

Fall 2012

Alumni Profile

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Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura (2012) "Alumni Profile," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 9 : No. 2 , Article 13.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol9/iss2/13

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A focus on the future

Gordon Brinser '87 knows the world he wants to leave for future generations.

And as president of SolarWorld Industries America Inc., the largest photovoltaic company in the U.S., he's working toward a more sustainable future. An Eagle Scout and avid outdoorsman, Brinser learned to appreciate the environment during his childhood, and his work at SolarWorld provides a clear match for his values.

"I could have been manufacturing widgets every day of my life for another 20 years, but at the end of the day, what would I have contributed to future generations?" said Brinser, who joined SolarWorld in 2008 and, soon after, turned an empty Hillsboro building into a 1,000-employee manufacturing plant. He travels often, including to Germany where the company is based.

Educating the community and getting students excited about technology is crucial to Brinser. He has concerns about the lack of youth studying science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

"We are not graduating enough students in those fields," said Brinser, who studied applied physics at Linfield. "We need a pipeline of students excited about the sciences. We're not providing our kids with the opportunities they need to get the education that will be required for them and the U.S. to be successful in generations to come."

SolarWorld reaches out to local schools and supports various programs, including robotics and living roof initiatives. Last year, SolarWorld supported the Self Express, a Linfield student-led sustainability bus tour.

Personally, Brinser and wife Melissa (Killin) '92 have been consistent supporters of Linfield as well, as members of the President's Circle.

"Linfield was a vital part of our education and our connection," he explained. "This is a place we can make an impact long-term. Anything we can do to help support education is vital, not just for our family but for the livability of communities in Oregon."

The U.S. was once the dominant global manufacturer of solar power products, but now manufactures less than 5 percent of the world's supply, something Brinser calls an alarming trend and hopes to change.

"It's a national treasure for the U.S.," said Brinser, who in recent months has spoken out on behalf of a coalition of companies led by SolarWorld in a complaint against China regarding illegal trade subsidies. Without government enforcement of free trade laws, he said, American solar companies will struggle to survive against illegal foreign trade practices. According to a preliminary decision in May, the U.S. government will enforce tariffs of up to 250 percent on Chinese solar panels and cells.

The cost of solar has continually come down over decades of focused effort. Linfield's T.J. Day Hall recently received a LEED



Gordon Brinser '87, right, president of SolarWorld Industries America, leads a tour with Senator Ron Wyden, center, and others. Brinser says education is a foundation for sustainable communities, which are vital to our nation's future.

Gold certification for sustainable building. The roof features 85 solar panels, along with photo cells elsewhere in the building.

"It is an investment," said Brinser, who uses solar in his home. "There's a clear return on the investment, in your electrical costs and your carbon footprint. It's something you'll benefit from for years to come."

At Linfield, Brinser learned more than just science. He said his liberal arts training prepared him for the leadership roles he's taken on in his career.

"Linfield taught me the importance and value of an individual," he said. "People really knew you and cared about you as a person at Linfield. You're an individual, not just one more face in a class."

Brinser appreciated the support of professors like Clancy Hinrichs '57 and Roger Dell, who allowed him to take risks in a safe environment. As a manager, he encourages his employees to take calculated risks as well. "If you don't challenge yourself, learning and innovation stall," Brinser said, "and both are critical to long-term success." 🍷

– Laura Davis