

Luther College Remembered

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I am a proud “non-alum” of both Luther Junior College and the Academy. (In other words, I didn’t get to graduate from either because of the closures in ‘59 and ‘62.) I guess I am here as a representative for the last generation of “Lutherites”!

Isn’t it amazing how one moving experience can wake you up to see how God has blessed you through the people and events you experience in your life? Such was my first Lutherfest in 2009—and again in 2011 when my family (the Julius and Vera Johnson family) were the honorees! And again in 2013, in the sharing of Luther memories, there came the announcement of the plan to formally launch the campaign to create “the Luther College of the Liberal Arts” as a vital part of Midland University.

What a marvelous history we all share because of a handful of Christians back in 1883 that had a vision that was Luther College and is now a part of Midland University. Many of us here today still remember with deep sadness Luther’s last commencement exercises! (I missed a portion of my twin brother’s graduation exercises because it was so emotional that I had to leave the gym). Wow, was I ever upset with Dr. Reuben Swanson, the Augustana Synod, and Midland! But, thankfully, Midland embraced the Luther students and faculty back then, just as they did the Dana College students several years ago. We “Lutherites” at least had some closure by being able to say farewell to our classmates and campus—Dana students didn’t! But now look what Midland has done for us all! It helped transition students into the Midland family, created “Lutherfest” for Luther Alumni, and now has established the creation of the Luther College of the Liberal Arts. What a marvelous way to keep the history of Luther alive for generations to come!

I continue to be amazed with the spirit of all the Luther Alumni! At Lutherfest 2009 an alum’s husband was watching the large group of Lutherites assembled and asked, “What is it about Luther that brings all these people back like this? There are more people here at this reunion than there are at reunions from schools with 3 to 5 times as many alumni?” I shared a few stories with him, and later, on my drive back to Montana, this thought hit me! Maybe the words of the Alma Mater answer it—“faith guides our way”—“the cross is the light through dark days and bright”—“for in Christ Thou has anchored Thy name.” In everything Luther was Christ-centered! It was interesting to read the responses to the 2009 survey question, “What were your favorite memories?” The majority of the answers included “Bible studies in the dorms,” “attending chapel,” and even the Sunday walks with classmates to Bethlehem. All these had special memories and meaning!

I have been asked to reflect on how Luther and its faculty and staff have impacted my life, my faith, and my vocational involvements after leaving Luther. My faith and trust in the

Lord is rooted deep in my Swedish ancestry, my strong faith-based family upbringing, my Nebraska roots, and both my Luther and Midland affiliations.

When the merger of Luther into Midland took place, God's blessings continued. My parents and I were welcomed into the Midland family along with the V.E. Johnson family. My parents managed the student union, and I became secretary in student personnel for twelve years. V.E. taught business, and Aina was secretary to Dr. Sinkey. I obtained my BA degree as a non-traditional student and finally graduated from Midland in 1972. After graduation I accepted a position with Immanuel Mental Health and was the office manager, intake case worker and therapist for 10 years. I left the mental health field to take on my own personal patient in 1981 (my husband, Leon), and we subsequently moved to Montana where we still enjoy working with all of our employees in "our family" of community banks in Montana and Wyoming. Nebraska is home to both of us, and we both treasure our roots, friends, and memories.

The V.E and Aina Johnson family has always been special in my life without my even realizing it until Lutherfest 2009. I was 13 when we moved from Holdrege to Wahoo in 1956, and right then the only thing that mattered to me was finding a friend, Carol. V.E. was just Carol's Dad, Aina was another 'mom' and, of course, we had to put up with Verner, Yvonne, Grace, Vernal, and even oldest brother Carl. I just grew up with them. They were good people, and that was that! But, historically, the impact of V.E.'s faith-based dedication, ingenuity, tenacity, and love for Luther and its students has been enormous to say the least. I am sure that all Luther students present tonight knew V.E. and probably have a few stories to tell themselves. Truly, V.E. did not miss his calling!

He graduated from Augustana in 1928 and moved to Wahoo to become Luther's Business Manager and Treasurer for the next thirty three years. He was a promoter, a jack of all trades, and a master of all! At Luther he recruited students, taught business courses, would trade a steer, a pig, eggs, and milk for tuition. He even started a food bank for the college kitchen. He implemented a "work in exchange for tuition and/or board and room" program. My brother was one of many recipients back in 1949 of the "work for board and room" concept.

I was amazed at the list of community organizations, board memberships, and other civic activities V.E. was involved in. As Public Relations Director he organized choir tours to both coasts, pursued donations and fund raisers, including Luther's Science Hall/Gymnasium and the Hanson/ Eastman School of Music. He arranged Lyceum programs and, together with students, planned the Luther Youth Leadership Conference on campus for over ten years. He also served as interim pastors at 30 some congregations during the summer and served on numerous community boards, worked with the Boy Scouts, served on church boards, was Treasurer and President of the Nebraska Conference of Lutheran Brotherhood, and served on church mission boards, Bethpage Mission in Axtell and Augustana Seminary in Rock Island, just to name a few. He even taught swimming at Camp Covenant Cedars Bible Camp! Now how diverse can one person get! V.E. was for sure reaping the "harvest" in all areas of his life!

Leon and I are pleased that we committed ourselves to the “the Luther College of the Liberal Arts.” A Julius and Vera Johnson Family Perpetual Scholarship was established by the Johnson/Bartek families at Lutherfest 2011 and will now be under the umbrella of the Luther College of the Liberal Arts. We have also pledged and established a perpetual scholarship to be named The “V.E. and Aina Johnson Perpetual Scholarship” at Lutherfest 2013. We hope that others of you will be motivated to keep the Luther spirit alive and contribute to these scholarship funds or establish your own Luther scholarship memorials.

The Johnson family has certainly been blessed for many years because of our relationship to both Luther and Midland, and we are extremely grateful. We recognize what Luther and Midland have done for us, and now it is our turn to continue supporting Midland University with our time, talents, and prayers!

To God be the glory for the things he has done!

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