



Steve Peterson '80 and Mary Wilkens '78 give from the heart.

BY PATRICIA GROTT'S KELLY '77

They met during Term in the Middle East in 1977. Steve was a sophomore planning to transfer to the University of Minnesota for an agribusiness degree. Mary was a senior who had given up her pre-med chemistry major in order to travel with Omar Otterness, her favorite religion professor. On their return, he decided to remain at St. Olaf and to major in political science. She completed a religion major and applied to the University of Minnesota Medical School. Married for 25 years, Steve Peterson '80 and Dr. Mary Wilkens '78 credit their Middle East experience — and St. Olaf — for shaping their beliefs, careers and hearts.

"I have four words that describe why I went to St. Olaf and why I love it still: academics, faith, community and world," says Steve.

In 1998, Steve and Mary gave a substantial gift to St. Olaf, a gift that became the cornerstone of the Omar and Margery Otterness Endowed Scholarship for International and Off-Campus Studies. They also solicited donations from other Oles who had traveled abroad with the Otternesses.

Their stewardship includes a significant gift to the new Regents Hall of Natural and

Mathematical Sciences, as well as annual leadership gifts to Partners in Annual Giving, all matched dollar for dollar by General Mills Corporation, where Peterson is director of contract manufacturing.

But their good example extends far beyond their generous financial support, says Barry Carlson '79, a St. Olaf principal gifts officer and long-time friend of the couple. "Steve and Mary truly embody St. Olaf's mission statement," says Carlson.

Twenty years after starting a successful family practice clinic in Hopkins, Mary Wilkens now teaches in the Methodist Hospital Family Practice residency program. She also spends 30 hours a week practicing pro-bono medicine at Hopkins High School where she works with uninsured teenagers who have mental-health issues, and at a free clinic for Spanish-speakers in Shakopee (for which she taught herself Spanish). "What I'm doing is so out-of-the-box," she says, "and it *so works* because I am liberal arts-, St. Olaf-educated."

Mary says that attending St. Olaf gave her "translation" skills she uses every day. "The most important thing in family practice was being able to translate what I knew into language that the patient in front of me would understand. It is *really* true now in what I do, because I work with every ethnicity, and every socioeconomic group. And some of the kids are more 'street' than scientifically literate. I use the liberal-arts side of my education at least as much as the scientific, clinician side."

This past January, Mary and seven other

Mary Wilkens '78 and Steve Peterson '80 with their children (L-R) Jacob, Luke '11 and Katie in Machu Picchu, Peru.

St. Olaf alumni volunteers (all in medical professions) traveled with nine St. Olaf students to Jalapa, Nicaragua with ISLA — Interfaith Service to Latin America — on a construction, education and medical-based mission trip. "It was a fabulous experience," she says. "The students were amazing. They learned that the ministry happens in construction, in education, even in medicine. It's not a luxury to be literate in theology, meaning, and values these days. This world requires it. It's one of the unique gifts that St. Olaf offers, and we should be bold about it!"

"Faith has always been essential to us," adds Steve. "And, in some ways, my values were most challenged in those St. Olaf religion classes. I went from my parents' faith to claiming my own faith at St. Olaf."

Today, in addition to supporting their church and St. Olaf, Steve and Mary are busy raising their three children (eldest son Luke is a St. Olaf freshman, Katie is a high school senior and Jacob is a 9th grader), and continuing their ten-year tenure on the board of Kinship, a faith-based mentoring program for five- to fifteen-year olds being raised by a single parent.

Says Steve: "We both come from wonderful families, who had means, so we're trying to be stewards of what has been given to us. We learned from our parents that giving goes beyond the checkbook. That's the easy part. It really is about giving your time — and your heart." 🐉