Several years ago, Gustavus alumnus Matt Swenson ’06 was invited back to his alma mater to speak to a group of current Gusties. His talk was titled “A Mission-Driven Life: Living with Integrity and Purpose.” Early on in the speech, Swenson told the audience this: “College is a time of discovery – not only a discovery of the world around you, but most importantly what lies within you; an intentional exploration of what you are capable of contributing in the short time you share on this earth. Gustavus Adolphus College is the place to begin asking yourselves those important questions.”

Swenson was speaking from experience as someone who utilized every day he had at Gustavus to experience new things, acquire leadership skills, grow as a person, learn from wise mentors, and reflect on the meaning of life.

Swenson’s Gustavus journey began when he was in high school as he made several trips to St. Peter to visit his older sister Katie ’04. After witnessing what an incredible experience his sister was having, Swenson says he fell in love with the College.

“From the moment I stepped foot on the Gustavus campus, I could feel a distinct sense of community – a sense of genuine joy and belonging I had never felt before. To this day, I strongly believe it is that indisputable sense of community that has made Gustavus the extraordinary place it is today, and has been for 150 years,” Swenson said.

“Truly, it is the people more than the place itself that defines the Gustavus experience.”

Midway through his freshman year, Swenson made a decision that he says changed his life. That decision was enrolling in the January Term class “Changing the World” which is taught annually by Chris Johnson ’85, Director of Vocation and Integrative Learning in the College’s Center for Servant Leadership. “It was in Chris’ class that I began to ask myself difficult questions about who I was as a person, what I hoped to gain from a Gustavus education, and how I would use that education to make our world – and the lives of those around me – somehow better,” Swenson said.

Swenson decided that the best way to find answers to those questions and ultimately prepare himself to change the world someday was to immerse himself across campus in a diverse assortment of activities. He performed in three main stage theatre productions his freshman year, spent three years as a Gustie Greeter introducing first-year students to the College, spent three years as a Gustavus Ambassador, was active in the Christian group Proclaim, was chosen to participate in the Summer Servant Leadership Program, volunteered in chapel as a lector, and spent Spring Break of his junior year in Jacksonville, Fla., helping build homes for low-income families through Habitat for Humanity.

“From the day I first met Matt in class, he has struck me as among the most committed and authentic people I know,” Johnson said. “I often introduce him to others as one of my heroes, because of the way that he leads, works, and lives his whole life from the inside out,” Johnson said. “I often introduce him to others as one of my heroes, because of the way that he leads, works, and lives his whole life from the inside out,” Johnson said. “Really, it is the people more than the place itself that defines the Gustavus experience.”
Swenson has only begun to leave his mark on the state and the world.