in the first place."

After graduating from Gustavus with a double major in communication studies and political science along with a minor in art studio, Swenson started his career as a communications specialist for the Minnesota House of Representatives. For a little over four years, Swenson provided political and policy-related communication strategies and writing services for 18 state representatives. In 2010,

Speaker of House Margaret Anderson Kelliher '90 asked him to serve as press secretary and chief spokesperson for her gubernatorial campaign. Then for almost two years he worked at the Minnesota Department of Commerce, first as the Assistant Director of Communications and then as the Director of Communications. Today, Swenson is considered by many to be one of the most promising young and up-and-coming voices at the State Capitol. At the time this article was written, he was seven months into his newest position as Communications Advisor to Governor Mark Dayton.

"Serving the Governor in this capacity is a rare and unique privilege, and one I am extremely grateful for," Swenson said. "Every day I walk up the Capitol steps, and step into the debates that will determine the course of Minnesota's future. It is a tremendous honor to help shape public discourse around some of the most pressing issues of our time. As a student of democracy at Gustavus, I never dreamed that I would have these opportunities to participate so meaningfully in the political process; but looking back, I know now that it was the gift of a Gustavus education that made it all possible."

Much of Swenson's success at this stage in his career can be boiled down to his ability to write effectively and to think critically about issues and understand them from multiple perspectives. While many professors at Gustavus contributed to his growth in these two areas, Swenson points particularly to former communication studies professor Terry Morrow and Associate Professor of Political Science Alisa Rosenthal. Morrow advised Swenson on his thesis – a 14-month project that involved a rhetorical analysis of sermons in the ELCA. Rosenthal taught Swenson's Constitutional Law class

during his junior year.

"The development of my voice, and my ability to articulate a clear and compelling message, are due in large part to Terry Morrow's instruction and encouragement. He recognized my potential as a writer, and challenged me to become the better writer I am today," Swenson said.

About Rosenthal he said, "I can honestly say that my ability to think critically about the many issues I encounter in politics and life was honed in large part by the lessons I learned in Alisa's class."

While many people would consider it the pinnacle of their career to advise the Governor of the State of Minnesota, one gets the feeling that Swenson has only begun to leave his mark on the state and the world. Swenson hasn't ruled out pursuing the seminary and a life of Lutheran ministry. He has also considered starting his own public relations firm, continuing public service at the state or local level, and don't be surprised if someday he is on a ballot running for public office himself.

"Twenty-five years from now, I hope to look back on my life and career and be proud of the work I have contributed to making Minnesota a better place to live, work, and raise a family," Swenson said. "I hope to one day raise my own family – inspired by the loving example of my parents – and show my wife and children the same abiding and unconditional love that I have been fortunate to have all my life. In the end, that is more than any man could ask for."

*Matt Swenson '06 holds a master's degree in public policy from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. In addition to his full-time job in Governor Dayton's office, Swenson is also an adjunct professor at Concordia University-St. Paul. Swenson also serves on the Humphrey School of Public Affairs Alumni Board of Directors.*

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