

KUYPER

College News

A Publication for Alumni & Friends



Troy Bierma in the library at the Hermitage.

MY STORY

TROY BIERMA

Finding Rest

To get to the Hermitage, the retreat center in Three Rivers, Mich., that Kuyper graduate Troy Bierma and his wife Faith run, one can take Bent Road to Dutch Settlement Road.

For Bierma, who grew up in the Dutch settlement of Sioux Center, Iowa, and admits to a long period of not bending to God's will prior to his current circumstances, the two roads provide a good reminder of where he's been and where he's going.

And he credits Kuyper in large part for what has been a significant transformation, though he is quick to add that sanctification is an ongoing process.

"I'm not a finished product," he says with a broad smile as he sits at a picnic table on a sunny spring afternoon at the Hermitage.

Still, he admitted, three decades ago he couldn't have imagined someday running a center for spiritual formation. As a high school student at Western Christian High School in Hull, Iowa, he knew Kuyper as

>> See **BIERMA**, Page 4

Inside this Issue

PAGE

02

Nourishment for Body and Soul

Planning and putting into practice tangible ways to help students, staff and faculty experience well-being.

PAGE

03

Kuyper Commencement

"Go and shine Christ's light boldly into every square inch of this world, doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly as you serve God and others."

PAGE

06

Athletics Update

Gym floor gets spruced up.

PAGE

07

Business Pitches

Two teams from an entrepreneurship course were selected to be part of a West Michigan business pitch competition.

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Nourishment for Body and Soul

On a summer evening, I relish sitting in a chair at the end of our dock reading a book, watching a loon catch a fish or seeing a mother duck gently leading her ducklings across the lake. I take delight and find repose in God's good gifts of nature, reflection and quietude. These nourish my body and soul.

We are all aware that with the challenges we've endured these past few years, finding nourishment and experiencing well-being are not to be taken for granted. And, while gazing over the beauty of a lake or reading a good book or visiting a retreat center may provide refreshment to our body, mind and soul, these may not fully satisfy our deepest needs.

Data in a recent research study by the Kaiser Family Foundation states that 50 percent of young adults (ages 18-24) reported anxiety and depression symptoms in 2023. The 2023 Trends Report by the Higher Learning Commission, our regional accreditor, lists the number-one trend as student mental health and includes these six items of note:

- Post-pandemic stress is exacerbating the emotional well-being of students
- Colleges are focusing more on the mental health needs of students
- Colleges realize more resources are needed to meet these demands
- Higher education is witnessing a growing need for trauma-informed leaders
- Faculty capacity is stretched as students turn to them as "first responders"

- Mental health needs are apparent among college employees, which can impact students

This is an important assessment of the reality of many college-aged students and the demands on the faculty and staff who serve them well. This summer, we are earnestly planning and putting into practice some tangible ways to help our students, staff and faculty experience well-being, such as:

- Weekly gatherings for Scripture reading, prayer and sharing a meal
- Faculty reading of *Self Care for Educators: Soul-Nourishing Practices to Promote Wellbeing*
- Partnering with 3rdchair, a group of Christian counselors
- Redesigning our faith formation and service opportunities
- Planning wellness activities for this coming academic year
- Welcoming our new director of student success
- Taking time for rest and refreshment

Scripture has much to say about how God cares for each of us in whatever our circumstances. May He grant us wisdom



"We are all aware that with the challenges we've endured these past few years, finding nourishment and experiencing well-being are not to be taken for granted."

and strength, and may we offer Him the words of Psalm 103:

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all His benefits— who forgives all your sins, and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Grateful to serve,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patti".

Dr. Patricia R. Harris
President

Kuyper Celebrates its 84th Commencement

Jessica Kuncaitis asked the Class of 2023 a simple question as graduates gathered with family and friends in late April for the College's 84th Commencement.

"Now what," she said with a smile. "Some of you know exactly what you're going to do when you leave here tonight, and some of you don't know what you're going to have for dinner tonight."

She noted that after graduating from Kuyper in 2011 with a degree in religious education, she became a successful hair stylist, married, had three children and started a nonprofit organization.

All the while, she felt God calling her to become a pastor, and eventually she could ignore her call no longer. She enrolled in Kuyper's Master of Ministry program, was ordained and now serves as pastor of outreach and discipleship at inSpirit Church in Byron Center.

Reflecting on her season of uncertainty, Kuncaitis reminded the class of 2023, "What is impossible on Earth is possible with God. He has a plan for your life and will bring it to completion, even if you might not be able to see how right away."

That theme of providence began already at Commencement practice where a crew of familiar Kuyper faces — President Patricia Harris; Dr. Andrea Fryling, registrar; Dr. Tim Detwiler, academic dean; Alyssa Blom, executive assistant to the president; and Lisa Rusticus, manager of the annual fund and alumni relations — walked the soon-to-be graduates through what the ceremony would look and feel like.

After that, it was time for the Commencement luncheon, including remarks by two students and by longtime professor Dr. Lisa Hoogeboom, who is transitioning from full-time to adjunct status.

Graduating senior Glenn Cloud recalled his early days on campus and some of the difficulties he had adjusting to the



Kuyper celebrated its 84th Commencement in late April.

"Go and shine Christ's light boldly into every square inch of this world, doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly as you serve God and others. Congratulations, class of 2023!"

academic pace of college. "But I began to prioritize homework and grades, and I grew in ways I didn't think I could achieve in high school," he said. Kuyper classes made a life-changing impact, he added, and he learned to love wisdom and better understand what it might mean to minister in a post-modern world.

Classmate Maddie Zeeryp sounded similar notes. "I have experienced so much growth here," she said. "I have grown in my competencies as a social worker, my internship experiences have taught me how to interact with my clients, I have grown spiritually with a deeper understanding of who God is, and everything has pointed me back to the true vine, so I can now go out and bear much fruit."

Dr. Hoogeboom spoke movingly about her time as a student, as the mother of three Kuyper alumni and her years as a professor.

"Graduates, we have been blessed by this place, a place that encourages us to passionately love people," she said. "We have been steeped in the Bible here and surrounded by people who love God, whose hearts hurt for the world and who just want to serve in some way. What you have had here is a precious experience you can share with others."

A few hours later, the Class of 2023 heard similar words from President Harris at the ceremony.

"There are 84 years of alumni just like you who are shining Christ's light brightly into every corner of this world," she said. "You are surrounded by a whole cloud of witnesses, so stay encouraged. Go and shine Christ's light boldly into every square inch of this world, doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly as you serve God and others. Congratulations, class of 2023!"

>>**BIERMA** from Page 1

the alma mater of his father but not an option for him.

“I was not much of a student in high school,” he said. “I was on another plane of existence, not really walking with the Lord. In fact, my walk with the Lord weakened a lot during high school, and I increasingly became more involved in the party scene.”

Having barely graduated from high school, and with little direction in his life, Bierma planned to work for a couple of years. After that he figured he'd get serious about life, go to college, then law school, work with his dad and eventually take over his practice.

Conversations with spiritual wanderers

God had other ideas, Bierma said.

He had been working on his uncle's farm throughout high school, and after graduation, he spent a year or so in his hometown, building chicken, turkey and hog confinements around the Sioux Center area. He then began a series of adventures that took him to the Netherlands (to work in an uncle's brother's greenhouse) and to the bush of Western Australia (to work on a sheep and wheat ranch). Then came time in Australia and New Zealand (for a variety of adventures, including bungee jumping, skydiving, scuba diving, whitewater rafting and more).

But all the while, he said, God was nudging him, bending him.



Troy Bierma on the grounds of the Hermitage.

“Conversations in the evenings with wandering travelers who were also spiritual wanderers kept my heart turning and yearning,” he said. “I found myself trying to convey to my fellow wanderers that there was more to life than these experiences, but I also knew that I needed to learn why I was so sure that Christianity was the true religion.”

Kuyper's strong tradition as a Bible college finally convinced him to attend the school of his father. It was a life-changing decision.

“I wanted to learn the Bible and learn about what I believe,” he said. “I wanted to know what the difference was between what I believed and the spiritual wanderers and other religionists that I encountered.”

He chuckled as he recalled coming to campus for the first time.

“I came to Kuyper expecting that I was only going to be studying the Bible directly, and to my dismay, at the time, I was required to take other courses as well, such as psychology, English and math,” he said.

Floored by God's grace

His gratitude for those courses came later, he added, but it definitely came, including in recent years. He also is eternally grateful that he found what he had been looking for in choosing a Bible college.

“I was blown away by the things I had missed growing up,” he said. “I was floored by God's grace, His choice to love and save me, and in retrospect, that God had led me to Kuyper more than I had chosen it for myself. God brought me there to humble me with His grace and to prepare me for ministering that grace to others.”

Bierma had been on a worldwide journey before landing in Three Rivers and at the Hermitage in the summer of 2022 to take on the center's directorship.

After Kuyper, he earned an MDiv at Calvin Seminary and did an additional master's degree, a ThM, to prepare for possible work abroad. He met Faith, a Calvin University nursing graduate, through an internship in the Philippines (where she grew up), and after graduation they moved to Bangladesh and then to Nepal where they worked with a good friend from Kuyper, Arbin Pokharel.

And the one-time hesitant high school student not only has two master's degrees,

Kuyper News and Events

Marriages

Ethan (2020) and **Bethany (Adkins) Hartman** (2020) were united in marriage on May 30, 2022.

Joyce (Vang) Her (2016) and Michael Her were united in marriage on September 26, 2020.

Grace (Norquist) Paige (2022) and Ben Paige were united in marriage on February 3, 2023.

Births

Will (2021) and **Kat (Reynhout) Brouwers** (2019) welcomed their daughter, Alice, on March 16, 2023.

Timothy and **Sylvia deWolde** (2014) welcomed their son, David Jason James, on August 22, 2022.

Professional Development

James and **Wendy (Robbins) Falkner** (1999) just opened their third Kilwins franchise with the latest in Traverse City joining existing shops in Mackinaw City and on Mackinac Island. Wendy reports that she started working at Kilwins Mackinac Island during the summers while attending Kuyper in the mid-1990s.



Yazzie, Faith, Troy and Priya Bierma (and Ricky).

he is also finishing a PhD through the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in a combination of ecology and theology called ecotheology.

“Ecotheology is becoming more common these days,” Bierma said. “For me, ecotheology was the culmination of life experiences with agriculture and nature in different countries along with the challenges for ministry and theology in many of these countries brought about by poverty and sacred/secular divides.”

A living laboratory at the Hermitage

Bierma said that ecotheology is also another example of how God has prepared him to serve, even in ways he didn’t recognize at the time.

“For many years, teaching theology seemed to be my calling,” he said. “Growing plants and trees seemed to be a side project or hobby. But theology and ecology collided

for me with increasing velocity while we were in Nepal as I was beginning to recognize that nature is God’s creation, we humans are of nature, and theologically, there is no escape from nature.”

At the Hermitage, Bierma has a living laboratory in which to explore both the philosophical work of his PhD and the practical ramifications of what it means to wrestle with theology and nature. The 65 acres of woods and prairies is also an ideal setting for ministry.

The property includes a main retreat house with a kitchen, dining room, bedrooms, an apartment, bathrooms and more, as well as a center with a chapel, meeting room, library, art gallery, guest rooms and bathrooms and three rustic cabins away from the main buildings.

“It’s an ideal location for rest, discernment, silence and solitude,” he said.

And yes, he added, he sees the humor in how he spent so much time running from God before finally finding his rest in Him and helping others find rest and hit the pause button.

In fact, he references Mark 6:31 where Jesus said to His followers that they should come with Him to a quiet place and get some rest.

With his arm around Ricky, the family’s dog from Nepal, Bierma said simply: “That verse now speaks so powerfully to me. This is a place of rest, and I hope God gives us the opportunity to be here for quite a while.”

Joyce (Vang) Her (2016) is a remote sourcing specialist for a nuclear power utility and involved in missions, including as a DJ for a sports ministry where she plays upbeat, up-to-date music that encourages and sharpens. She’s also planning a summer 2024 community outreach event.

Sam (Jansma) Sleeman (2019) is joining Cru as a full-time missionary, working with Athletes in Action at Michigan State University.

Karla Velis-Brito (2016) started a new position as director of SpringGR, a nonprofit that helps people start businesses in the West Michigan area.

Abbie Winter (2017) graduated from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School with an MA in Intercultural Studies.

Stay in touch. Call the Alumni Office (877.229.0941) or send us an email (alumni@kuyper.edu) with your latest news, updated contact information and more. We’d love to hear from you!



The floor in Kuyper’s gym was completely redone this past spring.

Kuyper Gym Gets Upgrades

Kuyper College students will have a renovated gymnasium to play in for the 2023-24 school year.

The 30-year-old venue got a much-needed facelift this spring, and the results are terrific.

Ray Thomas, director of campus operations, was part of a small committee that planned the improvements, including a new design for the gym floor, and he couldn’t be happier with the results.

“We wanted to upgrade the floor to represent what Kuyper College is all about,” he said. “And we wanted something that would stand out and look a little different than other gym floors in the area.”

Mission accomplished.

The new floor features black paint in the keys and along the sidelines and baseline. The area inside the three-point line is the original wood, a light oak or maple, Thomas said, and then the midcourt space is done in a black stain to create a washed look and a subtle contrast with the black paint. In the center of it all is a new Kuyper Cougar in purple, set against the light color of the original wood floor.

Thomas said recruits who have seen the new space have been impressed and are eager to play on the floor.

The work was done in a span of only five weeks. Thomas said Kuyper also plans to expand the College’s fitness room with more cardio machines in the near future.

In My Words

ALWAYS REPPIN’

As a 2006 Kuyper graduate, I never thought I’d be back as a staff member, but God had it in His plans for me to return and looking at where I’ve been and what I’ve done, I can see why.

Kuyper prepared and taught me to make sure that I am “Always Reppin’.” This urban saying has been around a while, but it caught fire in the 2016 NCAA basketball tournaments when Nike-sponsored schools wore shirts with the slogan. It means what it says: always representing. The players wearing the shirts were expressing their understanding that they were representing their university and its values and mission.



Al Moss

Director of Student Development and Faith Formation

When Kuyper taught me to always represent, I’m not referring to the colors of the school or even its name, but rather the One for whom the school exists — Christ Jesus, our living hope. As followers of Christ, bought by His blood and sealed by His Spirit, we too should always be reppin’.

The apostle Paul told the church of Corinth that they were ambassadors for Christ. He told Timothy to set an example and told Titus to make attractive the teachings about God our Savior. As followers of Christ, we are always under the eye test and being watched even when we think no one is watching. People are forming their decision about exploring Christ and His claims on their lives based on how we are representing Him. I have far too often heard people say, “If this is how the church and God’s people are acting, then I want no part in it.”

Having played pickup basketball at the local YMCA for the past several years now, I’ve gained a reputation for being the one they ask to make the call when there is a dispute. They know I won’t cheat. I represent Christ well because I know they are watching. Similarly, I remember working as a resident advisor in an open correctional program for probationers and parolees. My presence was always welcomed by the residents because of the way I treated them and conducted myself. I was making sure that I was representing Christ among individuals with records of criminal activity with an opportunity to share the Gospel. Even in our home my wife and I strive to be examples of who Christ is to our children so that they could go into this challenging world and do the same.

We are Always Reppin’ Jesus Christ and His kingdom. In traffic, at the mall, at the gas pump, at the playground, at the grocery store, out to dinner, on the phone, at the rec center, at the airport and, yes, working at Kuyper, we are representing the Lord Jesus.

Kuyper College — from the faculty and staff to the community to the theological training — had a major part in me Always Reppin’, and it’s good to be back.

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

Kuyper Students Pitch Business Ideas

Two teams of students from Business 311, an entrepreneurship course that looks specifically at the success factors necessary for the starting and running of a business enterprise, were selected to be part of a West Michigan business pitch competition called the MWest Challenge.

The course is taught by Attah Obande, the vice president of business and talent development for the Grand Rapids Chamber and now in his fourth year as a Kuyper adjunct professor.

“I have loved every minute of it,” Obande said about teaching at Kuyper. “I always wanted to teach at a Christian college because I was blessed throughout my life to go to faith-based schools and universities.”

Senior Josiah Michaelson and dually enrolled student Emily Karsten were part of the Tool Time team, while the Dutch Delights team was dually enrolled students Emily Henke and Ariel Talsma.

While neither team won the competition, the four students



Professor Attah Obande (far left) with Emily Henke (left) and Ariel Talsma, the Dutch Delights team.

entered it knowing that it was going to be an amazing learning experience regardless.

“If we succeed and win, this allows me to humbly give glory to God for that success and gives me a confidence boost to help others create successful businesses,” Michaelson said before the event. “And if we fail, this allows me to humbly look at myself to see what I can change about the way I approach business.”

Kuyper Junior Selected for Reclaim Today Workshop

Kuyper College junior Thiara Herrera-Leiva grew up in Santiago, Chile, and never imagined that she could someday go to college for ministry leadership and learn about the Bible. When she first heard about Kuyper, and especially when she learned about working on campus to help pay for her tuition (now known as KuyperWorks), it seemed like the perfect fit.

Today, she is a ministry leadership student and recently had the opportunity to participate in a Professional Writing & Design workshop presented by Reclaim Today (part of Our Daily Bread Ministries) and the Association for Biblical Higher Education.

The opportunity was available to college students from the 160 ABHE institutions in the U.S. and Canada. Students were selected based on their aptitude for professional writing or design, their career goals and their spiritual leadership on their home campuses. Only 30 students were selected.



Thiara Herrera-Leiva

Thiara had the chance to write Scripture meditations and prayers.

“We first got introduced to the creative process of writing a Scripture

meditation and prayer,” she said. “The beginning really was mostly talking about what are the needs we see in our generations since the content is aimed for young adults in their 20s and 30s. Then we would go into Scripture and after that we did have a few handouts and examples from Reclaim Today to guide us.”

As she reflects on her Kuyper journey thus far, she said she’s been able to learn about the Bible and ministry leadership thanks to great professors and a rigorous classroom experience. As a KuyperWorks student, she has served as kitchen staff and in facilities and been both a student success coach and part of the Spiritual Life student staff.

“Because of KuyperWorks, I’m able to cut back quite a bit of the portion of tuition that is left for me to pay after aid has been applied,” she said.

She added with a smile: “And I get to tell my mom to not worry. I’ve got this.”

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

STUDENTS TO WATCH

Emily Karsten

I was homeschooled all my life, and my amazing mom taught me all the way through. I wasn't sure I even wanted to go to college, but after seeing my brother at Kuyper — and the things he was learning and the fun things he was doing — I knew I had to come and join.

We have always been close, but Kuyper brought us closer. We have taken multiple classes together. We help each other study and become the best versions of ourselves.

Emily Karsten

CLASS
2027

HOME
Grand Rapids

MAJOR
Business Leadership

Life growing up has been challenging. I have recently been diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disorder called dysautonomia which makes simple things difficult to do but has given me a good perspective on life. My family are the most wonderful people on the planet and not in a super cheesy way. My parents, the hands and feet of Jesus, taught me that service is a gift and how to use my gifts to inspire people. My great grandma Gerry is the

reason I am who I am today. She is my biggest inspiration, and I hope to become even half of the woman she is.

Kuyper has surpassed all expectations. It has provided me with so many new opportunities, including a recent regional business pitch competition I was part of (I am majoring in business leadership). I know things I want to do (after graduation), but I'm waiting for God to answer that question as I feel since coming to Kuyper that I will be led where I'm supposed to be.

I had thought I could never succeed in a college class, but with great mentors and professors, I have done tremendous things. I have come to appreciate the tenacity of my professors to help me succeed in my college career and in life. They are very hardworking people with great minds who have helped me see the world in a faith-filled business mindset.



Professor Attah Obande (rear) with Emily Karsten (left) and Josiah Michaelson, prepping for a recent business pitch competition.

Professor Marc Andreas took us on a national parks trip to see what business looks like in the national parks system. He has inspired me to become a businesswoman with faith. He believes in us and teaches us how to use what we have learned in class in real-life scenarios.

I also have worked a couple of different jobs during my time here at Kuyper, including most recently through KuyperWorks in reservations where I get to host and help brides on their big day. Along with other events and rentals, this summer I am doing grounds at Kuyper and babysitting for my friends and family.

For anyone who does not know Kuyper, I want to say one thing: you will find no other college that is as encouraging as Kuyper is. Everyone here wants you to be amazing and will show you how to be.