

A Classic: St. Olaf Provost Jim May

By Kim Ode PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM ROSTER

JIM MAY IS A RENAISSANCE MAN shaped by Ohio steel towns, Grecian seas, and the Minnesota prairie. Consider the evidence: He built his own log home. He reads Latin and Greek fluently. He restores old farm tractors. He builds harpsichords and recorders. Enough? There's more: He's in the midst of restoring a '38 Chevy coupe. ("That's going to take a while.") He's a nationally lauded professor. He plays a tough game of handball. He was one of 170 volunteers who rowed a replica of an ancient Greek trireme in sea trials on the Aegean. He sings Gregorian chant.

That's enough — for now. It appears that May, the provost and dean of St. Olaf College, lives a life in which the famous words of the Roman orator and statesman Cicero are never far from conscious thought: "To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child."

Typically, May, 57, sums up his path with an economy of explanation: "Looking back, it seems that once I decided on something, I stuck with it."

What has made his life such a fascinating adventure and not a blinkered slog, is the range of pursuits he has chosen and stuck with.

May was the only son of a single mother whose education concluded in eighth grade and a man whom he simply describes as "a deadbeat dad." Ann May worked nights as a waitress in the Ohio steel town of Niles while her son attended parish school during the day.

It was in ninth grade that May encountered Ronald Karrenbauer, who taught Latin and was one of the great influences in his life. "You didn't want to leave school without being in his class," he says. "At the age of sixteen, I decided I wanted to be a Latin teacher."

That may sound precocious, but the fact is that May has taught the classics at St. Olaf for thirty-two years. He decides; he sticks.

More evidence? When May was fourteen, he met a classmate named Donna Fialko and just knew, on some level, that they'd always be together.

They've been married thirty-five years. Decides. Sticks.

May occupies a modest office in the administration building. A model tractor anchors his desk. One wall includes a floor-to-ceiling bookcase lined with books, many weighted toward Greece. You can see that most are texts in the original Greek and Latin. May's bearing itself suggests something of a Roman bust of Cicero, whom he has studied extensively. It's no stretch to imagine a wreath of laurel circling his broad brow.

His mother was a voracious reader who instilled in him the idea that books were treasure troves. She loved getting lost in Sherlock Holmes and Ellery Queen, he says, which was perhaps an understandable yearning for mystery in a life that must, at times, have seemed all too predictable. "She loved the language and always kept a large dictionary at her side," May recalls.

He joined the high school debate team, fascinated by the art of verbal persuasion, "how you can sway others by the power of speech." Little wonder, then, that May would grow up to write several books about Cicero, one of Rome's most gifted orators.

Inspired by Karrenbauer, he consumed the classics, finding in them "the best of what has been thought and written, a glimpse into our common humanity," he says. "They provide a model, a lesson, an example for living worthwhile and productive lives."

He attended Kent State University, earning degrees in Latin and English, and received his Ph.D. in Classics at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 1977. He learned of a job opening at St. Olaf, a college in a small town somewhere in Minnesota. He and Donna visited and have been here ever since, raising two sons who both graduated from St. Olaf. Decides. Sticks.

On paper, May's work history may appear a rather straightforward affair. But the Renaissance nature of his pursuits outside the office and classroom turn that paper into a veritable origami of fascinating angles and edges. "It is in my nature to like fairly intricate, technical kinds of study," he says.

That nature extended even to the simple but essential need for summer work. His future father-in-law, Joe, was a contractor, and May began working with him while in high school and continued through college and graduate school. The work taught him how to build houses, including doing plumbing, wiring, and laying brick.

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"I was blessed to have a great role model in my father-in-law, and we built many houses together," he says, eventually including May's own log home in Northfield. "He was extremely intelligent when it came to problem solving. He used to say, 'Anything can be done.' He had a real courage about tearing into anything."

May's woodworking skills extended to making furniture, and, inspired by Donna, a professional singer and choir director, took a turn into musical instruments. He began making recorders, laughing that "most turned out to be firewood."

An acquaintance with Layton ("Skip") James, principal keyboard artist with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, led them to work together to build harpsichords. Today, the harpsichords at St. Olaf, Carleton, and the SPCO are among the products of that collaboration.

His curiosity took another turn, courtesy of living on rural acreage outside of Northfield. "Living out in the country, you get interested in tractors," May says, so he learned how to restore vintage models. It wasn't so much a hobby as homage to the past, to how farmers needed to know how to repair their own tractors during the Great Depression. "If you watch closely how you take things apart, you can usually put them back together," he says.

Tractors and harpsichords, laying bricks and translating Cicero — such a disparate range of pursuits may seem a little self-conscious, as if channeling da Vinci on the prairies. Instead, it may be closer to say that he's channeling his late mother.

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He recalls the wide range of needlework that Ann May enjoyed doing — crocheting, embroidery, needlepoint. “She was an absolute perfectionist,” he says, “which was both a vice and a virtue. At a very, very young age, she instilled in me the idea that if you’re going to do something right, you might as well do it right the first time.”

All of these youthful influences — his mother, his father-in-law, his Latin teacher — come together in May’s teaching of the classics at St. Olaf.

“There’s a kind of spirit in much of ancient literature that certainly teaches us to be curious and to learn things,” he says. “The classics will always be taught because they are, as Thoreau says, the noblest recorded thoughts of man.”

May has written many articles about Cicero and has authored or coauthored several books, including *Trials of Character: The Eloquence of Ciceronian Ethos*, a translation of Cicero’s *On the Ideal Orator*, and a textbook, *38 Latin Stories*. His most recent work was editing a book of essays, *Brill’s Companion to Cicero: Rhetoric and Oratory*, and he is now working on a Ciceronian student reader, containing Latin passages with commentary from several of the orator’s most notable works.

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Played out in the daily life of St. Olaf, May

says that the students’ education unfolds with a particular goal. “We don’t teach them to *do* something; we teach them to *be* something.”

Of course, he says, there’s nothing wrong with learning to do something. But he finds an irony in the movement toward emerging from college with a concrete and practical skill, only to discover that being trained in a narrow focus may increase the chance of your becoming obsolete in a fast-changing world.

Obsolescence is a concept with which he literally has hands-on experience. In 1990, May signed on to participate in an experiment that put him as close to life in ancient Greece as he could have imagined.

The Hellenic Navy and other donors funded the construction of a trireme, a replica of an ancient Athenian warship that required 170 rowers to power her through the Aegean. Sea trials were organized to determine whether the accounts of what such ships could accomplish in terms of speed and maneuverability were lofty exaggeration or honest fact. So he volunteered to be among the three banks of rowers, arranged in three levels top to bottom, in the *Olympias*.

The design was a triumph of space and thrust, coordination and teamwork. Each top-to-bottom trio of oars had to strike within a mere square meter of water, then pull as a unit through the stroke.

“The camaraderie was amazing,” he says, and quickly put to rest the popular image of Hollywood’s Ben Hur pulling among the galley slaves. “Part of the secret of the ancient Athenian democracy was that the rowers were actually citizens. True, they were of the

lowest census class, but they were not slaves.

“The public was aware that these rowers protected the Athenian empire. The state was wholly dependent upon those who could be considered the lowest socioeconomic class of citizens. This must have added a special dimension to their notion of democracy.”

In modern-day 1990, the experiment played out with a rather steep learning curve of working as one unit. Yet over the course of the trials, May and his fellow rowers attained a speed of close to ten knots, or about eleven miles per hour. More importantly, he says, they were able to maintain a speed of five to seven knots for hours on end, providing blistered evidence for accounts of great distances traversed over certain times.

Finally, they were able to execute 180-degree turns within a minute, lending credence to ancient accounts of such ships’ maneuverability in battle.

“It was mind-boggling,” May says. “It was such an intimately human experience.”

Cicero himself might have drawn on such a bonding of humanity when he observed how many “wonderful things the human mind embraces,” while commenting further on the importance of “performing and fulfilling the function for which we are born and brought into the world by using that mind, which serves to unite people and form the natural bond that exists between them.”

It’s the sort of philosophy that Jim May might have run across as a burgeoning student of Latin and, having decided that it made sense, stuck with it all of his life. 🦁

KIM ODE is a longtime staff writer for the *Star Tribune*.

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