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BLOM'S LIFE TAKES NEW TRAJECTORY



JAMIN VER VELDE ('99)

While visiting campus during Defender Days, Steve Blom spoke in classes and shared with students about his life experiences.

This year's Distinguished Alumni Award recipient, Steve Blom ('01), has made significant impact along each stop in his professional career.

Accepting invitations into challenging circumstances, taking time to listen to the people around him, and finding like-minded men and women to help him champion causes has allowed him to tackle seemingly impossible challenges and enact real change.

Blom can trace the development of those skills back to his time as a Dordt University student.

"The trajectory of my life shifted while I was at Dordt," says Blom. "I was unclear about what I wanted to do. After my freshman year I didn't know if I wanted to continue. I had a bit of a crisis of

faith and started taking some theology classes, asking bigger questions about life and faith."

Those bigger questions and his pursuit of their answers led to a new direction in Blom's life: a direction focused on ministry.

"I give a lot of credit to my adviser, [former theology professor] Dr. Syd Hielema," says Blom. "He was good for me in allowing me to question and be curious, and he encouraged me to continue in theology. As a result, I decided to go into youth and young adult ministry, a new program at the

time at Dordt."

That focus, combined with a transformative study abroad semester in the Netherlands during Blom's junior year, inspired Blom to pursue a life of ministry.

"That semester was very instrumental in causing me to look at the world through a fresh lens," says Blom. "I worked doing ministry in Amsterdam, primarily among the homeless, while developing new friendships and connections. When I came back at the end of my junior year, I knew I was going to do ministry and be moving somewhere."

That somewhere eventually turned out to be the south suburbs of Chicago, Illinois.

"There was this major cultural shift happening in Chicago when I got there, with a number of white families moving out of the area and black families moving into the area" says Blom. "In real time I was experiencing—in church and in ministry—discussions about the church moving out of a neighborhood. During that time, it became clear I was highly motivated to work in that space of the black/white divide, especially among Christians in the south Chicago area."

Blom eventually moved out of ministry work after seven years and began working with the Christian Community Development Association in Sauk Village. This was (and still is, according to Blom) an under-resourced community that saw significant population shifts, political turmoil, and negative community engagement. At that time, Blom was specifically working with youth in the local junior high and high school.

Soon after, Blom was asked to serve on the school board for Deer Creek Christian School, an open enrollment school his children attended, which was facing struggles and difficulties. After working with the school board to put together a successful plan focused on improving the situation, Blom was asked yet again to take on a new challenge—this time, as interim principal of the school.

And he knew exactly where to turn for support that would prove to be invaluable.

"The next day I called Dr. Tim Van Soelen who runs the Center for the Advancement of Christian Education (CACE) at Dordt and asked if they would help us," says Blom. "He said yes, without even batting an eye. In many ways, that changed the course of my work."

The purpose of CACE is to walk alongside Christian schools who are committed to teaching from a biblical perspective, contending for the sustainability, improvement, innovation,



From left to right, Gretchen, Simon, Steve, Sally, and Jonas Blom.

advocacy, and promotion of Christian education at all levels of learning. Working with Van Soelen, Blom began to see a bigger picture of the impact that could be made in his very own school and beyond.

"At that point I realized Christian education has the potential to be an

starting one. After two years of feasibility studies and research as well as working with a remarkable group of committed stakeholders, Unity Christian Academy was established. Blom was asked to serve as the chair of the high school's leadership team, which he did for five years.

That role ultimately led to his current position as executive director of Bright Promise, an organization dedicated to supporting Christian schools in under-resourced communities in and around Chicago. The program also facilitates leadership development and improvements to growth, health, and capacity for its network schools.

Blom's role at Bright Promise has given him opportunities to pursue his passions, live out his faith, and enact change in a region in desperate need of unity and continued community development.

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— Steve Blom

incredible tool for family and community transformation across the black-white divide,” says Blom. “Because, at the end of the day, we all want a good education for our children.”

Following this, Blom was presented with yet another challenge – not just working for a Christian school but

transition in the region I live in," says Blom. "I was compelled by some of the historical brokenness and isolation and separation and spent a lot of time studying the institutional and individual reasons for that."

Reflecting on the places his career has taken him and the challenges he has stepped into, Blom credits his time at Dordt for preparing him to work with teams, listen well, and be bold in tackling difficult circumstances.

"I am incredibly grateful for Dordt allowing me to be curious and skeptical at the same time," says Blom. "As I moved into ministry and these other spaces I've walked into, that's remained a lasting impact—the fact that I don't have all the answers. I believe I have gifts and abilities that I'm called to steward, but I need all these other people in the room because when we share our gifts with one another, something really beautiful comes out of that. And that's something I learned and experienced at Dordt."

Dordt also helped Blom to view problems and challenges from perspectives different from his own.

"When I began to experience life with brothers and sisters in Christ who were African American or Hispanic, I got to learn about their experiences and the way God carried them through," says Blom. "It made faith in God and the Kingdom that much bigger. And I give credit to Dordt for not just trying to make us proficient or certain but allowing us to wonder. The skeptical curiosity that was encouraged while I was at Dordt has served me well for the past 20 years."

Looking toward the future, Blom sees the importance of educational opportunities for all people to be an essential component of Christ's love in action.

"Living in Chicago for as long as I have now, it's become clear that education is a significant issue of justice," says Blom. "If I believe that Christian education as a whole is good on its own—not anti-public school, but good on its own—then it should be available to anybody who



ADRI VAN GRONINGEN (18)

"I'm thankful for Dordt and the relationships that were formed and have lasted to today," says Blom.

desires it as the best reflection of who Christ is in this world."

In Blom's opinion, the impact of a quality Christian education in multicultural contexts can positively affect more than individual students; it changes how we understand God, his Kingdom, and our shared place in it.

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"When I'm able to meet with families or leaders of schools in our network and hear stories of families coming to our schools and experiencing very real joy and love and humility...that their children are known and cared for and challenged—in many ways for the first time—then I say why should we *not* be trying to move heaven and earth to make sure all children have access to it?" says Blom.

"I'm not saying every family should choose that option, but we should be working tirelessly to make sure every family that *does* desire that can receive it."

Even 22 years after graduating, Blom believes his continued connection to Dordt has been integral to his efforts toward positive change.

"I'm always aware of what's going on at Dordt through communication, and I come back to Northwest Iowa and have attended Dordt events over the years," says Blom. "But the biggest thing is my connection with CACE, which has been instrumental in shaping me and my perspective on how Dordt is continuing to engage the world in unique ways."

Van Soelen, director of CACE, says that Blom's work in the Christian education space isn't just valuable, but essential.

"As a board member, interim head of school, development director, and now the Bright Promise Fund executive director, Steve is passionate about creating learning experiences for all children, regardless of income or race or other social constructs that school systems can sometimes create," says Van Soelen. "That passion is one of the many things I admire most about Steve's leadership. Steve exemplifies the serviceable insight that we desire from Dordt graduates."

Reflecting on being named the 2022 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient, Blom was quick to defer praise to the many other Dordt graduates whose work is making an impact across the country and around the world.

"I'm truly honored to receive this award, especially considering who has received it before me and considering who Dordt graduates are in this world," says Blom. "There

are so many graduates doing important, meaningful work, and I'm inspired by that. I'm humbled as a recipient, and grateful for the opportunity to share the work we're doing here in Chicago, which I'm excited for people to learn more about."

MIKE BILLETER