

## Visser Helps People Overcome, Learn, and Make Changes

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### Recommended Citation

Van Voorst, Bethany (2020) "Visser Helps People Overcome, Learn, and Make Changes," *The Voice*: Vol. 65 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/voice/vol65/iss3/3>

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## Visser Helps People Overcome, Learn, and Make Changes

In Alumni, Issue, Spring/Summer 2020 by Bethany Van Voorst July 9, 2020

Looking back, Dr. Stanton Visser ('70) can see how God orchestrated moments in his life that prepared him for each new step or hurdle he tackled.

Visser spent more than 35 years working as a counselor at Creative Living, a Christian counseling center in Rock Valley, Iowa, that he and two friends started as a part-time endeavor back in 1978.

Visser's story does not start there, however. When he was a student at Dordt, Visser's dream was to teach and coach. But the Vietnam War interrupted many plans that year, including Visser's, as men waited for draft announcements.

“One day when I came home from work, there was a letter laying on the table, and my mother was crying. I saw it was from the draft board. I quickly opened it, and I read that I was required to report in December for the U.S. Army.”

Visser shared that many men feared being called to the infantry.

“Instead of going to Vietnam, I ended up being sent to upstate New York to a missile base, and I was a company clerk,” he recalls.

Following his time in the army, Visser came back home to Iowa, where a friend connected him with a job at Hope Haven, a ministry that offered schooling and programs for disabled children, adolescents, and adults. Little did Visser know, this was the next step in a bigger plan that God had for him.

Visser started working in Hope Haven’s machine shop but soon transitioned to work on the social services side.

“Looking back, I can see God leading, directing, and opening doors. At the time, I didn’t fully see it, but clearly he was guiding my life.”

During his time at Hope Haven, Visser and some colleagues decided to take a graduate course in counseling at a local community college. This led to the next step—pursuing his master’s degree from South Dakota State University. After completing his degree, his pastor encouraged Visser and two others who worked in human services at Hope Haven to open a Christian counseling center.

“He kept saying to us, ‘You guys need to open an office. There’s no Christian counseling in this whole area. People don’t have an option.’”

That led to Creative Living, a Christian counseling center, which Visser and his colleagues opened in Rock Valley in 1978.

“We didn’t know anything about running a business, let alone a counseling business,” recalls Visser. They eventually learned how to bill clients, advertise their new business, pay taxes, and pay themselves. They highlighted their expertise in areas such as addiction counseling and marriage and family therapy, as well as their background in mental illness from serving at Hope Haven. Word spread, and business continued to grow.

After a couple of years at Creative Living, Visser wanted to further his education. So, he decided to get his doctorate from the University of South Dakota, utilizing the GI Bill to help pay for his degree.

Visser spent many years in the profession, and Creative Living expanded to have offices in other surrounding cities.

“A big part of counseling is giving people a safe place to be who they are,” he says. “I am amazed at the resilience of people, and the determination, and the willingness to learn and try new things. I just think back of how privileged I was to be part of people making those significant changes in their life, or dealing with really hard, hard things. That kept me going too.”

Visser also got involved in prison ministry, where he has had opportunities to share the gospel with others. Visser was invited to participate in a retreat weekend where he watched other men share about their faith. Later, he was invited to go with some friends to go to a prison in Fort Dodge, Iowa, where they met with prisoners and talked about their faith. The group traveled almost three hours to Fort Dodge, Iowa, where they visited the prison and had the opportunity to share their faith. This experience inspired Visser to get involved in prison ministry closer to home.

One of his favorite memories is the first time someone asked to pray with him.

“He pulls me aside and says, ‘Would you pray with me to ask the Lord into my heart?’”

Visser had never had the opportunity to lead someone in accepting Christ. At first he struggled with what to say and how to lead.

“But God gave me the words, and we had a prayer, and that’s happened numerous times in my prison work, especially in these weekends. I’m thinking, ‘Boy, what a blessing from God to be used to change someone’s eternity.’”

After retiring from Creative Living, Visser started visiting three prisons each month: South Dakota Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, Yankton Federal Prison Camp, and Mike Durfee State Prison in Springfield, South Dakota. Recently, Visser was encouraged to become a commissioned CRC pastor for doing work in the prison. He also participates in Crossroads Prison Ministry.

Throughout his life both in his counseling and prison ministry, Visser has worked with many people.

“We live in a complicated world. There are challenges coming at people all the time. We use the word ‘broken’—there is brokenness around us, and in us,” he says. “But I am grateful to be a small part in helping people overcome, learn, and make changes.”



Photo by Rylan Howe and The N'West Iowa REVIEW.