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Passionate about the Liberal Arts

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Thomas L. Hellie, who will begin work April 3 as Linfield College president, meets community members during a reception in November when he visited the college.

Linfield's 19th president

Passionate about the liberal arts

Thomas L. Hellie may be the quintessential liberal arts graduate.

He's curious about the world around him and has a multitude of interests. He has changed careers several times, yet remained connected to higher education. He's a graduate of a small liberal arts college and has been on the faculty at a similar institution. He's been an academic administrator and a foundation executive.

When he becomes Linfield College's 19th president on April 3, he will bring a broad background of academic experience and passion to the position.

"I believe fiercely in the transformational power of undergraduate college education, especially liberal arts education," Hellie said. "I believe it both elevates and frees us."

Glenna Kruger '68, chair of the Board of Trustees that unanimously elected Hellie president in November, said he understands the culture of Linfield and the link between liberal arts and professional education. "Tom is an excellent match for Linfield," she said.

Bill Mackie '71, professor of physics and member of the search committee, said Hellie's combination of experience at liberal arts colleges and his foundation and fundraising background will serve him well at Linfield.

"His experience as a faculty member and his work

with faculty give him a strong understanding of academic issues and concerns," Mackie said.

Hellie, 52, was attracted to Linfield for a number of reasons, including its reputation for academic excellence. He was intrigued by the college's successful undergraduate program with a liberal arts core coupled with programs that are professionally oriented.

"I'm very interested in connecting the liberal arts to the professions and I'm impressed by Linfield's success in that area," he added. "I am also pleased that Linfield programs include service to others. In some circles we describe this as the call to vocation, the call to serve others through our work as well as our volunteer activity. I am eager to emphasize the relationship between the philosophical values of the liberal arts and the practical value of professional programs."

Hellie is bright, intellectual and dedicated to students, say people who have known and worked with him for years. He has a quiet, calm persona that belies an energy and enthusiasm for his work. He is loyal, generous and patient, and has a great sense of humor. He's not afraid to laugh at himself.

"He believes strongly in the liberal arts," said Robert Larson, professor of theatre at Luther College and one of Hellie's former teachers. "He will be very

supportive of the professional programs and a very student-centered president. He understands the dynamics and culture of the place where he lives. He will be careful of Linfield and respect that culture.”

When Tom Hellie was growing up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, he had no illusions that he would become a farmer. Although he worked in the fields and tended the livestock, both he and his father knew his heart just wasn't in it.

“I was never very good at it,” he said with a laugh. “By the time I was in junior high, my dad and I agreed that my future didn't lie in farming.”

He wasn't sure what his future would hold until as a sophomore at tiny Cottonwood High School, he was cast in a play and discovered a love of theatre. Although he dreamed of fame on the stage, he quickly learned in college that that wasn't his destiny.

But doors did open for him at Luther College, where he worked in virtually every aspect of theatre, served as student body president, and sang and toured with the college's Nordic Choir.

“He was someone who had initiative and took on special projects,” said Larson. “He was not afraid to ask questions and pleasantly challenge faculty and other people. He kept you on your toes as a faculty member.”

By his sophomore year, Hellie realized there was a scholarly side to theatre and that he could teach, research and become involved in the literature and history of theatre. He soon set his sights on a Ph.D.

“I have very strong multidisciplinary interests – I'm interested in a lot of things,” Hellie said recently. “I became very interested in theatrical history, theory and literature as well as performance. In graduate school I took so many American history courses that I almost qualified for a master's degree in history; I was fascinated by how plays and theatres might reflect and shape the society in which they occur.”

Hellie said his own liberal arts education helped him adapt to different situations and circumstances. He learned to be sensitive to other cultures and perspectives and to think on his feet.

“When I was an undergraduate, we were asking big questions about what matters in life, we were challenged to think about what we stood for, who we were and what we were called to do,” he said. “My education didn't always give me answers, but it helped me identify and articulate the questions. It enriched my life in many ways.”

The Thomas L. Hellie File

- B.A. (magna cum laude), Theatre, Luther College; M.A., Theatre History, University of Missouri–Columbia; Ph.D., Theatre History, University of Missouri–Columbia
- Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Hiram College, 1980–89
- Program Officer, Vice President, Associated Colleges of the Midwest, 1989–99
- President and Executive Director, James S. Kemper Foundation, 1999–2006

Selected appointments and service:

- Trustee, U.S. Business School of Prague (Czech Republic) 2000–2005
- Trustee, Lenoir-Rhyne College (North Carolina) 1997–2006
- Chair, Lake View Homeless Shelter Task Force, 1999
- Vice President, Lakeview Lutheran Church, 1998–99

Hobbies: long-distance runner, avid football and baseball fan; enjoys theatre, cooking, wine, art, international travel; collects fountain pens and reads history and modern fiction.

Hellie is interested in how the liberal arts can challenge students today through internships, experiential learning and critical thinking, just as he was challenged as an undergraduate. He firmly believes prospective students and parents need a better understanding of how the liberal arts prepare students for the professional world.

“We've already seen that careers and professions are rapidly changing,” he added. “If someone is trained with a particular skill, that's well and good if it leads to a job. But if they have not learned how to learn and have not developed a broad set of skills, they could be in trouble as their field changes or disappears. Few careers move in straight lines, and the majority of people are not working in their original major field by the time they are 35 or 40.”

When Hellie joined the faculty at Hiram College in Ohio, he loved helping students learn and grow.

“I find it very satisfying to work with students and help them find what their interests are, to help fulfill their potential,” he said. A long-distance runner, he began training with the cross-country team and later

served as an assistant cross-country coach. He became an advocate for international education after taking students to London for a theatre course and he ultimately chaired a task force at Hiram that dealt with international studies.

Even as a tenured faculty member in both theatre and English at Hiram, Hellie found himself drawn to administration. He enjoyed the give and take of faculty governance and strategic planning. He was also curious about other disciplines and thought his many interests might be suited to an administrative position where he could work with people in different fields.

“I wanted to test myself, to see what else I might be able to do and to take on new challenges,” he said. “Whenever I’ve changed jobs, it’s been to take a risk, try something new and see if I can make a difference in a new place.”

The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, a consortium of 14 leading liberal arts colleges, provided just such a challenge.

There Hellie broadened his international experience by administering off-campus study programs at a dozen sites on four continents, including programs in Costa Rica, London and Florence. He created an innovative anthropology/biology program in Tanzania. He



Julie Olds

Olds looks forward to return to campus life

Julie Olds acknowledges that she lives somewhat anonymously in her local neighborhood in Chicago.

She anticipates that changing once she moves to McMinnville and her husband, Tom Hellie, begins his duties as Linfield College president.

“Our neighborhood has a small-town feel, and we like that kind of interaction,” she said. “We recognize people and notice changes. But I am used to people not recognizing me or really caring what I do. I guess that may change!”

Despite the celebrity that may come because of her new status, Olds is excited about moving to McMinnville and living on campus. She and Hellie lived adjacent to campus when he was a professor at Hiram College and she was working for a children’s theatre company.

“I loved living on campus,” she said. “I love the atmosphere and I look forward to getting involved in campus life.”

Since then, Olds has reinvented herself in several different careers. After completing her bachelor’s degree in theatre at Hiram and her master’s of fine arts at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, she worked as an actress in the Cleveland area for several years.

“When Tom got the position in Chicago, I decided it was time to get a real job,” she said with a laugh. “I had been a working actress in Cleveland, but once you start in a new town, you have to start from scratch.”

She took a sales job in a wallpaper and blinds store

and worked her way up, eventually managing several stores. Looking for a new challenge, she became director of housekeeping and management in a nursing home. Although she didn’t like the housekeeping and laundry part, she found she loved working with senior citizens. She moved into admissions and marketing and ultimately secured her license as a nursing home administrator. She’s now director of assisted living at a senior community and she loves the position.

“Some people have a knack with kids. I guess I have a knack with seniors,” she said. “I just love working with them. They have so many interesting stories, but they also have a different outlook on things.”

Olds doesn’t yet know if she will pursue that career once she moves to McMinnville, but she does plan to play an active role in the life of the Linfield and McMinnville communities.

Olds and Hellie will be accompanied to McMinnville by their gray-bearded cat, Falstaff, one of many cats they’ve had over the years, all named after characters from Shakespeare’s plays. Olds also vows to learn how to cook, once she arrives.

“Tom has been the main cook in our family, and he’s quite good,” she said. “I’ve always been the ‘throw the leftovers in a pot and add cheese’ sort of cook. This should be interesting, and I hope the smoke detectors in the house aren’t too sensitive!”

An avid runner, she has competed in seven marathons and may take a crack at next fall’s Portland Marathon. She, like her husband, loves to read – contemporary fiction and mystery novels – as well as trying new restaurants, attending theatre productions and gallery hopping. And she’s a big fan of blues-based rock and roll, so sounds of AC/DC or Aerosmith may be emanating from the president’s house.

– *Mardi Mileham*



Marvin Henberg, left, interim president, introduces Thomas L. Hellie and Julie Olds at a campus and community reception held during their visit to Linfield in January.

closed the consortium's program in Yugoslavia because of political unrest and established a new site at Palacky University in the Czech Republic. Not only did ACM students study there, but Hellie arranged for a number of the Czech faculty to study at the University of Chicago. In 1996 Palacky University awarded him its highest honor, the Pamětní Medal, for his contributions to Czech higher education.

"After the revolution, these universities were facing all kinds of problems," Hellie said. "Previously, intellectuals had to adhere to Communist doctrine in order to become professors. After the Soviet invasion in 1968, they had no familiarity with what was going on in the West. Through ACM, we were able to arrange for Czech faculty to meet with American professors, study at the University of Chicago and rebuild their academic resources."

Hellie also organized and led faculty development projects and conferences at ACM and dealt with diversity issues. He helped secure grant support to assist students of color in considering graduate school and academic careers.

Elizabeth Hayford, president of ACM and Hellie's boss for 10 years, said he will make a good president because of his excellent combination of organizational, managerial and personal skills.

"He doesn't impose his own ideas," she said. "He listens first, he offers his own perspective, he is genuinely consultative and open to suggestions and ideas. You can always be confident in his judgment. He is very careful and thorough and looks at all sides."

His personal skills are the most important, she said.

"He's a very good colleague at all levels," she added. "It became even more clear when he left ACM that everyone he worked with liked and respected him. They were very articulate about their appreciation."

As much as he loved his work at ACM, after 10 years Hellie was ready for a new challenge. He was attracted to the position of president and executive director of the James S. Kemper Foundation for two reasons. First, for the opportunity to award funds rather than request them, and second, for the Kemper Scholars Program, which would once again allow him to mentor and supervise students.

While at ACM, Hellie had interacted with deans, faculty and presidents from liberal arts colleges, learning how different colleges operate and gaining a perspective on effective and innovative programs. At

Kemper, he broadened those experiences by working with some of the nation's top undergraduate business schools and alongside senior corporate officers of Kemper Insurance. As executive director of the foundation, Hellie also frequently met with fundraisers and gained a strong understanding of what is effective and not effective in seeking funding for projects.

"I've had opportunities to interact with corporate and business leaders whom I would not have met in my academic role," he added. "It's given me a better appreciation, respect and understanding of the business sector. I hope that experience will make me more effective in representing Linfield to the outside world."

But his favorite part of the job was administering the Kemper Scholars Program for 80 undergraduates at 19 participating colleges. He served as a mentor to some of the scholars, a teaching opportunity he had missed since leaving Hiram.

Matt Huels, one of the students he mentored, has remained close to Hellie since completing the program. He said Hellie took an active interest in his development, both personally and professionally.

"He is a powerful listener and a compassionate person," Huels said. "He is a man of faith who works very hard at what he does. He will take an interest in the people he works with, and will take a particular interest in the students."

Huels and others who know Hellie well agree that his greatest asset is his ability to ask probing questions and listen to what people have to say.

"At Kemper, he was a leader who learned what people were doing and what they had to contribute," Huels said. "Then he was able to add his own flair and his own vision for the foundation. He would be the first to tell you it wasn't on his own – he had a great staff which got him up to speed. He doesn't take himself or his staff for granted."

Beth Tyler, who worked for Hellie at ACM and now serves as dean of students at Lake Forest College in Illinois, said he takes the time to learn about an organization and the people with whom he is working.

"He gives a tremendous amount of time to understanding the issues and the people he's working with," she said. "He very much recognizes the value of empowering the people who work with him and for him. I admire his humility. I think humility is one of the most important management traits, and he personifies that."

Hellie and his wife, Julie Olds, are not strangers to McMinnville. Before being approached about the Linfield presidency, they had vacationed in the area, pursuing their interest in wine. They were enchanted with McMinnville, Oregon and the Pacific Northwest and considered it as a possible place to retire.

They are excited about coming to McMinnville and about moving into the president's house. They rented a house adjacent to Hiram College when he taught there.

They look forward to taking an active role in the community as well as immersing themselves in the life of the college.

"I loved being part of the college community and I'm looking forward to returning to a residential college," Hellie said. "I'm excited to live next to students and near so many other people who are part of the community. And it's a great commute!"

They anticipate little difficulty adjusting to the community. Even though their address is Chicago, they consider themselves part of a small neighborhood community where they interact with local residents and business owners.

Although traditionally college presidents begin their term in the summer, Hellie opted to come in April to have a chance to meet this year's graduating seniors and to engage with the faculty prior to commencement. His initial goal is

to get to know the institution as well as he possibly can, including students, staff, faculty, trustees and alumni.

"To understand the institution, I need to do a lot of listening, and that's going to be important during my first few months," he said. "I need to hear from as many people as I can. Once I do that, I will be better prepared to enunciate goals and work with others to devise a plan to meet those goals."

"The last two presidents and everyone else at the college have dramatically strengthened the college and elevated its profile," Hellie said. "This is a great opportunity for any new college president. I just happen to be the lucky one."

– Mardi Mileham

Dr. Hellie is eager to hear from alumni and others about their Linfield experiences and their views about the college today. He can be contacted at newprez@linfield.edu.

If he receives an overwhelming response, he may be unable to personally respond to all messages.

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