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DEAR OLES,

ST. OLAF COLLEGE BEGINS ITS 135TH YEAR THIS FALL. We will welcome 780 new first-year students to Manitou Heights to begin the transformative experience that our alumni readers of this magazine know so well. One key element of that transformation for our new students will be the intentional conversation about their vocation that the college fosters. “Vocation,” of course, means not merely the work you do after graduation but also your discernment of what you have been called to do, your understanding of how your work aligns with your deepest commitments — indeed, your very identity.

This issue of the *St. Olaf Magazine* demonstrates what happens when Oles find their vocation and apply their talents to the issues facing America and the world. As a genetic counselor at the National Institutes of Health, Barbara Bowles Biesecker '79 is working in perhaps “the most deeply personal aspect of medicine,” offering support and guidance to patients with genetically-linked illnesses. Our profile of her shows not only how science and compassion reinforce one another in Barbara’s work but also how a conversation with Professor Alice Burton when she was a St. Olaf student began a process of discernment that led Barbara to the important work she does now.

Any list of the top issues facing our country today would have to include not only health-care but also education, and our profile of the 2008 Minnesota Teacher of the Year, Derek Olson '88, shows one Ole working at the leading edge of that issue. This article tells the story of Derek’s accomplishments in the classroom and the path of vocational discernment that led him to Afton-Lakeland Elementary School. A semester on the Term in Asia and, especially, visits to two orphanages changed Derek’s life path. He keeps a photograph on his wall at home as a reminder that what he does is “not just a job, it’s your calling.”

The recipients of the 2009 Distinguished Alumni Awards also exemplify through their lives the deep meaning of “vocation” and give us more examples of the process of discernment that leads to an understanding of what we are called to do. Perhaps the most inspiring element of each of their stories is the seamless connection between the work they do and the values they hold.

None of this happens by accident. The distinguishing feature of a St. Olaf education is the way we embed intellectual rigor in an ongoing conversation about the uses of that knowledge, the purpose of work, and the values we espouse. Professor DeAne Lagerquist’s reflections on how she approaches the teaching of religion in a pluralistic world illustrate the thoughtfulness and intentionality of the conversations we seek to foster.

I hope you enjoy these articles and the stirring images from the Gimse International and Off-Campus Photo Contest reproduced here. Best wishes from St. Olaf.

David R. Anderson