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Kennenth P. Saurman Award: The Truth About Legacies: Three Salient Moments in the Life of a Young Professional

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THE KENNETH P. SAURMAN AWARD

This award honors Kenneth P. Saurman, who will long be remembered for his dedication to the field of student affairs and to the graduate program at The University of Vermont. After his death in 1980, a memorial fund was established for a prize recognizing the outstanding graduate in the program. This award is a reminder of the professional excellence and commitment Kenneth P. Saurman inspired in his students and colleagues.

Each spring, a committee of faculty members in the College of Education and Social Services selects a student, or students, who best display(s) the established award criteria. Those recognized: (a) show a record of outstanding achievement; (b) demonstrate ability to make outstanding future professional contributions at both local and national levels; (c) demonstrate future ability to make outstanding intellectual contribution to the field in the areas of research and scholarship; (d) show evidence of having fostered a sense of community and cooperation among peers, staff, and faculty; and (e) show evidence of outstanding contribution to the University through internship and practical experience.

In April 2010, the Kenneth P. Saurman Award was proudly presented to:

Matthew J. Van Jura

The Truth About Legacies: Three Salient Moments in the Life of a Young Professional

Matthew J. Van Jura
2010 Saurman Award Recipient

My younger sister, Hannah, is currently a junior at Ohio State. When she graduates, we'll share the same Alma Mater, just like we've attended the same preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school.

As the younger sibling, Hannah grew up routinely hearing the expression, "Oh, you must be Matt's sister." It's no secret that she despises these comparisons. But she's done a fairly effective job of pursuing studies and forms of involvement that are completely different than my own in an attempt to negate any basis for comparison. Nevertheless, comparisons still come up from time to time, and when she applied to work at the Ohio Union during her first year at college, the barrage of questions regarding our family ties again resurfaced from my past supervisors, advisors, and friends.

As the big brother, I have never had to worry about these comparisons or struggle to forge an identity separate from that of an older sibling. But last fall, while attending the Association of College Unions International (ACUI) Region 7 Conference I took an open seat at a breakfast table occupied by a group of students from Ohio State. We introduced each other, asked how the other was enjoying the conference, and engaged in small talk. At one point I made a passing remark about my sister who works at the Ohio Union, when one of the student's eyes suddenly lit up with recognition. "Wait!" she exclaimed, "Are you Hannah's brother?" Sensing the irony of the moment, I inwardly laughed to myself. "Yes," I replied. "I'm Hannah's brother."

As I listened to this student recount all the interactions she has had with my sister and explain the nature of their friendship, something dawned upon me. My sister is a pretty big deal. Granted, this wasn't a total revelation to me. Growing up in the same household, I've always known how gifted she is. Rather, hearing so much praise from her peers made me appreciate how college has allowed Hannah

Matthew Van Jura is a 2010 graduate from the University of Vermont's HESA Program. He is an alumnus of The Ohio State University, where his sister, Hannah, currently studies Vocal Performance. Hannah has starred as Julia in the lead role of "The Wedding Singer," Emmie in "Albert Herring," and last summer studied abroad with the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria. Matt currently is a Program Advisor for University Unions at the University of Michigan.

to develop the talents she's had from a young age, discover what she's passionate about, grow into her own skin, and become a role model that other students now look up to. Living on two separate campuses several hundred miles apart, I don't get to see that transformation play out every day and it gives me tremendous pride to know that my sister has found her fit and is building quite a legacy for herself.

The Truth About Legacies

In one of my favorite Calvin and Hobbes strips, the scene begins with Calvin and his father stepping onto an escalator. As the two ascend to the next level, his father turns to Calvin and breaks the silence by telling a story. He tells Calvin about the days when he was a boy and his mom would take him to the department store. How he loved to ride the escalators. How they were wooden with small gaps between the slats, and made noises like, “click, clack, and creak.” How some were narrow and some were wooden, and how those escalators had so much more personality than the slick metal ones found in today's stores. The story ends and Calvin looks up at his father for a moment before thinking to himself, “I'd hate to think that all my current experiences will someday become stories with no point.”

As I sat at the breakfast table that morning listening to Hannah's coworkers speak about her accomplishments, the annoying brother in me had the urge to one-up my sister, and talk about “when I was a student.” Fighting this impulse, I couldn't help but think about this particular comic strip and picture myself as Calvin's father. I reminded myself that even though I was in these students' shoes less than three years ago, they neither knew about, nor probably cared, about my moments of triumph or the legacy that I worked so hard to achieve as a student. And that's okay. In that moment, it was a good thing to be known as Hannah's brother. Because this is her time to be in the spotlight.

Nevertheless, I began to think. Three years removed from being an undergrad I am known as “Hannah's brother.” Was this a sign that my legacy as a student leader had now faded? Beyond the learning outcomes, what was the lasting result of the countless hours invested in my organizations, campus job, classes, and leadership positions? How did I make meaning of my experience if I could no longer find tangible evidence of the impact I had on campus? The questions were cerebral, and actually did not cause me alarm or denial (although I was beginning to feel old). Yet three years ago, these questions would have constituted a crisis of identity.

So why wasn't this question of my legacy causing me greater concern? I pondered this throughout the weekend. I decided that the reason I was at peace stemmed from three specific moments of influence on my path from student leader, to HESA graduate student, and now first-time professional. Three stories that have allowed me to more fully understand my critical truth. Three lessons that have

helped to shape my values, find meaning in my new profession, and ultimately see my greatest successes in the triumphs of those around me.

(1)

During my first year of college, I experienced one of the most salient and influential moments from my time as an undergraduate. It came from a speech. At the conclusion of an otherwise uneventful hall council meeting, our advisor stood up to talk to us about the concept of leaving a legacy. Each of us had been given an opportunity, he told us. What we did with that opportunity was up to us. We could very easily wake up each morning and do the bare minimum of what was required to get through the day. We could spend the next four years, five years, or the rest of our lives focused on ourselves. Some people have little or no control over the circumstances that dictate the course of their lives. However, being first-year students, our choices were innumerable and we were privileged to be in the position to have these choices. He challenged us to demand more from ourselves, to lead lives of purpose, and to care about more than our own personal interests. He asked us to realize the opportunity we had as students to work each day toward creating a legacy. That way, when we left the university, we would leave it better than the way we found it.

This was an incredibly inspirational and motivating speech, and one that I took to heart. For the next four years, the speech became my mantra. Live with purpose, dedicate yourself to your community, leave a legacy. However, while I can trace the roots of my professional calling and many of my values back to that speech, my understanding of “legacy” has changed considerably.

Being charged with leaving a legacy motivated me. It got my butt out of bed each morning determined to make a difference, but for reasons that were not entirely altruistic. I believe there are many good changes that come about by striving to build one’s legacy. But at times I lost sight of my values. Sometimes I valued my legacy and my image more than the work that I was doing for my community.

For much of my time as a student leader, building a legacy through my own accomplishments was what I thought to be a critical truth. Yet as proud as I was of these accomplishments, over time I began to struggle when searching for meaning in these milestones. I would look at the names of past students, engraved on plaques throughout the student union, and wonder if in 30 years my legacy would affect students beyond serving as a trophy case decoration. Thinking more about those enshrined former student leaders, I felt that regardless of how well known they were to today’s students, to their peers and those who worked alongside them, their legacies lived on. And so, over time, my critical truth and understanding of “legacy” began to evolve.

My senior year of college soon came and brought with it a great amount of reflection. Grasping the finality of my time as a student, I struggled to put into words what I had done to leave campus better than the way I found it. Thinking back on my favorite memories, the accomplishments I was most proud of, and the moments when I felt I made a difference, I realized that beyond any line on a resume or certificate of achievement, it was the people around me that brought the greatest satisfaction. The characteristics that I wanted to be remembered the most for were being a good friend, acting as a mentor, learning someone's story, and showing authentic appreciation. Ultimately I arrived at this critical truth: legacies can accomplish great things, but legacies can be impersonal. Equally, if not more important, are the impressions you make on others. Impressions leave a lasting mark on the people you meet in life, for good or for bad, and a small act of kindness often has a much greater impact beneath the surface.

(2)

Now my critical truth did not come in a moment of epiphany, and I find it much easier to articulate several years removed. I believe that in my heart I understood this long before being able to put it down on paper. So with this truth entrenched in my heart, I arrived at the University of Vermont to continue my journey, where I quickly met another influential mentor whose words fit well with my new understanding of legacies and impressions.

When I arrived in Burlington to interview for the HESA program, I remember feeling quite unaccomplished. Meeting the other candidates, I was struck by the conviction with which they spoke about their beliefs and the dedication they displayed toward their causes. Attempting to remain “on” throughout my visit, I did my best to display admiration without revealing my insecurity that many of my accomplishments paled in comparison.

Adding to my stress was the fact that within the HESA community, I was more aware of my privilege than at any previous time in my life. As an undergraduate, my privilege allowed me to go through four years of college without understanding how my identities contributed to the wonderful experience I enjoyed. My privilege also prevented me from considering how many of those same experiences were marginalizing to others. Again, I questioned the impact of my work as a student leader, and whether my accomplishments constituted living with purpose if I had never before considered who my actions were actually serving.

By mid-afternoon of the second day, I arrived at Mann Hall for my faculty interview with Deb feeling tired, stressed, and sensing my chance of admission slipping away. After being invited into the office, I took a seat on the edge of her rocking chair so as not to allow myself to become too comfortable. Yet as the interview

unfolded, I felt myself begin to relax. The tension in my shoulders dissipated, and my voice began to steady.

Ultimately, we arrived at the final question. Leaning back in her chair, Deb peered over at me before saying, “Now, we, the HESA faculty, each year receive many applications to this program. And in selecting those fourteen to eighteen students who will be admitted, we attempt to fashion a cohort that brings many different perspectives and experiences to the group. So if you were to be offered admission to this program, and if you were to accept that offer and join us, what qualities do you think you might bring?”

Her words lingered in the air for a moment as I considered my response. While not as difficult as anticipated, this question pinpointed the worry that had been festering inside of me all weekend. Finding my voice, I told her that although I had the best intentions of doing good work in this field, I was still discovering my passion. I could not articulate it or put a name to the cause I had chosen to dedicate my life toward, but my visit had shown me how much I needed to learn not only about student affairs, but also about myself. Once I finished, Deb set her legal pad on her desk and paused to collect her thoughts before responding.

“Look,” she began. “Within this program, we place a heavy emphasis on topics of social justice. And the reason we do that is because when you look at the history of higher education, in many ways it hasn’t always been an inclusive environment. Yet when you stop to consider the powerful impact that higher education can have over a person’s life, you realize how important it is that the opportunity to attend and succeed in college be available to all students, regardless of who they are or where they come from. We’re not trying to make anyone feel guilty or embarrassed for who they are. So while you may have certain privileges, and it’s important that you recognize those privileges, you have an extraordinary opportunity to do good work for the world by being in this field.”

Hearing this response felt incredibly empowering. When I made the decision to apply for student affairs graduate programs, I was drawn to the field for many reasons. But hearing a faculty member express what she believed to be the purpose of the profession helped me to connect the unique learning outcomes of the HESA program to my earlier epiphany concerning the value of impressions in contrast to legacies. Reminiscent of the charge delivered by my hall director, I felt that what made HESA special was the degree to which the program challenged community members to lead with purpose, to better the lives of others, and in doing so, to change the landscape of higher education. That’s what I wanted my passion to be, that’s what I wanted to dedicate myself toward, and that was the impression I hoped to leave behind on the campus I would one day call home.

(3)

My third and final lesson stems from a personal tradition. Each fall, the week before college football season kicks off, I watch the movie, “Rudy.” For those of you unfamiliar with the film, it chronicles the true story of Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger, who grew up dreaming of one day playing football for the University of Notre Dame. In order to pursue his dream, Rudy has to overcome many obstacles.

At 5’ 7” and 165 pounds, Rudy does not have the prototypical build of a Division I football player, but his challenges are more than short physical stature and limited athletic ability. No one in his family has attended college. Following high school, he serves in the Navy for two years before working in a factory to save up tuition. And although he doesn’t know it until later in life, Rudy struggles with schoolwork because of dyslexia. When he makes the decision to return to school in 1972, he is denied admittance to Notre Dame three times before finally being accepted as a transfer student in 1974.

When Rudy finally arrives on campus in South Bend, he has the fortune of befriending Father John Cavanaugh. A former president of the University, Father Cavanaugh becomes a mentor to Rudy. He listens to Rudy’s story, takes his dream seriously, and when Rudy is most discouraged, Father Cavanaugh is there to offer encouragement and connect him to people who can help.

Rudy eventually earns a spot on the football practice squad, and after two years of training in obscurity is given the chance to dress with the Varsity players for the final game of his senior year. At the end of the game, with the outcome already determined, the coaches send Rudy in for the final five seconds. On his only play, the last play of the game, he tackles the quarterback for a loss and the stadium goes wild. Rudy is carried off the field on the shoulders of his teammates while 60,000 fans give him a standing ovation. The camera cuts to his family, his friends, his teammates and coaches, but one figure notably absent is Father Cavanaugh.

The most recent time I watched “Rudy,” I was struck by the parallels between this scene and the nature of our work in higher education and student affairs. Stories like Daniel Ruettiger’s happen at colleges and universities nationwide each year. Like Ruettiger, there are countless students who possess the potential to be great in their own regard. But potential does not always translate into achievement, and hard work alone cannot transcend all challenges. For many students, it is the presence and support of mentors that bridges the gap between realizing success and succumbing to life’s obstacles.

Father Cavanaugh’s character personifies the attitude of many student affairs professionals. Although he is accomplished, intelligent, and served his institution

with distinction, it's not about him. It's about the students. As student affairs professionals, our work may go without recognition, and we cannot expect results to materialize overnight. It is uncommon that we witness our students' moments of triumph, and never should we expect to share their spotlight. However, the impressions we make on others change lives, and selflessly dedicating ourselves toward the dreams of our students is when we shine brightest. Let your legacy be the students you serve. By empowering their voices, and encouraging them to believe in themselves, work each day to change the landscape of our campuses and our world for the better.

An Older Brother's Closing Words

When I was growing up, I often tried to convince my sister to be just like me. I wanted her to play sports, love social studies, run for student council, and play with Legos®. I was always frustrated that she hated those things that I loved and instead focused on musical theater. But as I sat at the breakfast table last November, listening to her friend describe Hannah's accomplishments, I felt happy that my sister didn't take my advice. Can you imagine Daniel Ruettiger's story if Father Cavanaugh took such an approach? I don't think the movie would have been as inspirational if Rudy spent his entire life chasing a dream of playing college football, only to be pressured into joining the priesthood.

As a first-year professional, I am reminded every day that there is more I can learn. At the beginning of what I hope will be a long career in this profession, I believe it is not enough to simply understand and articulate what I have outlined as my critical truth, but to now live out this belief each day. Listen to people's stories, offer encouragement, motivate others to reach their potential, and find happiness in the success of others. This is my critical truth, how I hope to empower the voices of those around me, and the impact I hope to have on the landscape of our field.

As our regional conference ended and I said goodbye to my breakfast companions, I couldn't help but feel an immense pride to be recognized as Hannah's brother. This feeling reminded me that although I hadn't always been the perfect brother, there were plenty of times when I did attend her plays, cheer her performances, encourage her imagination, or otherwise show her how much I love her and believe in her. As a rising star, Hannah's success is all her own, but I'm glad to have played a supporting role along the way.

Riding home in our van and thinking about the lessons learned that weekend, I couldn't help but look forward to the coming year and years ahead. I hoped that one day, I might hear updates about students I've worked with, listen to stories chronicling their adventures, and feel a similar sense of pride. In my opinion, this would be evidence of a purposeful and meaningful career. After all, I believe

it is through the stories of our students, our impression on their lives, and how we prepare them for their journeys that our own legacies are truly written. So in closing, I ask you, the reader, “What stories comprise your legacy? And what is the impression you’ve made today?” I hope to hear from you soon.