

Chartchai

Story and photo by
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LERTSACHANANT '72

When Chartchai Lertsachanant '72 left his native Thailand to study in the United States in 1968, the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., were still fresh wounds on America's psyche, and college students around the world were angrily protesting the war in Vietnam. Lertsachanant's early impression of Americans was formed first by U.S. soldiers on the streets of Bangkok — and then by a group of St. Olaf students participating in Term In Asia, an International and Off-Campus Studies program.

This chance encounter with the St. Olaf students led to Lertsachanant's decision to spend his college years on the Hill.

"I knew nothing when I arrived in the United States, but I wanted to learn more, and St. Olaf gave me a great opportunity to explore other cultures," says Lertsachanant, who jokingly claims to be one-quarter Norwegian after spending four years at St. Olaf. "In the end, we are not different. It's just that if we don't know each other, we think we are different."

Thirty-two years later, Lertsachanant continues to exemplify the college's global perspective, an integral part of the St. Olaf mission, and credits his alma mater with having honed his ability to work effectively within a variety of cultures. He feels equally at ease in China, the United States, Chile and Sweden. For the past 25 years Lertsachanant has owned an international paper company and says that his job is not selling paper, but rather that of "a bridge-builder, bringing people from different cultures together."

The soft-spoken Lertsachanant blends a hard-driving, expressive American style with the timeless Asian message of harmony and finding middle ground. "Why should we say, 'You are right and I am wrong,' when we all have to live together?" he asks.

With St. Olaf still so central to Lertsachanant's life, he was pleased when his son, Pongsakorn '06 ("Pong"), also became a St. Olaf student — the first child of an international alumnus to do so. "Pong gained a broader view of the world while at St. Olaf," says Lertsachanant with pride for his son.

In early April of this year, Pong was killed in a car accident while home in Thailand on spring break. Pong's name was the first to be added to the college's new Wind Chime Memorial Tower. His father came back to campus for the dedication. ■

The name of Lertsachanant's beloved son, Pongsakorn '06, became the first to be added to the college's Wind Chime Memorial Tower since its dedication last fall.

