

MY STORY

# ANDRES LÓPEZ

#### WHEN HOPE BLOOMS IN BROKENNESS

In Guatemala City, Guatemala, there is a community known as La Florida. Its name means "the flowery place," which implies it is full of beauty. Sadly, this is not the case. Economic instability is common. Parents often resort to leaving their children in the care of third parties or unsupervised altogether to work long hours to provide for their families. This causes children to fall behind in school and become vulnerable

Alumni Profile

CLASS **2019** 

HOME

Guatemala City, Guatemala

CAREER

Iglesia Hebron & Florecer

**FAMILY** 

Wife, Carla, and three children: Estuardo, Genesis and Cristian

to the lure of gangs and other illicit activities. If they finish school, they often do not have opportunities for quality jobs or higher education.

Even so, there are many within La Florida who recognize what is possible for their community. They see the beauty that is already present and desire to cultivate and spread it. They believe that

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**Engaging Communities**The Ministry of Presence



Safe Church Ministry
Equipping congregations
in abuse awareness,
prevention and response



**Giving Tuesday**New Bibles for the Vos Chapel



How to Maximize Your Giving Stretch your dollars and reduce your taxes



A Professor's Authentic Identity Hybrid Workshop for Faculty of the African Diaspora



# Engaging Communities

# The Ministry of Presence

Faith formation is an integral part of our Kuyper College community.

We provide opportunities through weekly chapel services, prayer gatherings,
Bible studies, and other book studies to nurture this.

This semester, our community is engaging in a book study of *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods.* The author and pastor, Jonathan Brooks, is ministering in the Englewood neighborhood, one of Chicago's most dangerous neighborhoods and not too far from where Kuyper College (RBI/RBC) was founded in 1939.

Church Forsaken offers theological insights based on Jeremiah 29, and stories of Pastor Brooks' years of practicing the ministry of presence in the neighborhood where he was raised. There, God called him back to minister, even though it wasn't the place he desired to be.

Brooks presents seven practices to help us love our neighbor and our neighborhoods, as Jesus Christ demonstrated in his ministry context. While these practices may be simply stated, they are challenging to apply. Yet, we take confidence in knowing that love comes from God, and God showed His love among us by sending His one and only Son into

the world that we might live through Him. Therefore, since God so loved us, we are called to love one another (1 John 4:7-11).

Engaging in neighborhoods and the ministry of presence can be something we do as individuals and as a community. A few years ago, we set a strategic priority to develop Community Presence and partnership opportunities in locations within the urban area of Grand Rapids. There, students and faculty can establish meaningful presence and relationships with others as we pursue our mission. Since then, we've been focusing our engagement in the Madison Square community, partnering with other nonprofit and for-profit organizations looking to launch our WorkPlace Partnership program. We realize that it is essential for us to put into practice what we're learning from Brooks as we work together for the flourishing of the community.

Our cover story, "When Hope Blooms in Brokenness," describes how Andres López



practices the ministry of presence within the La Florida community in Guatemala City, Guatemala. Andres' story is similar to Pastor Brooks'. He also grew up in a neighborhood to which he returned to engage in ministry. Believing the way to show Christ's love to his neighbors is by establishing presence within them, Andres founded Florecer, a ministry whose name means "to flourish." Through it, he is committed to serving "the most forgotten members of La Florida in a new way" so they may bloom, and ultimately, God will be glorified.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Grateful to serve,

Dr. Patricia R. Harris

#### Kuyper Community Notes

#### Births

**Aubrey (Boomsma) Smith** (2016) and Alex Smith welcomed Owen Menzo James Smith home on December 16, 2021.

#### Professional Development

**Vickie (VanSetten) Ruiter** (1980) is retiring in May from teaching at Central Valley Christian School in Visalia, California.

**Ken Kruithoff** (2007) and **Kristi (Lyman) Kruithoff** (2007) celebrated the adoption of Juliette Megan and Seth Benjamin on January 14, 2022.

**Rebecca Laarman** (2000) started work as Academic Counselor at Chiang Rai International Christian School in Chaing Rai, Thailand. Michael Wolters and **Trisha (Avink) Wolters** (2013) welcomed Liam Michael home on March 3, 2022.

Naomi (Girwarnauth) Sponable (2004) is the new K-12 Principal at Ellsworth Community School in Ellsworth, Michigan.

# Making Church Safer

#### KUYPER GRAD CONFRONTS ABUSE IN THE CHURCH

As stories of abuse and brokenness within the church continue to emerge, one Kuyper College grad is working toward justice and prevention. Eric Kas ('12) serves the Christian Reformed Church of North America as a Safe Church Ministry consultant. The Safe Church Ministry is an initiative by the CRC that aims to equip congregations in abuse awareness, prevention and response. "I believe that abuse affects us all, both in major, visible ways and in unaccountable, invisible ways, as we all cope with a world that is not the way it is supposed to be," Eric said. Safe Church's goal is to help build spiritual communities where the value of each person is honored and where they are able to worship and grow free from abuse.

In Eric's role with Safe Church, he consults with congregations, providing assistance and support when abuse or allegations of abuse

arise. He also coaches and provides resources that educate churches and ministries in restorative practices. In doing so, he works alongside other Safe Church coordinators and teams across the CRC. "When someone comes forward with a disclosure or allegation of abuse, we have what's called the advisory panel process. Five people listen to both the claimant of abuse and also the person who is being accused. They give a report to the council so they can then make a decision," he said.

Dealing with abuse after it has occurred is just one part of the work that Safe Church does, however. "We try to focus on prevention," Eric noted. One important way this is accomplished is through webinars and YouTube videos. Safe Church uses these methods to discuss issues such as dynamics of power and having a trauma-informed



understanding of the church. "I think that, if church leaders better understood trauma, it would drastically change how churches operate and help create safe spaces for every person, no matter what their story is," he said.

Eric believes that preventing and dealing justly with abuse is central to the message of the Gospel and the life of the church.

# Giving Tuesday NEW BIBLES FOR THE VOS CHAPEL

On Tuesday, February 8, a special service was held in the Vos Chapel at Kuyper College. The Kuyper community came together to observe the dedication of new Bibles recently acquired for the chapel through this year's Giving Tuesday fundraising campaign. This gathering was a unique opportunity for the Kuyper community to honor its generous supporters and the contributions they make to the life of the College. Most importantly, it was an occasion to revisit the story of Scripture and think about Kuyper's place within God's work in His good world.

For those unfamiliar with Giving Tuesday, it is a worldwide movement that focuses on unleashing radical generosity's power to impact the world positively. The central concept is that everyone has something valuable to give; every act of generosity counts, no matter how small it is. Giving Tuesday began in 2012 as a simple idea: set aside a day to encourage people to do good. Since then, it has grown into an independent non-profit organization as well as a year-round, global mobilization that inspires hundreds of millions to give money, collaborate, and celebrate generosity. The central organization exists to inspire and equip others, but any institution can engineer its own Giving Tuesday campaign.

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#### **Events**

**Kuyper College Spring Celebration Gala** April 25 | Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

Commencement

April 29 | Kuyper College

Kuyper College International Golf Scramble

August 22 | Muskegon Country Club

As alumni, we invite you to get involved and stay in touch by calling the Alumni Office at 877.229.0941 or sending us an email to alumni@kuyper.edu with your contact information or the most recent news about you.

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God is present among them, actively working toward transformation, and they joyfully participate in His redemptive work. Andres López' family is part of the effort to help their community live up to its name.

Andres was an adolescent when his family became involved with the community of La Florida. His parents began leading a church there called Iglesia Hebron. "I remember I was a preteen when we moved into this new church, which my parents have now pastored for almost 20 years," he recalled. Andres' father had been the youth ministry leader at the family's previous church, and they soon began a program for the young people of Iglesia Hebron. "We decided to invest a lot of energy into the youth group, or youth ministry, because it was pretty much nonexistent at that point," Andres added.

They soon discovered that they would need to build their youth program from the ground up. "We started trying out lots of different things. Pretty soon, I started leading alongside my dad, which was a strange experience as I wasn't much older than the other kids. That was my first exposure to working in youth ministry," Andres said. The López family eventually partnered with the parachurch organization Word of Life, which supports local churches worldwide seeking to bolster their youth programs and reach young people for Christ. "We were trying to create something so that other kids would be attracted to the program. We did a bunch of different activities in the community, trying to reach out. Now, the number of kids stays pretty consistent. It feels more like a church instead of just a couple of families meeting together," Andres said.

As their fledgling church and youth program became more established, the López family began to notice a toxic element within the churches of La Florida. "Churches there were very invested, but only within their own four walls," Andres recalled. "We started to notice that we were participating in that as well. Sure, we were glad if people grew in their Christian life, but really, we were building our program." They found that they had become so caught up in bolstering participation numbers that they had lost sight of their true goal: bringing the love of Christ to their neighbors.



A typical day at Florecer with students and tutor.



Flyers are used to promote Florecer's free community educational program "School Reinforcement—1st to 6th Grade."

Something desperately needed to change, so Andres' parents began taking frequent walks throughout the community, getting to know it in a way they hadn't before. They noticed that, though there were many churches, little real change was taking place. "This is a very broken community. It's considered a Red Zone, which means that there's a lot of violence, trafficking of people and drugs, homelessness, prostitution, addiction, alcoholism and similar things," Andres noted.

As they talked with their neighbors, particularly the children, they saw the pain and brokenness that persisted among them. After some time, Iglesia Hebron and the López family woke up to the reality that they had become distant and disconnected from the people they sought to serve. Andres recalled his parents saying, "We have to do something. We can't just be a Sunday services only church anymore. We have to start doing other things."

After graduating from high school in 2009, Andres spent the next few years pursuing a career in dentistry before realizing that God was calling him to ministry. When youth ministry was recommended to him, Andres was intrigued. "I began to think about going the theology and youth ministry route instead of continuing dentistry school," he recalled. Shortly thereafter he experienced what felt to him like divine providence. "Carla Landhuis, an American doing mission work in my parents' church and who would later become my girlfriend and then my wife, told me about Kuyper."

He enrolled at Kuyper, and after graduating with a Ministry Leadership degree, Andres brought what he calls "the knowledge and skills I was given there to really make a difference" back to Guatemala and La Florida. Both he and Carla soon became part of a group effort, along with other members of his parents' church, to serve the most forgotten members of La Florida in a new way.

"As the church began to welcome children and youth more openly, we began to notice some specific needs," Andres said. "School reinforcement and vocational training were the most pressing. Even before I went to Kuyper, we dreamt of creating a program to meet these needs. But back then, none of us had the experience or training in anything like that." The members of Iglesia Hebron worked together, with Andres contributing the new skills and knowledge he gained at Kuyper, to create an organization they would eventually name Florecer, a word that means "to flourish."

Andres and his partners saw that many of La Florida's problems stemmed from a cynical mindset regarding education. Children in the community lacked a system of accountability for their learning, since their parents worked long hours. So, Florecer sought to create opportunities for positive, lasting life habits. Florecer's goal from the start was to prevent kids from falling behind in school or dropping out when it became too difficult. "We created a safe place where they can escape their reality and be built up by receiving positive reinforcement in many areas, including their education," said Andres.

Florecer works toward this goal through their established Vocational English Training Program and the School Reinforcement Program. The Vocational Program helps teens and young adults learn and grow in their English language skills. "We believe that, if they learn English, they'll have more and better work opportunities, especially when higher education is not an option," Andres said. "If you know English, it weighs in your favor and makes you more marketable."

The School Reinforcement Program works with children in first through sixth grades. It provides them with tutoring and accountability in their schoolwork as well as a safe and encouraging environment in which to do it. "Students meet in groups of six for two hours at a time. In addition, each student has two 2-hour sessions each week with a tutor, focusing on their own targeted needs," Andres said. "During these meetings and sessions, we are equipping the kids with skills to help them flourish, while always reminding them of their value as God's children."

Though Florecer is still a young ministry, they have already begun to see the fruits of their labor. Andres recalled a young boy named Manassas, who was struggling when he came into the School Reinforcement Program. "He had been held back a couple times in school. He's in fourth, going into fifth grade, but he should be going into seventh grade," he said. However, as he participated in the School Reinforcement Program, things started to change. "He began to finish all his assignments and homework early. He even started helping the tutors with the other kids and their homework," Andres said. Manassas' story shows that Florecer is already creating a safe space for children to be accepted, validated and seen as individuals.

One joyous step Andres and Carla took in June of 2021 was the adoption of three siblings, Estuardo 7, Cristian 5, and Genesis 4. "We entered into the adoption system in early 2020 and enlisted for a group of siblings of up to three children," said Andres. "We've been blessed by God once more who entrusted us with three beautiful children of our own to bring up to know and love Him."



Carla López teaching in Florecer's Vocational English Training Program.

Together with Carla and other partners, Andres has big dreams for the future of Florecer. Recently, they've expanded their ministry to meet other urgent needs in La Florida. "Another group of marginalized people we see is the elderly," Andres observed. "Just to get vaccinated for COVID-19, they encounter many barriers because most don't know how to use the technology needed to register." To bridge this gap in technological ability, Florecer plans to create classes that teach basic skills, such as typing, using Microsoft Office, or sending and receiving emails. "Even if it's just one or two people at a time, it would make a big difference. We just can't sit still and do nothing," Andres said.

It would be easy to approach this work with a patronizing attitude, but Florecer has consciously chosen to take a different path. "We want to teach how to do, rather than continuing to do things for others. We want to give people the tools to do it for themselves," said Andres. "Our main goal is to focus on those who have been forgotten in our community. We want to create opportunities for those who don't have much of a voice and to stand up for those who can't do it for themselves." By empowering the marginalized in their community, Florecer is striving to create something that will grow. The hope is that each person they invest in will, in turn, pay it forward to those around them, and change will spread like seeds on a windy day.

Andres knows that with God all things are possible. So, they continue to work toward the growth and safety his community's name evokes, though it may be hard to envision right now. "We want to see the transformation of this place so that it actually lives up to that," he said.

Ultimately, everything Florecer does is for the glory of God. "We believe that our community can be a place where God's name is glorified," said Andres. "Because of this, we invest in those who are the least among us: children, teens, adults and the elderly. We work together so God's kingdom can become tangible in the lives of our neighbors. We want them to experience His transformation, His redemption, so then they can live it and help in the process of transforming our community."

### Maximize Your Giving

Whether shopping, investing or giving, you're always trying to get the most out of your money. To you, this just makes sense! If you're looking for even more ways to stretch your dollars, consider these smart, tax-wise tactics to support ministries close to your heart.

#### Give Appreciated Stock

If you've owned stock for at least a year, you can receive a double tax benefit by donating it to a ministry. Not only will you receive a tax deduction for the fair market value of the stock, but you'll also avoid paying capital gains tax.

#### Give Real Estate

If you have real estate that's increased in value and you no longer need it, consider gifting all or a portion of it prior to a sale. By doing so, you can bypass the capital gains tax and receive a charitable deduction.

#### Give From an IRA

If you are 70  $\frac{1}{2}$  or older, you can make tax-free distributions from your individual retirement account (IRA), up to a maximum of \$100,000 per year. These gifts count toward your annual required minimum distribution, and none of the IRA distributions will be included in your adjusted gross income.

# Give Farm Machinery and Commodities

Farmers can realize big tax savings by gifting machinery and commodities such as grains, soybeans, fruit and even livestock before they are sold. You'll reduce your taxable income, and you may be able to deduct the production costs.

#### Make a Life Income Gift

Life income gifts are great solutions if you wish to give with impact but are concerned about having enough to meet your family's needs. You can give cash or other property and receive steady income for the rest or your life or for a set number of years. The remainder of the gift will go to support your favorite ministries.

To learn more about other giving or estate planning options, please contact the Kuyper Advancement Office at (616) 988-3662 or email advancement@kuyper.edu.

# In My Words

#### FROM DOUBT TO CONFIRMATION

In September of 2015, I stepped foot onto Kuyper's campus to start my college education. During what I now call "my first round at Kuyper," I experienced excitement as I met peers who felt similar calls to ministry as



Kat Brouwers
Coordinator of
Student Success

well as an opportunity to further their education in a way that would allow them to lead more effective ministries. Those next four years unfolded in ways I never would have expected. They were marked with new relationships, discipleship, personal development and learning, as well as lots of laughter. However, I cannot ignore the tests that also came as I learned the importance of establishing healthy boundaries as well as consistent selfcare.

After graduation I took the plunge into full-time camp ministry. It was a desire that went back to

when I was 6 years old. My training at Kuyper helped me in many ways as I developed a curriculum for high school students, hosted guest groups and facilitated various retreats. However, even though I loved my job, something was missing.

The pandemic came and camps were closed. Without a job I was left wondering what was next. I bounced around between some different jobs where my gifts, talents and training were not used. I struggled questioning my value as a leader as well as my calling.

Looking back, I now see God's hand in all of this. In February of 2021 I married my best friend Will, also a Kuyper graduate, in a small, intimate ceremony in the Vos Chapel. We moved to the south side of Grand Rapids as he started seminary. The community we live in has welcomed us. In true Christian fashion we share meals, have spontaneous dinners in the backyard and even dog sit.

Soon after, I was invited to apply for the student development position at Kuyper. In doing so I was somewhat anxious. I wanted to be seen for my gifts and talents developed since graduation, not as a college student. I should not have worried. Not only was I welcomed with open arms, but I was also seen for who I am. In reality, my time at Kuyper as a student had equipped me to return as a staff member.

Reflecting on the last seven months, I smile that I ever doubted that returning to a community where I was known, loved and valued for who I am was possible. As I provide support to the KuyperWorks program and help implement the Student Success Program across campus, I know what I do is of value.

"In My Words" is a feature of the Kuyper College News highlighting first-person stories by Kuyper College faculty and staff.

# A Professor's **Authentic Identity**

Dr. Richelle White knows the power of authenticity in the realm of education. She has spent many years teaching young people, both within and outside of classroom settings, and knows that showing up as her true self is part of what makes her such a good educator. "I can only be my best self by being my authentic self," she said. In order to nourish her own sense of identity as a Black woman in the field of academia, she has decided to participate in the 2022 Hybrid Workshop for Faculty of the African Diaspora, hosted by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion.

This particular workshop invites mid-career colleagues of the African Diaspora to discuss the themes of identity and community and how these are relevant to their work. The participants include 14 higher education faculty members from institutions all across the United States as well as two facilitators. "There are seven virtual workshops, and then we will meet in person at the Wabash Center in July," Dr. White said. "We will be looking at and talking about issues of identity and community as it pertains to teaching, scholarship and service, or the work that professors tend to be engaged in." Sessions will include small and full group discussions as well as time for socializing, personal and community discovery, relaxation, restoration, exercise, meditation and shared meals.

This is not the first time that Dr. White has participated in the programming of the Wabash Center. She has also been a part of a digital salon hosted by the organization designed to provide opportunities for faculty members to gather virtually and discuss learning and teaching resources for a post-pandemic world. Her particular cohort is the Mid-Career African American Faculty Group. "We talk about forming a sense of belonging and finding our authentic voice," she said. "It's such a rich experience because we come from so many different



places and fields of study." This work has created a space for life-giving understanding and community among Black scholars.

Dr. White is looking forward to more stimulating conversations with colleagues about how to form community by being their authentic selves. "I am anticipating that these conversations will continue to heighten what I already know, what I've already done, and what I've already experienced," she said. "It will also give me an opportunity to see new ways that being authentic can take shape in a post-COVID context. We're not just living in the world of a disease pandemic, but of a racism pandemic as well, and who I was before the pandemic is not who I am now." She foresees that these discussions will help her discover new ways in which she can embody her own identity in our changed world.

It was her passion for her work that prompted Dr. White to take part in the 2022 Workshop. "I love teaching and learning, so I take any opportunity I can to enrich myself in those areas," Dr. White said. "So, when the Wabash Center advertised this workshop, I applied and was accepted." She is confident that doing this kind of inner work will help her to face any challenge. "It's taken me time to find the authentic me in the classroom. Now that I've found her, she's not going to retreat, no matter what situation may come her way," she said.

>> GIVING TUESDAY from Page 3



Giving Tuesday's goal to create a more just and generous world inspired Kuyper College to join the movement. "We wanted Scripture to be as accessible as possible

for students," said Lisa Rusticus, Kuyper's annual fund and alumni relations manager.

So the decision was made to focus on raising funds for Bibles in an updated version to help chapel services go more smoothly. For example, all text and page numbers would match by having the identical copy of the Bible in the pews as at the pulpit. This way, a speaker would only need to call out a page number for attendees to find the text. In addition, Lisa added, "It helps students who

come into Kuyper without a knowledge of how to use a Bible to feel comfortable and part of the community."

Each person was given a new Bible during the dedication service as they entered the chapel to place in a pew. Then, all in attendance commemorated the occasion by praying, singing, and reading Scripture together. Each part of the service reinforced the idea that followers of the living God are part of His grand story, able to partner with Him as He works out redemption in His world.

"Initially, we intended to raise enough funds to purchase twohundred Bibles for the pews and a pulpit Bible," said Rusticus. "Fortunately, through the generosity of donors, that objective was exceeded. The extra funds will be used to make several updates to the Vos Chapel so that the Kuyper community can continue to gather there for many years to come."



#### Bringing God's Grace into Today's Culture

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#### STUDENTS TO WATCH

### Jaw Po Tha

My name is Jaw Po Tha, and I will be graduating from Kuyper College in May of 2022, majoring in ministry leadership and Bible and theology. My parents are part of the Karen ethnic group, from a small village in Myanmar. They fled to Mae Hong Son, Thailand, to escape a war, and I was born there. When I was around 1 or 2 years old, my family moved to a refugee camp. My mother died when I was 5, and my father left me after that, so I don't have many memories of either of them. I do remember that my family was Buddhist and that my mother wanted me to become a monk, but I never did.

Growing up without parents was hard for me. I have one older brother, and we didn't get along as children. After our mother died, we were separated. He went to live with one relative, and I went to live with an aunt. During my teenage years, I was depressed and miserable. Growing up in a refugee camp meant living in extreme poverty. I worried that I would be judged for not having parents or nice clothes, so I stopped going to school at age 9. I spent most of my time fishing and helping people cross the river in my friend's old boat, but I made very little money. I was without freedom, hope or access to a good education.

In 2009, however, everything changed. God created the opportunity for my aunt's family and I to come to the United States. My first year living in Grand Rapids was overwhelming. I had never dreamed of living in a nice house, having lots of clothes and a table full of food, or the opportunity to go to school. It's still hard to explain how I feel, but I'm glad not to be in the refugee camp anymore.

I attended Union High School and met the Campus Life director there, who kept inviting me to join. I didn't want anything to do with Jesus or Christianity at the time because I had dreams of becoming a businessman and making money to support my poor family. I finally agreed to come to Bible Club because there would be free pizza, and I was really hungry that day. I became curious about Christianity and eventually gave my life to Christ. Over the next few years, I became very

involved with Campus Life and met several amazing Christians who mentored and discipled me.

As I grew in my faith, I began to get a vision for bringing the Gospel back to Myanmar. I knew I needed more training, so I enrolled in the Bridge Street Mission School. When I graduated, my mentor encouraged me to check out Kuyper College, and I loved it. I decided to apply and was so excited when I got accepted. Out of all the schools I could have applied to, Kuyper was my first and only



choice because I felt like it was where God wanted me to be.

Kuyper is a great school for people like me who want to know God and make Him known. If I could go back and do it all over again, I would still choose to come here. I love all my professors, and I appreciate their passion and wisdom. I received a lot of grace from them and don't know if I could have made it this far without that. Dr. White and Dr. Hoogeboom, in particular, pray for me and encourage me on a personal level.

Here at Kuyper, I have received all the help that I need. Over the years, I have made many good friends who help and encourage me. I have received a lot of grace from my professors. God has blessed me with financial aid and scholarships so I can afford to study here. I have also found a community that encourages me to use my gifts and help others to come to know Christ. Kuyper has taught me that, with friends and community, we can accomplish great things for God's glory.

I know God is preparing me for something great. After graduation, I hope to use all that I have learned to bring the Gospel back home to Myanmar and Thailand. I can't wait to see what He will do with my life.