

ESSAY



By Gaylen J. Byker

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Ivory towers deserve to fall

*Developing caring hearts
is more worthwhile for schools*

As a boy topping onions in the muck fields of Hudsonville, I could not have known the adventures God had in store for me. How could I have imagined someday standing in the rice paddies of Vietnam as an artillery officer? Practicing law in Philadelphia? Working for Chase-Manhattan Bank in New York developing complex commodity-indexed derivatives and finances? Or being airlifted with my family off a beach in Beirut, Lebanon, during civil warfare?

And, more recently: How could I have known that I would be called away from an entrepreneurial career in offshore energy development in Houston to become the eighth president of Calvin College, my alma mater?

The answer is that only God knew the diverse experiences heading my way. But I knew He had me in His plan, and I worked hard at preparing myself to serve Him through the challenges He sent my way.

Unique challenges ahead

God blessed me with valuable training, developing the values of faith, hard work, education, service and patriotism — and by the latter, I don't mean "My country, right or wrong," but a love for community and country that leads us to work to make them "right."

It's good to be back in West Michigan. There is something fitting about coming full circle, back to this area for the unique challenge of leading Calvin College into the next century.

I wasn't sure what I'd find at Calvin when I took a careful look at all aspects of the institution, but I am very impressed with what I have seen. Calvin is, and will continue to be, an active and creative partner within this community.

In my travels, I often met people from West Michigan, including many Calvin graduates. They were doing amazing things. Whether in Washington, D.C., London, Singapore or Beirut, the West Michigan people I observed were making major contributions. There is indeed something special about this community that produces such important participants in a diverse range of endeavors.

West Michigan produces citizens with caring hearts, people who have learned how to serve. At Calvin, we add another phrase: we want our students not only to "learn to serve," but also to "serve to learn." I think the same can be said of many in this community.

Until I left West Michigan, I don't think I fully grasped importance of this unique readiness to serve. I've never come across another part of the United States — or any other country — where this dynamic is so pervasive.

How is this virtue instilled in so many West Michigan citizens?

The sources of strength

Service is learned behavior, and West Michigan draws strength from its excellent educational institutions. The public, private and parochial school systems are striving for excellence, and the higher educational network is remarkable.

I appreciate the fine public and private universities and colleges of the area — Aquinas, Calvin, Cornerstone, Davenport, Grace Bible College, Grand Valley State, Grand Rapids Community College, Hope, Kendall and Reformed Bible College. We live in a region that stands out for quality education.

However, simply having good schools doesn't guarantee the development of caring hearts. In fact, in many institutions of higher education, one finds campuses disengaged from their surrounding communities, too busy with research and scholarship to affect the lives of those living nearby. It's the oft-described "ivory tower" phenomenon.

I believe that demanding intellectual rigor and inspiring hearts for service are not mutually exclusive endeavors. The educational institutions across the country that are making the biggest contributions to society are engaging students and faculty in both scholarship and service.

From my varied experiences, I can add that an isolationist, "ivory tower" outlook has also pervaded the business and media worlds. But many of today's business leaders are coming to

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realize that we need more corporate creators than corporate raiders, and the media is aware of the strong call for more careful communication, rather than self-serving manipulation.

In today's society, there is no room for ivory towers — places where the academic (or business or media) enterprise is isolated from the community.

West Michigan has known this for a long time. I'm convinced that a prime reason for our flourishing civic life is our community partnerships, including significant contributions from the area's educational, business and media leaders.

I'll give you a few Calvin College examples. Our last two U.S. congressmen from Grand Rapids have been Paul Henry and Vern Ehlers — both former Calvin professors. The heart of the area's social service network is full of Calvin graduates — Jim Haveman, in charge of the state's health services in Lansing; Evert Vermeer at the Family Independence Agency; Jonathan Bradford at Inner City Christian Federation; Jennifer Marcum at Ramoth House; Dave Jacobs at Home Repair Services; Beth Bandstra in numerous civic capacities; John Kuiper at Habitat for Humanity. The list goes on and on.

Developing citizens with caring hearts to work in our schools, businesses and community organizations is the strength of West Michigan.

While I am impressed with our community, as an entrepreneur I also see the potential for growth. (An entrepreneur is never totally satisfied!) And future success lies in developing more opportunities

ABOUT THE ESSAYIST

Gaylen J. Byker has the background to do about anything he wants, and he seems to have done almost all of it.

He has been a soldier, entrepreneur, lawyer, business executive and teacher.

He was not thinking of adding "educator" to his resume when he was approached with the prospect of becoming president of Calvin College a little more than a year ago, nor was he even looking for a job.

"This is the only school I would have considered," he said of his beloved alma mater.

"We've enjoyed many things about West Michigan, but the college was the real attraction."

What prompted him to write his essay?

"I have been away for 23 years. It was intriguing to come back to find that things were going very well in West Michigan in terms of economic development and social services. I started looking at the key values that lead to that, and I thought this would be a good chance to share my observations," he said.

"Calvin has been seen as somewhat isolated, located on the edge of the city. But the fact is Calvin is very much involved," he said.

He cites faculty leadership and student participation in a



long list of community affairs. Activities range from tutoring to medical research projects with area hospitals and planned joint efforts with other area schools.

"We have 2,200 students per year involved in service projects," he said.

Foundation blocks for his broad career are a doctorate in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania, a law degree and a master's in world politics from the University of Michigan, and a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies from Calvin.

Byker and his wife, Susan, another Calvin grad, live in DeWitt Manor on campus. They have two daughters.

for this area's intellectual, business and media leaders to create innovative partnerships.

The Grand Rapids Public Schools have launched the Children's Summit, and area businesses and the media are responding. The school/business partnerships through Public Education Fund initiatives are exciting. Calvin is a "corporate partner" with Congress Montessori Public School, a delightful arrangement for both

schools. My wife, Susan, is enthusiastic about being the college's liaison with Congress.

D&W's Bob Woodrick is a shining example of how a corporate leader can change hearts in a community. His leadership in racial reconciliation is inspiring.

The involvement of the area's major business leaders in civic concerns is simply unparalleled. Think of the DeVos and Van Andel families, the Princes, the

De Witts, the Pew and Wege families, the Meijers, the Berkowitzes, and the leaders of the local banking and automobile dealerships, among others. These entrepreneurs have not only excelled in their fields; they have, at the same time, demonstrated the virtues we want to celebrate — faith, hard work, education, service and patriotism.

But there's more to do. Our area colleges, businesses and media centers can create internships, as well as graduate and continuing education ventures and programs to assist the K-12 educational system.

Recently, 120 students from Calvin, along with many others from Aquinas, Cornerstone, Central Michigan, Grand Valley, Michigan State and Western Michigan, met at a "Beginning Teacher Day."

These future teachers of our children attended seminars on topics such as classroom management and motivation techniques, led by faculty members from these institutions. This kind of cooperative effort is invaluable for our community.

Calvin and Hope colleges have formed a corporation, Creative Dining Services, that has been a job creator and profit producer for the schools and the regions. (By the way, with favorable reviews from the students being fed.) The two schools have also teamed up to provide a noted bachelor's of science in nursing through Butterworth Hospital.

If long-time competitors such as Calvin and Hope can forge a mutually beneficial partnership, any two entities in this community — business and media rivals as well as educational organizations — can do the same.

I challenge the leaders of this area to eliminate ivory towers, whether you work in the non-profit or for-profit sector. Together we can create an environment that develops caring hearts — a key source of this area's strength and one of the greatest "exports" of West Michigan.