

# CARETAKER OF THE CONNECTION

By Bill Zahren 1986



Photo by Jim Lee

Ask the man in charge of Morningside alumni relations “when does someone cross the imaginary line between student and alumnus?” and you might get an unexpected answer.

Of course, before you can ask Gene Ambrosion such a question, you’ll have to catch him between scouting alumni-involved trips to China or Ireland, planning alumni events in Des Moines or Minneapolis, and huddling up with a sports team or music group to see how they can work together to make alumni feel connected to their alma mater.

But when you finally track him down, Ambrosion will give you this answer to “when do students become alumni?”

“I enjoy working with students so that they understand that they are alumni from the first day they walk onto campus,” said Ambrosion, in his 12th year as director of alumni relations. “My challenge continues to be to work with the students so once they leave here they are always thinking of themselves as alumni.”

That’s just one of the challenges Ambrosion has faced since taking over the alumni relations helm in 1995. Others include finding ways to successfully engage alumni from multiple generations.

The stakes are high. Moral, financial and political support from alumni is critical to the success of colleges in general and private institutions in particular. With no direct public funding, alumni support is critical to every private college’s long-

term success.

Ambrosion’s philosophy to look at freshmen as alumni helps lay the groundwork for a life-long, mutually beneficial relationship between student and institution.

“Gene’s contributions to the college go way beyond the call of duty,” said Morningside President John Reynders. “Alumni think highly of him not only because of the experiences they share with him as Morningside graduates, but also because of the relationship they had with him as students. He is a valued member of our college community.”

## CONNECT AND RE-CONNECT

To keep alumni involved and supportive of Morningside during their time as students and beyond, Ambrosion says the key is providing ample opportunities to “connect and re-connect.”

The methods used to create that connection are evolving quickly, Ambrosion said. The days of inviting a group of alumni to get together for coffee and reminiscing are probably over, especially for alumni from the last two decades.

“It’s kind of an interesting thing,” Ambrosion said. “One of the most precious things we have, no matter who we are, is not money, but time. Time is a very precious commodity. Because of all the family activities that now take place — be it soccer, T-ball, swing choir, whatever it is — there are far more activities at the elementary, middle school and high school level. And that tends to consume parents’ time.”

With increasing competition for alumni’s time and attention, Ambrosion said the challenge is to “try and find the kinds of activities that resonate with alumni.” How do you find out what those activities are? As Ambrosion is fond of saying, “this



Gene Ambrosion and right, Katie Cook

Photo by Jim Lee

isn't rocket science" — you ask them.

"That's why we try to be in communication with alumni, asking them what activities they'd be interested in through surveys and constant conversations," Ambrosion said. "After all, they are the ones who know best."

A great example is the wildly successful 2006 Homecoming Taste of Morningside — essentially a giant post-game alumni/student party featuring such Morningside culinary staples as Miles Inn Charlie Boys, Jerry's Pizza, Bob Roe's wings, Tastee Inn & Out onion chips, and more. It was originally the idea of staff member Barb Pittman.

"I was talking about Barb's idea with Tom Rice (vice president for institutional advancement) and he immediately said, 'Man, this is a no-brainer.' Tom allowed us to step out and do something really off the wall and different. We presented it to the president, and it ran from there," Ambrosion said.

Alumni loved the event ("not one negative comment") so for Homecoming 2007, Morningside repeated the party but evolved it to include children's activities. "Some of our younger alumni can bring their kids and have the entire family enjoy the event," Ambrosion said. "It's a great example of building on a great idea and how we have to think more in terms of things entire families can enjoy."

### **"THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THIS PLACE"**

Getting alumni together is the hard part. Once they are together, the re-connecting almost takes care of itself. Set the stage, get the alumni to participate, and their common backgrounds immediately create a bond.

But just what creates that bond and makes Morningside alumni so loyal?

"There's something about this place," Ambrosion said. "That's the comment I'll always hear. There's something about Morningside — it's really hard to put your finger on it. It touches the whole of everyone here in some way, shape, or form, the whole of the person — mind, body and spirit."

Ambrosion eventually credits that special something at Morningside to "a combination of things."

"I think it's faculty and staff who have made a big difference in the lives of people here. No question. It's the kind of encouragement that students need that propels them once they leave here to go on and do extraordinary things. There are so many alums who have gone on and done extraordinary things, and I think it all comes back to the people here."

### **ANSWERING THE CALL**

Although he's not technically an alumnus, after more than 20 years with Morningside — first in public relations and then in alumni relations — Ambrosion said the same things that create fiercely loyal alumni

drew him to Morningside from a high-profile public relations job with IBP in 1986.

"You know, I think more often than not people are called to do things," Ambrosion said. "And the more I thought about it, the more I got really interested in Morningside College and higher education and working with people."

The deal-maker turned out to be the same thing that hooks alumni for life. As Ambrosion describes it, "I think it's that atmosphere of discovery and excitement that comes with being in a place like this. Students discovering whatever it may be, whether it's in the classroom or in doing the various kinds of volunteer work that they do or whatever. The excitement that comes from doing some things for the first time that takes place on the campus like this. And the encouragement by faculty and staff to do those kinds of things. I really found that to be a very exciting thing."

The extreme importance of having a connected, participating alumni creates high expectations of the director of alumni relations to keep those relationships strong. But after 12 years of tending to the connection, Ambrosion says he's as energized as ever.

"I love interacting with alumni," he said. "It's just one of the joys of being in this job. The contact with the folks who have graduated or those alumni students who are in process of going to that end and getting their degree — it's just a joy and a pleasure making that connection."